



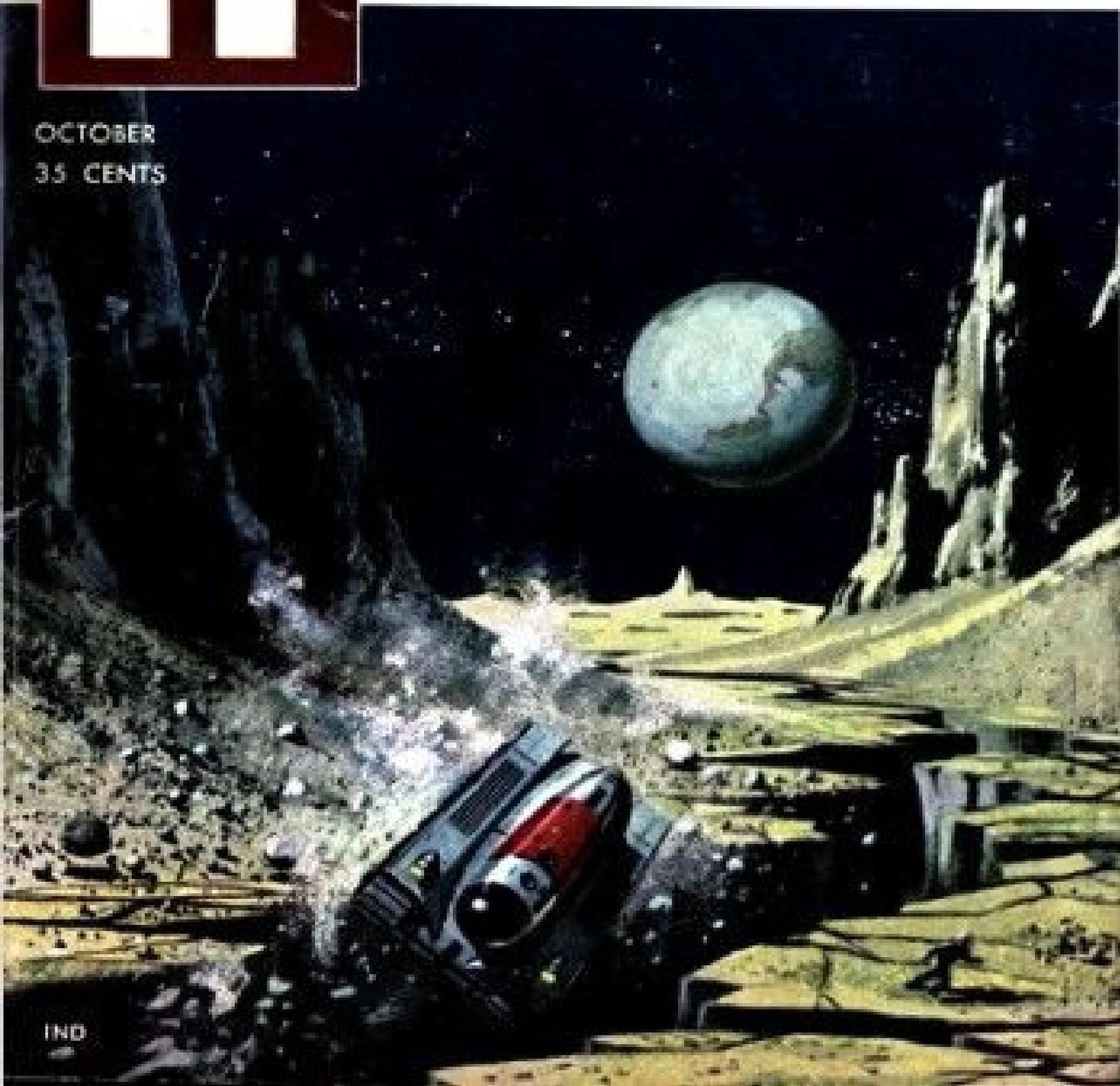
WORLDS OF
SCIENCE FICTION

Returned from the stars . . .

MAN ALONE

By DON BERRY

OCTOBER
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The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Fishdollar Affair, by R. M. McKenna

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FISHDOLLAR AFFAIR ***

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THE FISHDOLLAR AFFAIR

BY R. M. McKENNA

With more courage than prudence, the ensign followed his star to the final (and delectably feminine) test of a young officer's honor.... A tender, ironic and funny story, by a new name you'll be seeing again.

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from
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Subspace cruising never bored Ensign Stephen Welnicki. The ship's computer rotated skew-quadro fields, inscrutably altering by threes the twenty-seven positional variables—leaving the watch officer idle. Thoughts were to be had for the thinking.

Thoughts came unbidden to watch officer Welnicki. What if the never-found alien intelligence, feared so absurdly in official policy, was *subspatial*? Weird things, eating mathematics, fighting with music. They'd attack ... Captain Kravitz and the others nerve-frozen somehow ... command of Galactic Patrol Ship *Carlyle* devolving upon Ensign Welnicki ... triumph ... muster at Prime Reference ... medal of honor....

Thoughts came unbidden to watch officer Welnicki.

His pale blue eyes gleamed and his short blond hair bristled even more at the thought. His quartermaster broke in.

"That emigrant ship is a minute late calling in, sir. Shall I buzz it?"

"No. We are senior. I will reprimand her at five after."

That ship in synchro with *Carlyle* was S.S. *Rubberjack*, carrying twelve hundred colonists and equipment to found a settlement on a yet nameless planet of Kappa-9 Carinae. From some democratic planet in Vela sector, to be settled athwart an autocratic trend coming down from Columba. Ensign Welnicki, aged twenty-four, was already helping make galactic history.

G.P.S. *Carlyle* would stand by until the settlement was viable. Adventure ... a flyer forced down among nameless mountains ... hardships ... mineral deposits ... tremendous cliffs and chasms ... forever after, on the maps, the Welnicki Mountains....

"Five past, sir."

"Very well."

Ensign Welnicki brought his slight form erect and strode across to the subspace voder, hardening his lips. Forestalling him, the light blinked on and the neutral machine-voice said, "... *Carlyle*. S.S. *Rubberjack* calling G.P.S. *Carlyle*...."

