



Illustration by
EMSH

The babes are gaping like kids at a sideshow

Miss Stardust

By RICHARD MATHESON

DEAR HARRY:
How are things in the baked bean industry? Cracky good, I trust—as we used to say in those halcyon days of yore when thou and mou were drip-

ping young ichor over our public relations courses at ye olde M.U.

I swan things *should* be cracky good, what with your future intact and paid-for Cadillac. Second-rank publicity man

★

It was a case of beauty and the beast . . . but which was which?

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for *Altshuler's Boston Beauties*. Kid, you're living.

As for me—nothing. I'm on the ropes from this dang *Miss Stardust* contest. I s'pose you've read some accounts of the debacle by our comrades-in-legs, the roving reporters. Well, buddy, the inside tale is still to be wagged. So I'm waggin'. List.

To begin with, as they prose in Victorian ghost stores, I have my little agency, single entrepreneurish and struggling. I have no complaints. There are my steady customers—*Garshbuller's Candied Dental Floss*, *Los Alamos Insect Bombs*, *The Blue Underwear Company*. and, but of course, the ever popular *Mae Bushkins Imperial Foundations*. All said clients guaranteed to knock me out a steady if non-stratospheric return.

So what happens? You remember that joker from my home town I told you about once, Gad Simpkins? You know, the one who was going to parachute down a mine shaft? The one who was going to walk tightrope across a burning Bessemer Converter? Sure you do.

What happens, but the jerk decides to swim the English Channel backstroke. Damn fool thing to try in any man's book, but that was Gad to the socks. Always one for a new twist.

Well, to cut short the prelims, Gad doesn't know a soul. He's small potatoes, strictly a benchwarmer in the minor leagues. He comes to me. Joe, he says, you got to handle my publicity for the swim. This is dynamite, he says to me. I look him over. Change your brand, I tell him. He retires.

But comes two plot thickeners. For one, *Los Alamos Insect Bombs* is kaput, after one of its larger items blows up a customer's seven-room house and adjoining garage, while he and family are out to the movies.

Result: A—One less client. B—Enough loss to create one wry look on the kisser of my beloved, which says as clearly as if she'd intoned the words in

her gravelly snarl: "*Penury! It's upon us!*"

This is the first thing. The second is edging on the subtler side, but still enough to egg me on. I am getting sick of dental floss and foundations and blue underwear. I am tired of catering to torsos and teeth. I want a little magic in my latter days. Besides the fact, as I say, that I covet a little needed jack to improve my low-caste status at Home Sweet Home.

But enough of that. Sufficient to say that I give the job a run for its money. All the tricks of the trade, from squibs to bits of semi-droll fluff in the *New Yorker Magazine*. I get Gad on the radio, he desports like the idiot he is. You know the rest. Good solid publicity, interest snow-balling, project going strong. Is it my fault Gadstone Simpkins swims into a rock twenty yards out from the Gallic shoreline?

SO I toss my greying shock of hair to the side, and am preparing my retreat to blue underwear, when to the house comes a party of three. They are directors of a proposed contest to determine who is to be a certain *Miss Stardust*.

I elucidate, this being the crux of my somber plaint. The winner of this here contest is to be declared best-looking head not only on Earth, not only in the Solar System, but in the whole blarsted galaxy. This includes *beaucoup* stars and this, my skinny info about the heavens informs me, includes the chance of a goodly sum of probable life-sustaining planets. As well as our own nine, one of which we already know contains a strange brand of living matter.

Ergo—mishmosh.

However, at the moment these three talent-seeking gents come to see me, I am not thinking overhard about such wraithlike topics. I know as much astronomy as I know where last years' taxes went. When it comes to supernova and escape velocities, I am on a par with the guy who can lose a bass

drum in a telephone booth.

This, I hasten to add, disturbs me not one whit. Because the three characters like my publicity work on Gad's ill-fated plunge. I have imagination. I have the fresh approach. I have journalistic *joie de vivre*. Outcome—they want me to handle the *Miss Stardust* contest at a juicy figure (not one of their prospective contestants—a retainer.)

I sign the contract. Hastily. I am now head rah rah man for a setup that determines which babe has the face that launches a thousand spaceships.

So I get hep. I start ladling out the pablum of publicity articles and ads disguised as news. 8 x 10 glossies make the rounds. *Miss Georgia* and *Miss New York* and *Miss Transylvania* and *Miss Hemoglobin* and *Miss The Girl We'd Most Like To Be Trapped In A Cement Mixer With*.

Prizes are announced. A huge silver loving cup. A Hollywood contract. A car. Others. The applications pour in.

Interest picks up. The boardwalk at Long Harbor starts to get prettied up. The judges are picked, five of them. Two are local dignitaries, fugitives from the Chamber of Commerce. One is a Mayor Grassblood on his yearly