The ensign pressed his transmitter bar and snapped, "*Carlyle* here. Go ahead, *Rubberjack*."

Too bad there was no visual transmission in subspace, to carry his hawklike stare to that sloppy merchant officer. Too bad his crisp voice would be wasted in the neutrality of *Rubberjack's* voder.

"This is Wendrew Fishdollar, President of the Republic of Fishdollar Five," the voder said. "Our forces now control S.S. *Rubberjack*. We wish to negotiate a standard treaty with the Galactic Patrol."

Welnicki's long, thin nose twitched in dismay. "What ... where is Fishdollar Five?" he gasped. *Are they human?* his thoughts ran.

"Our present seat of government is in S.S. *Rubberjack's* tender," the neutral voice replied. "We have seceded from the main body of settlers. We wish to arrange for settlement on a different planet."

"Oh! Oh. Mutinous settlers?"

Welnicki's eyes narrowed. He smiled grimly. He glanced down at his blue and gold tunic and punched on the photo-recorder. Best have a record for the historians.

"Fishdollar, this is mutiny in subspace. In the name of the Galactic Patrol, I command you to surrender yourself and your accomplices to Captain Glover at once!"

"I am chief of state of a sovereign nation and I will not be spoken to like that," the voder said. "If necessary, we will cast loose the tender and enter space to find our own planet. We are holding the tender crew at their stations, even as I speak."

"I forbid it absolutely!" the ensign barked. "If you inspace at random, you will likely be far beyond the sphere of permitted exploration. You may betray humanity to an unknown enemy. Moreover, you will all be pirates and slavers. President Fishdollar, consider what you do!"

"National survival is at stake. My first loyalty is to my nation."

Ensign Welnicki arched his neck. "I warn you, President Fishdollar," he said vibrantly, "if you take those *Rubberjack* crewmen into space, I will follow and free them if I must pursue you to the uttermost ends of the galaxy!"

"We will defend our sovereignty to our last drop of blood," the voder replied pleasantly. "We had hoped for Patrol cooperation, but we are prepared to carry on in the teeth of Patrol hostility. Our determination, Captain Kravitz, is unshakable. Goodbye, sir!"

The light blinked off. That parting speech must have been sonorous and magnificent in old Fishdollar's natural voice, the ensign thought. Then an echo of it nagged at him and he jumped.

"Oh my," he said, and punched the captain's emergency signal.



Captain Kravitz played back the photo-record and cocked a grizzled eyebrow at Welnicki. He sounded the general alarm and snapped orders: ready Scout Vessel Two and boarding party. Sleepy men manned battle stations. Captain Glover came on the voder to report his tender gone and trouble with lost-mass aberration. He was almost inaudible at full gain. "Prepare to regress," Captain Kravitz ordered.

"Proceed to destination and wait in orbit for me," he shouted into the voder. "I will regress and send a party after your tender. Give me the break coordinates."

Whispered data passed until Kravitz said abruptly, "That's enough, captain. I want a short regress. Good luck."

Welnicki thought about regression. The nine canonical threes vary independently in subspace; when a ship inspaces between the initial and terminal points set up in her computer, she may be anywhere. To find the Fishdollars, *Carlyle* would have to regress to the tender's breakaway point without changing computer settings. It is a mode of living backwards, and indescribably unpleasant.

"Stand by to regress!"

Howls of dismay arose. Ensign Welnicki stood at attention and raised his chin.



Pale with nausea, Ensign Welnicki faced Captain Kravitz after *Carlyle* in spaced. The tall, graying captain looked shaken also, but his eyes burned. His voice was ironically gentle.

"Given the chance, I might have persuaded Fishdollar to take another Carina planet, avoided all this ... four thousand parsecs beyond the frontier of exploration ... dangerous security breach ... you command the search party, Ensign Welnicki ... field-search each system in turn, buoy each as you leave ... I know I can count on you for the last full measure of devotion, Ensign Welnicki...."

Welnicki opened his eyes wide.

"I shall not fail you, sir," he said as firmly as he could.

The captain stroked his clipped gray mustache with two fingers. "I expect you to pursue the Fishdollars to the uttermost ends of the galaxy, Ensign Welnicki," he said solemnly.



G.P.S. *Carlyle* had ghosted back into subspace. Welnicki in blue and gold faced his subordinates across a green table in the tiny wardroom of Scout Vessel Two. They wore gray coveralls. Sergeant Chong, dark, stocky, impassive. Chief Quartermaster Rutledge, plump, florid, voluble. Chief Drive Tech Kihara, small, dark, reserved. The ensign cleared his throat.

"This is a council of war, gentlemen. Here is our situation...."

Five Sol-type stars lay within the tender's range. They would visit and field-search each system in turn, regain control of the tender and its crew when found, then wait for *Carlyle*. Under the treaty they were agents of the settlers' parent system, Sigma-3 Velorum, and bound by its constitution.

"So, gentlemen, it is really intersystemic war. Now the enemy population is about fifty—Captain Glover's estimate, he hadn't time to muster the settlers before we regressed. We have twenty marines and nine spacers. We are outnumbered and must attack prepared positions, but courage and imagination —"

"Won't some settlers be women?" Chong broke in gruffly. "We may not be so overmatched. How are they armed?"

"Body weapons only, sergeant. Nothing heavy. We mustn't hurt women, of course."

Chong coughed and subsided.

"One thing more. Our inspace separation from *Carlyle* is great enough so that, under article fourteen of Patrol Regulations, our scout is an independent ship. I now declare this ship in full commission."

He took glasses and a bottle of Earth whisky from a bag at his feet and poured drinks all around.

"Stand, gentlemen," he bade them. "To our ship and her christening: gentlemen, I give you G.P.S. *Fishdollar's Bane*."

The men choked a little on the fiery liquor. Ensign Welnicki wiped moisture from his eyes and looked on them with kindly gravity.

"Hereafter you may address me as Captain Welnicki," he said. "And now stand by to outspace."



Arrowing through the fourth system like a hundred-foot rapier probing enemy vitals, G.P.S. *Fishdollar's Bane* finally sniffed out the tender's ID pattern on an inner planet.

"Pinpoint the enemy and orbit his horizon. Compute physical data and report," Captain Welnicki ordered Rutledge.

Next ship-day he briefed his subordinates. A single continent lay athwart the planet's equator, with major volcanic activity in its galactic north. The enemy base was on the southwest coast. Gravity was point nine, the day twenty-six standard hours, and the season spring in the southern hemisphere. They would achieve surprise by landing in the north and staging the landing party south in the atmospheric flyer. What did they think?

"It's a laugh, the way we outgun them Fishdollars, Mr.—I mean Captain Welnicki," Chong growled. "Why not take—this ship—right over 'em and call on 'em to surrender?"

"They'd defy us, sergeant. They're ready to die to the last man—oh, you should have heard old Wendrew Fishdollar's parting speech! And remember, they have hostages."

"Oughta be some way we could use the ship's armament."

"You're a tough fighter, sergeant, but you lack creative imagination. No, my decision stands. Have your marines roll field packs."



Spiralling in, Captain Welnicki thought the continent spectacular. Volcanoes and fissure flows welled forth seas of molten rock. Seas of rain slashed into them and roared skyward again as atmospheres of steam. The shrewdest enemy would never expect attack from this quarter.

G.P.S. *Fishdollar's Bane* grounded at dusk in a wooded region of low hills. The air was sulfurous but good, the sky a smoking glory. Occasionally the ground trembled. Singing birds in the strap-leaf foliage and furry ground rats were curious and unafraid. Captain Welnicki walked apart and listened to the shouts of his marines getting groundworthy.

Kihara and the spacers were assembling the flyer. The marines were playing grabtail, except two armed sentries. Keen fighting men all, spoiling for a fight or a footrace. The captain winced when he heard one refer to his ship as G.P.S. *Fishbait*. But then, enlisted men were that way, hiding their nobler sentiments under such rough endearments. Underneath, however, hearts of oak....

Early in the flaming dawn Kihara flew the marines south. He returned in midafternoon from the four-thousand-mile round trip. Then Captain Welnicki and the spacers flew south with equipment to complete the camp. There seemed to be no large animal life, so he left the ship closed but unguarded.

Chong's position lay behind a hill fifty miles north of the enemy. Great strap-leaf trees concealed tents and sentries. The captain, wearing the gray working uniform for the first time, called a council of war in his command tent.

Eve of battle, gentlemen. Stout hearts, now. Chong, Crespi and Swenson would be landed in darkness to scout for the attack. They would plant a guide beacon and hide until the full party joined them the next night. Tomorrow the flyer would move reserve rations and the heavy blaster ammo down from the ship.

Sgt. Chong, in accordance with Patrol Regulations, would direct the actual fighting. He, Captain Welnicki, would resume command when the diplomatic phase opened, that is, when President Fishdollar offered to surrender. Questions?

No questions. When Kihara returned from dropping Chong, he came again to the dark command tent and brushed past the orderly.

"Captain, wake up. The ship's guide beam don't register on the flyer's screen. Noticed it coming back just now. Something's wrong."

"Do you suppose the Fishdollars—" Captain Welnicki came full awake. Never betray doubt to a subordinate ... the lonely leader...

"Locate it visually tomorrow, then," he said calmly. "Take Rutledge to help. But you can't miss that big T-shaped lake."

"Oh, I guess we'll find it, if—"

"Of course you will. Turn in now, Kihara. Get some rest."

The captain did not sleep. He paced uneasily next day until the flyer returned, then almost forgot himself and ran to meet it.

"Gone forever," Rutledge said excitedly. "One of them fissure flows, must've been ... miles of boiling rock right where we was ... updrafts like to tore us apart and fried us too ... now what, captain?"

Captain Welnicki stood very erect and lifted his chin.



Darkness under the two small moons. Captain Welnicki stood apart and thought. Nothing but hand weapons and pack rations for two days. A fanatic enemy sitting with enormous reserves in a prepared position. So ... attack, of course ... always the audacity ... out of this nettle danger I pluck this flower...

Kihara landed the party, minus the useless blasters, by Chong's beacon. Chong, sulfurous in disgust, drew his corporals aside to improvise a new plan. Captain Welnicki hovered near, saying nothing. He heard Chong tell Swenson to use the spacers for support fire.

"Soon's it's light enough I'll pass the word," Chong finished. "Scatter now."

"Come on, you spacers," Corporal Swenson growled.

He moved off, followed by the spacers. After a moment Captain Welnicki trailed along.

The enemy base lay on high ground across a small stream. One large unfinished

building of slagged earth stood near the tender. The land was uneven and wooded. The roar of the sea came faintly through night air as Swenson briefed his spacers.

"Sleep if you can," he ended. "I'll watch."

"I want to scout in closer, corporal," the captain said.

"Not past the stream, if you please, captain. We spotted infra-pickups over there. That's why Chong wants daylight and cover fire."

Minutes after he crossed the stream the captain's throat communicator prickled. It was Chong.

"Swenson tells me you're prowling, captain. Don't tell me where you are cause I'm scared to know. But freeze there. That's a military order in the field."

"Aye aye, sergeant," the captain said glumly.

He slept fitfully on the hard ground. Long time until dawn like thunder ... Corporal Swenson stunned, command of the spacers devolving upon Captain Welnicki ... ask no quarter, give none ... red dawn streaks now, an omen ... LISTEN: *footsteps in the brush!*

Over his flame pistol Captain Welnicki saw a tall man appear. He wore a merchant spacer's leather jumper and carried a small shovel. At the captain's terse command he dropped the shovel and faced the leveled pistol, hands at shoulder height.

"Quiet now! Who are you?" Welnicki whispered.

Eyes squinted above the loose mouth. "I'm Jonas Cobb, that was third officer in *Rubberjack*. Are you a Patroller?"

"Captain Stephen Welnicki, commanding G.P.S. *Fishdollar's Bane*. I have come to liberate you."

"Well now, cap'n, that's right good of you. I'd be pleased to help." The hands dropped.

"You can, Cobb. I can use help. I've lost my ship, you see. I have only twenty-eight men with nothing but body weapons and two days' rations. I *must* win on my first assault."

"Here's an idea, cap'n. Them Fishdollars are still sleeping aboard. Suppose I sneak back, close the bunkroom collision doors and pull the fuses? I'll jam the

hull doors too, so the guards can't close 'em."

"*Good* man, Cobb! Would you dare try?"

"I would, cap'n. Suppose they closed up the tender on you? All the chow's still aboard, and you can't eat native protein here without it's bio-fielded. Them Fishdollars could just sit and guzzle while you poor Patrolers all starved, and then who'd liberate us? Handguns won't noways touch that plating."

Chong came on the communicator. "Military order, captain. Stay put and keep your head down. We attack in one minute."

"No! Oh *no*, sergeant," the captain protested. "I've taken a *Rubberjack* prisoner ... he'll jam the hull doors for us—"

"Don't trust him nor you neither. The both of you stay put. Here goes—"

"*No*, Sergeant Chong! I relieve you of command. Article thirty-seven, Patrol Regulations. Stand fast, now!"

He smiled apologetically. "My field commander is impatient. But hurry, Cobb. My marines are straining at the leash."

Cobb moved off hastily. Moments later came a subdued clamor of voices, scurrying feet, grating noises. Captain Welnicki peeped through the screening shrubbery just in time to see the ramp pull in and the ponderous cargo doors swing shut.

He called Chong: "Enemy alerted ... fortunes of war ... stiff upper lip ... resume command, Sgt. Chong."

Chong exploded. "Situation militarily hopeless ... stop playacting and surrender ... your baby, captain, and look to its napkin."

Captain Welnicki stood stiffly erect and raised his chin.



That darkest hour ... inexorable hunger on this star-lost planet ... guile now ... keen intelligence of the spaceways.... Captain Welnicki called his subordinates to a council of war.

They had one idea—to surrender. "Somebody, you, captain, go bang on that personnel port," Rutledge urged.

"Never! Death before dishonor!"

"Hey! They're sending out a flag," Chong said.

The tender's personnel valves were ajar and between them a white cloth dangled.

"I'll go in and parley," Captain Welnicki said crisply. "Deploy and cover me, sergeant. If they try to overpower me, blast us all down."

Sgt. Chong snorted nervously. The captain walked toward the ship ... lonely, gallant ... ashes of defeat ... guile now.... The ramp poked out and a lanky figure, bearing the flag, descended. It was Cobb.

"Cobb! What happened? Did they—"

"General Cobb to you, cap'n. General of the Army of Fishdollar Five. I come out to take your surrender."

The captain stared.

"President Fishdollar says tell you we'll treat you real good if the marines'll help with the settlement. If so be you've a mind to, the foreign minister will work out a Patrol treaty."

The hangdog features gloated in mean triumph. Degrading ... proud wings drooping ... unless ... yes ... restructure the gestalt....

"I come not in war but in peace, general. Commanding a Patrol vessel empowers me to act as Patrol ambassador. My men will aid you, in accordance with standard Patrol policy. Tell President Fishdollar I will make my official entry shortly after noon."

"I'll do that, cap'n. Say, you're a slippery one too, ain't you?" the general asked admiringly.

He turned away. Ambassador Welnicki rejoined his aides in stately dignity. Rutledge was secretary, Kihara chauffeur and Chong commander of the honor guard, he told them. Then he ordered a retreat to the flyer.

In the flyer he donned his blue and gold uniform. He had meant to wear it when he took President Fishdollar's surrender. Oh well, he had not disgraced that ancient, mystic bird-and-anchor symbol ... diplomatic triumphs, now....



Kihara landed the flyer before the large single building. No one was about. Eight marines got out and lined up. Ambassador Welnicki watched while a pretty young woman came out of the building and looked doubtfully at the flyer.

She was small, dark haired and wore a high-girded chlamys of clinging white cloth. Squinting, he saw above her left breast an emblem worked in red. It was an outlined fish with the ancient, mystic dollar symbol inscribed. She approached the marines hesitantly.

"Here now, young woman, those men are on duty," the ambassador warned. "You mustn't molest them. Please inform the foreign minister—"

She smiled. "I am the foreign minister," she said, bobbing a curtsy. "Lindrew Fishdollar, at your service, Mr. Ambassador, and welcome to Fishdollar Five. The president is waiting in the state reception hall."

"Thank you, Madame Minister." He stepped down with dignity, saluting, and followed her into the building. She danced ahead with vivacity unbecoming a foreign minister.

The hall was large, with bare slag walls and rough wooden furniture. Coming to meet him was another pretty young woman in another white chlamys that molded itself to her walking. He stopped short.

She was smiling ... milk white skin and jet black hair ... thick eyebrows, black eyes ... small, sweetly curvesome ... holding out a hand....

"Oh my God!" he said shakily. "You! You are Wendrew Fishdollar!"

"Wendy to my friends, Captain Wennocky, and I hope you will be one. We do so want a Patrol treaty. Won't you sit down?"

The ambassador sat down, head whirling.

"How many of your officers of state are women, may I ask, Madame President?"

"All of us," she said brightly. "Our charter population, fifty-two in all, is entirely feminine. Since our founding we have naturalized eleven men."

"Well, Madame President ... you must realize ... most unusual...."

"I understand, Captain Wennocky. Perhaps you're tired. Quarters are ready for you upstairs and the minister of the interior will show you to them if you wish. General Cobb will berth your men in the tender."

"My name is Welnicki," the ambassador said, rising. "Captain Stephen Wel-

nicki."

"Oh, forgive me, Captain Welnicki. General Cobb—but there, poor man, you're tired and I won't keep you. Will you and your aides attend an informal dinner tonight with my cabinet officers?"

"Yes ... delighted...."

The minister of the interior skipped along apologizing prettily for the crude furniture. She was Wandrew Fishdollar, call her Wanda, and she would see him again at dinner. His bedroom was also the Fishdollar National Library.

The ambassador called a council of state. His aides were equally overcome. Who'da thought it? ... all women, all named Fishdollar ... cute as crystals, too ... always liked them Sigma Velorum planets ... hey, Chong, you old goat?...



Dinner ... elfin faces with white skin and black eyes ... short, kilted skirts, sleeveless blouses ... Cindrew, Rondrew, Sandrew, Dundrew ... minister of this, minister of that ... the ambassador was still dazed.

His aides did well. Kihara talked slagers and nuclear furnaces to the minister of public works—Cindy, was she? Rutledge, expansive, held a group bright eyed and breathless with his account of the volcanic north. Chong was saying, "No offense, General Cobb, but in a fight the marines...." Defense Minister Bondrew listened admiringly.

The ambassador felt better. Born diplomats, these men. That came of roaming the starways ... a cosmoplanetary polish ... charm no provincial could resist —"What did you say, Madame President? My mind wandered."

"Let's take our teacups into the next room where it's quiet. I want to tell you the story of the Fishdollars."

"Of course." The ambassador rose with courtly, cosmoplanetary grace.

She sat beside him on the single cloth draped bench, and smoothed her short red skirt.

"In the second century After Space, Stephen—may I call you Stephen?" she began. He nodded indulgently.

The eighty-fourth planet colonized from Earth, she told him, was Fishdollar One,

so named for Andrew Fishdollar, who founded the settlement and brought along many kinsmen. The settlement prospered but the planet had a strong Rho effect. Did he understand?

"Yes, Madame President. An excess of female over male births until a certain population density is reached."

"It may take *centuries*. It's terrible. Stevie, I've actually heard the Patrol sometimes sends ships...." She blushed prettily and looked down at the teacup on her rounded knee.

"Yes. Yes, Wendrew. There is a special clause—oh, most delicately worded—in the standard Patrol treaty with Rho effect planets. Spacers call them good liberty planets." He felt warm, tugged at his tight collar and kept his gaze on the president's teacup.

She took up her story. Genetic strains varied in susceptibility to the Rho effect, of course he knew, and it was terribly severe on Fishdollars. The clan became immensely wealthy through pioneer land holdings, but the name was dying out. Male Fishdollars were recruited from Earth and the other planets until the name was extinct elsewhere, but it was no use. Sex control was no good—bad psychic effects in the resultant males. Finally, in the fourth century, the Fishdollars settled a new planet, seeking a reduced Rho effect.

"But Wendy, why not adopt boys, change names and so on?"

"Against the laws, Stevie. People with low-Rho names believed the effect worked through the name and not the gene pattern. Silly superstition of course, but they had the votes."

It was the same story on Planets Fishdollar Two and Three. Fishdollar wealth grew and Fishdollar males dwindled in inverse ratio. On Fishdollar Four, in the Sigma-3 Velorum system, they vanished altogether. A few hundred women still bore the name.

"It's pitiful, Stevie, when a name dies after thousands of years," she said softly. She put down her teacup and smoothed nervously at her brief skirt.

"I can imagine. Ten generations of Welnickis have served the Patrol."

"We tried hard to keep the name alive," she went on, vainly tugging the pleated skirt lower on the smooth white legs. "Stevie, some of us here are haploid and some are illegitimate."

Her head drooped. Wordless, he watched her hands. She raised a rosy face to

him impulsively.

"You mustn't think I'm one," she said rapidly. "My father was the last Andrew Fishdollar, the last man. He died two years ago."

The younger Fishdollars, she continued, planned one last effort to settle a new planet, to be named Fishdollar Five. They recruited a group meeting Patrol standards and got sponsorship. It cost them a great deal of money. Their constitution and legal codes were those of the parent system, with minor changes correcting the unfair laws against high-Rho names.

"And then—oh Stevie, those superstitious, ungrateful, low-Rho settlers! While we were still in subspace they began amending the laws and the constitution. They even changed our planet's name to Rewbobbin, the ugliest, lowest-Rho name among them!"

"Rewbobbin!" He shuddered.

"We were just frantic, Stevie. We wanted to scratch their eyes out and we wanted to die. Then we thought about seceding. We learned that *Rubberjack's* tender was preloaded to care for an advance party of two hundred. We talked to General Cobb—you know the rest."

"Yes, Wendy. How imaginative ... a random inspacing into unexplored vastness.... Wendy, I salute your courage!"

"We weren't really so brave. The tender was a last resort, to force Captain Kravitz to settle us on another Carina planet. But when he reacted so violently—oh, Stevie, you should have *heard* the language he used to me—we knew we must go. We really had no choice, now did we?"

The ambassador coughed and licked his lips. "No, I suppose not, Wendy. Captain Kravitz is unimaginative ... aging...."

"Stevie, did we do wrong? Do you think we did?"

"No, Wendy. Not you, whoever else may have. You were magnificent. I will use all my influence to see that your settlement lives."

"I'm so happy, Stevie. I feel safe now. Tomorrow Linda can work out a treaty with you. Shall we join the others?"

The smooth white legs stood up.



The ambassador could not sleep. His own copy of Patrol Regulations was lost, but providentially he found a copy in the Fishdollar National Library beside his bed. He thumbed it.

He was, indeed, still captain and therefore ambassador while his crew was intact. But that other article ... here it was:

"In exceptional circumstances involving galactic security the commander of a ship or squadron may assume plenipotentiary status and execute finally rather than provisionally binding agreements ... as soon thereafter as practicable he shall report to Prime Reference for plenary court martial."

So. If he dared... He remembered old Borthwick's lectures in Patrol Jurisprudence at the academy. Only two men, both squadron commanders, had ever used that article. One had been shot, one cashiered... The ambassador slept.



Over coffee next morning the foreign minister produced copies of the Patrol treaty with Sigma-3 Velorum, with appropriate name changes, and proposed they sign them.

"These won't do, Madame Minister," he protested.

"Why not, Stephen? We have almost the same constitution."

"Your planet, Lindrew. Almost four thousand parsecs beyond the sphere of settlement. Do you know why we *have* a frontier?"

"Oh, Patrol policy ... no, why?"

"Other intelligent beings may be settling the galaxy just like we are. We're afraid to meet them too soon."

"Why?"

"Maybe hostile. Lindrew, just because the Patrol prevents inter-planetary wars, it's the only deep space fighting force humanity has. But with no wars, and support of the Patrol voluntary, it isn't very big. Not big enough for galactic war."

"Will it ever be?"

"We hope so. We add a new ship for each new planet. We increase as the cube of the radius and our frontier only as the square, as long as we enforce the sphere of

settlement concept."

"The Patrol enforces it?"

"Yes, by denying sponsorship and protection to non-treaty settlements. We can't actually use force against a sovereign planet, except blockade under certain conditions."

"Do settlements ever defy you?"

"Not for long. They give up and we move them to a settled planet that wants them, wiping out all traces of their stay."

"Oh. Stephen, do you approve of that policy?"

"No, Lindrew, I never have. It's—it's unimaginative. But they'll tear their beards at Prime Reference about your planet."

"But you'll help us, won't you Stephen? How must we change the standard treaty?"

"This is an outpost planet and the aliens, if they exist, will surely find it first. We'll need a Class I base. You must in time support extra-planetary defenses."

"You make the changes, Stephen. Whatever you say. Then we'll sign."

He shuffled his feet. "I'm afraid I can only initial it, Madame Minister. Prime Reference must ratify. I will urge most strongly—"

"Oh Stephen," she interrupted, pretty face stricken, "might we lose our treaty after all?"

"There's a chance, I can't deny it."

"Oh dear! I haven't the heart to tell Wendy."

"I need to think," the ambassador said. He excused himself unhappily.



Days passed and the settlement grew. The ambassador put away his blue and gold and worked with his hands. The native strap-leaf vegetation flowered riotously through long, warm days, and so did Earth plants in the test plots. The shapely Fishdollars became golden-tan and more charming than ever.

The Patrolers worked like fiends erecting buildings and plants, striving to outdo

the merchant spacers. The girls helped where they could and bubbled admiringly at the prodigies of labor. The minister of public works told Chong privately that one marine equalled two merchant spacers. The latter, as if unaware of their lesser worth, worked like fiends too.

Kihara and his two petty officers were the engineers. Corporal Crespi, with a gang of marines and Fishdollars, milled fragrant lumber from native hardwoods. Houses went up and were filled with furniture rough-styled by General Cobb. The ambassador worked on the power plant, the materials converter, and then the air conditioning. The men became hard, deeply bronzed, strongly alive as the native trees.

With his aides, the ambassador worked out treaty revisions.

"PR will never ratify," Rutledge said.

"Look. Maybe the aliens don't exist," the ambassador argued. "If they do exist, they may respect boundaries. Then Fishdollar Five stakes a huge claim for humanity. If it's war, we make our fight around an outpost planet, far from settled regions."

"We ain't Prime Reference," Chong growled. "Who you trying to convince?"



Fishdollar Five ratified the treaty. Ambassador Welnicki looked unhappily at his initials and told the foreign minister, "I'm sorry, Linda."

"We understand, Stephen. We know you're doing all you dare for us."



Resting one day from pipefitting, the ambassador asked Kihara, "You know math, chief. Isn't it true this damned, sacred 'sphere of settlement' really takes in the whole galaxy in subspace?"

"Yes, in a way."

"It's fossilized, Einsteinian thinking. Damn the admirals!"

"The admirals think Einstein is God. You better think the admirals are God," Kihara warned.

The ambassador thought. The outpost planet ... last, loneliest, loveliest, exquisite, apart ... one man with imagination ... serve humanity and be damned for it now, canonized later...

One afternoon he walked with Wendy to their favorite spot on a headland above the sea. She climbed before him up the steep, narrow way, and the sea wind fluttered her skirt. The outpost planet ... democracy ... daughter planets teeming with pretty girls like Wendy and stalwart young men like ... really imaginative galactic ecology...

Sunset neared and half the sky, as usual, flamed gorgeously. The sea sent back the color and beat hypnotically against the cliff base. Wendy stood on tiptoe, arms raised, skirt wind-molded, sweetly rounded form outlined against the sky.

"Stevie, Stevie," she whispered, "isn't our planet beautiful? I would rather die than leave it. I feel ... fulfilled, somehow."

"Wendy, I haven't told you, but—"

She came to him in quick concern, her hand on his arm. Then it came out of him in a rush.

"Regulations permit me to assume plenipotentiary status. If I do and then sign that treaty, it will bind the Patrol absolutely. Wendy, I'm going to do it!"

"Can you really, Stephen? Won't they find a way...." Her face was grave.

"I can, for sure. I'll undergo court martial after. But the treaty will stand. The pledged word of the Galactic Patrol is sacred. Only the Patrol binds humanity into any kind of unity, and its very existence depends upon planetary trust in Patrol good faith."

"It's so much power for one man."

"Not every man is made a Patrol captain. Believe me, Wendy, your planet will live. And I'm glad."

Then she was in his arms and they were kissing, and Captain-Ambassador Welnicki trod on air back to the settlement feeling that the game was worth the candle if they took his head for it. He signed with a flourish, Stephen Welnicki, Captain, GP, subscribed Ambassador Plenipotentiary. Then he called his aides into council and assumed the status formally, just for the record.

Days passed, shorter and warmer, fruits forming on the native plants. Basic installations were complete. Exploring and mapping teams brought in mineral and biotic specimens for testing. It was midsummer of the four-hundred-two-day year. President Fishdollar brought up a delicate subject with the ambassador plenipotentiary.

Four of her citizens were, well, you know, and they wanted to marry four of his marines. Could he authorize it?

"Of course, Wendy. Enlisted men may marry on any treaty planet."

He spoke to Chong.

"I told 'em hell no," the sergeant said. "Us marines depend on higher authority to protect us from that. You're gonna back me up, ain't you, captain?"

"No I'm not! What's so terrible about marriage?"

"Ask Corporal Hodges that, captain. He's married and the Fishdollars *know* it."

Chief Justice Sandrew married the four couples in a mass ceremony. President Fishdollar wept and the ambassador plenipotentiary comforted her.

She was distraught and melancholy in the days that followed, and the ambassador plenipotentiary was himself obscurely troubled. Eight more couples married. Then one evening they were again on the headland in a flaming sunset and she began crying softly. She didn't know why, unless it was because the sunset was so beautiful.

So he held her and they talked in low voices until, as the sun's red disk touched the sea rim, he had to tell her that no Galactic Patrol officer could marry until he reached the rank of commander.

"But you're a captain already, Stevie."

"Only in a special, temporary way—"

"But your heroism, finding us, losing your ship—surely they'll make it permanent."

"Wendy, they'll want my head for all that. I ... I've tried to think that way myself,

but I can't. I do believe, in the far future the name Welnicki will be honored by what I have done, but now—when Captain Kravitz comes—I have no right—"

"Every man has a right to happiness, Stevie. What if you married anyway?"

"Cashiered, automatically. Ten generations of Welnickis have given their lives to the Patrol with not one dishonorable action—"

"Stevie, you make me furious! How can marriage be dishonorable? We'll keep it secret and you can command the base here until you make commander. It's all so simple, really."

"I need to think," he said sadly. She laid her dark head on his shoulder and cried.

He thought: make her happy ... secret ... impassioned speech before the admirals ... galaxy to fill ... creative imagination confirms me now, gentlemen, time will vindicate me ... so tearfully anxious ... in for a copper, in for a solar ... make her happy....

"Wendy," he said in a low, halting voice, "let's do get married."

"Oh yes, Stevie! Yes, yes, yes!" She melted into his arms.

The crimson sun dropped below the sea rim and the sky faded to somber red. They walked back hand in hand, the president chattering gaily, the ambassador plenipotentiary oppressed under the cumulative enormity of his command decisions.

The wedding was beautiful. The bride wore her chlamys of state and the groom stood very erect in blue and gold. Chief Justice Sandrew wept but managed to get the words out clearly enough through tears and sniffs. All the Fishdollars wept. Even hard, unsentimental Sgt. Chong snorted nervously.

Married life was wonderful. The president melted with affection and the ambassador plenipotentiary loved it. Never had diplomatic relations between the Patrol and any planetary government been so cordial.

Even the weather reflected it. The days, cold and rainy as winter came on, turned clear and warm again. The native trees were deciduous and their long strap-leaves became a blaze of color carrying the dawn glory through softly bright days, carpeting the ground with sunset. Thinking and worry were fantastically unnecessary.

Then one beautiful morning after an intimate breakfast, the ambassador plenipotentiary learned that maybe, just maybe now, darling, he was going to be

a father. A few tearful moments later an excited quartermaster called him to his door. G.P.S. *Carlyle* was in orbit and would ground next day. Captain Kravitz instructed Ensign Welnicki to report aboard as soon as grounding was secured.

All along her six-hundred-foot length, ground shores probed out to equalize tensions as G.P.S. *Carlyle* eased her lift. The shriek died with the slowing generators, and the starboard personnel port swung open. Beyond the zone markers Ensign Welnicki looked into his wife's face, then marched toward the ship. He wore his blue and gold.

Carlyle's passageways seemed more cramped than he remembered. He felt foolish in his dress uniform, exchanging greetings with coverall-clad shipmates. He ducked past the saluting orderly into the captain's office almost with relief.

Captain Kravitz, behind his gray desk, had never looked more austere forbidding. As the ensign made his report, the grizzled eyebrows raised, then two fingers stroked the gray mustache. When the ensign reported his binding signature of the treaty, the captain raised his hand.

"Very well, Ensign Welnicki. Remain in your room incommunicado until further notice."

Ensign Welnicki stood very erect and raised his chin. Then he walked directly to his stateroom in the bow, ignoring greetings from former shipmates. He clanged the door shut, and never before had the tiny room seemed so microscopic.

A long week's pacing, three steps each way. Thoughts ... defense at Prime Reference ... first the grave statement of facts, for the record and for unborn historians ... for some future Welnicki burning to vindicate his triple-great grandfather ... then the exhortation to courage and imagination, powerfully restrained emotion almost breaking through ... deep, ringing sincerity ... then the gray courtyard and the firing squad ... I die without resentment ... my short life justified, its meaning found in action....

Thoughts about his planet ... *his* planet?... Wendy, the child ... a boy, of course, the Welnickis were quite low-Rho ... never to see his son ... knowing that in the

gray courtyard.... He wanted to cry.

Ensign Sotero, armed and brassarded, came to conduct him to the captain on the eighth day.

"Damn orders, Steve," Sotero said, standing in the door. "We know most of the story and we're all for you. Your wife and the skipper have been going round and round for days, beating each other over the head with that treaty, Patrol Regulations and the constitution of Sigma-3 Velorum. Somebody heard him say she's the smartest space lawyer this side of Earth. Don't let him stampede you, Steve!"

"Thanks, Juan, I won't." Ensign Welnicki's own voice sounded strange to him after the silence.

The captain was disconcertingly un-fierce. He looked tired and sad behind the gray desk.

"Sit down, Stephen," he said dully. "Let's talk about this mess we're in."

Ensign Welnicki sat down gingerly, his back stiff.

"My head falls too, of course," the captain went on. "You're too little a goat. They may even chop down Sector Admiral Carruthers."

He sighed and looked at the overhead. The ensign opened his mouth.

"I see my error now," the captain forestalled him. "You are not mature enough for command. But I was ensign under your grandfather Welnicki in the old *Ashburton* before you were born. I thought I sensed in you the same intangible that made him great. Well, spilt milk, Stephen. What can we do?"

Ensign Welnicki suggested unsteadily that the Fishdollars might consent to removal to an approved planet.

"First offer I made, Stephen. They voted it down unanimously. Bluster was no good, pleading no good. With that treaty they've got us cold and they know it."

Ensign Welnicki wished he were dead but did not see how that would help. After a long silence the captain spoke again.

"I have one last hope, Stephen. Something you've overlooked. I got it from Rutledge."

The ensign looked his question.

"You didn't formally assume plenipotentiary status until *after* you signed, so technically your signature is not binding. Now if it was a forced subterfuge to counter logistic pressure, your ship being lost and all, we can repudiate the treaty without breaching faith. Only you can really know."

Ensign Welnicki breathed deeply "The Fishdollars with no treaty, how they can survive, I don't know, captain...."

"We'll leave message capsules. When they call for help we'll dump 'em on Rewbobbin."

"I ... I don't know, captain."

"We can fix everything else, save your career."

"No, sir. The treaty stands."

"You signed falsely and you know it."

"I can say—I hereby do say that I signed second copies afterward. The treaty stands, sir!"

Ensign Welnicki stood up, suddenly feeling good.

Captain Kravitz stood up too, face tautly impersonal.

"All right," he said, shuffling papers on his desk. "I want to lift out as soon as possible." He pulled out a paper and looked coldly at the ensign.

"As you may or may not know, your marriage makes you a citizen of Fishdollar Five," he went on. "As you may or may not know, your precious treaty forbids removal of a citizen to another planet without governmental consent. I doubt the admirals at Prime Reference would choose to come all the way out here just to court-martial one small ensign. But as you *certainly* know, your marriage means the automatic revocation of your commission. You will save me trouble and delay by signing this resignation."

He shoved the paper across the desk. Ensign Welnicki looked at it stupidly. His inner song was muted.

"Sgt. Chong will stay to command the temporary base force," the captain was saying. "Within a year you may expect a Patrol construction fleet to open your communications and start work on the base. Your pay accounts can be settled then. There! Sign it!"

Ensign Welnicki bent and signed. The captain looked at the paper and handed it back.

"Use your right name," he said.

Ensign Welnicki looked blank.

"Stephen *Fishdollar*!" the captain roared.

The ensign looked blanker still.

"Ensign Fishdollar, some day you really must read through the legal codes of your adopted planet," the captain said mock-earnestly. "One of the changes made by the Fishdollars in the Sigma-3 Velorum codes was to make marriage and descent matrilineal. That way their name escapes Rho-death."

Ensign Fishdollar sagged. His inner song faded to a whisper.

"Very, very clever of the Fishdollars," the captain said musingly. "To link their name with the X-chromosome rather than with the Y. So it becomes as low-Rho as it was high before. Very clever indeed.

"Ensign Fishdollar, you utter lamb, did you honestly not *know* that?" he finished with roar.

Ensign Fishdollar swung his head dumbly.

"You know, Ensign Fishdollar, that the Patrol regards as null any marriage with a citizen of a non-treaty planet," the captain said softly.

The savage self-biting of his autonomic nervous system almost made him grimace as he bent wordlessly to the paper and signed "Stephen Fishdollar." The inner song was dead.

"You may go home now, Mr. Fishdollar," the captain said. "I will send your personal effects, less uniforms, ashore before I lift out."

Mr. Fishdollar turned away. Captain Kravitz came around the desk and laid an arm across his shoulders.

"Sit down again, Stephen," he said soberly. "I had to play it out to the end, but I don't want you leaving on that note, lad."

They sat down, on the same side of the desk.

"Stephen," the captain said gently, "all youngsters worth their salt chafe at the policy of restricted settlement and exploration. I did and I still do, but I never had the courage to act directly."

He paused and closed his eyes, then continued.

"Graybeards in conclave never make the important decisions for our species. They are always afraid. The decisions well up from the four-dimensional life-continuum that is our species, and the graybeards accept, with what grace they can muster." He tilted back his head, eyes still closed.

"The decisions always come through crooked, unmapped channels, through poets and prophets and dreamers, to enter the consciousness of man. Dreamers drove man to be free when he feared freedom. A few centuries later they drove him into space, shrinking and trembling. Now this. Dreamers, giving vent to that will of our species which no graybeard can gainsay."

The captain opened his eyes and looked again at his companion.

"There is an old saying, Stephen: 'Beware of the dreamer who dreams concretely.' Perhaps the Patrol version should be 'Never put a dreamer in the way of dreaming concretely.' I will never know for certain how much I have really had to do with this. I will be in grave trouble before it ends. But I know, as you have just learned, that dreams can be merciless."

Mr. Fishdollar smiled weakly. Captain Kravitz stood up and so did Mr. Fishdollar. The captain held out his hand.

"Goodbye, Stephen," he said. "Good luck, lad, and I'm proud of you."

They shook hands and Mr. Fishdollar turned to the door. He rather thought that, just as he turned, the captain snapped him a salute.



Mr. Fishdollar stumbled toward the settlement. People passed and he did not see them. He was not thinking. Someone ran squealing. Then Wendy was running toward him, crying.

"Stevie, Stevie, I'm so glad!" she sobbed against his shoulder. "They tried to browbeat us into taking another planet, but we remembered and fought for your dream of an outpost planet. We've won, haven't we won, Stevie?"

"Yes, Wendy, we've won," Mr. Fishdollar said slowly.

She pressed closer and he hugged her convulsively.

"Let's celebrate tonight," she cried. "A Thanksgiving—"

"All right, but let me go now, sweetheart. I need to think." He hugged her convulsively again and released himself.

Alone on the headland, he looked out over the sea for a long time. He took off his blue and gold tunic, folded it neatly, and thrust it deep into a crevice of the rock. The day was gray-chilly and he shivered in his undershirt.

Evening drew on, red-gray over the water. He stood very erect with his chin up. He heard the signal gun and then the roar as *Carlyle* lifted out, and his chin rose higher. Finally thoughts began coming through the hurt. Thoughts were still to be had for the thinking.

President-consort Fishdollar walked through ghostly, tentative snowflakes toward the settlement on the lonely outpost planet ... standing like a great rock in the way of the aliens ... or in the way of the sickly pale cast of conscious thinking ... aliens both, to the unsearchable mind of the species ... aliens, then, war or negotiation ... President Fishdollar down with nervous strain ... the First Gentleman in *de facto* control ... triumph ... reception at Prime Reference ... medal of honor...

With a spring in his step and warmth inside him, Stephen Fishdollar came home.

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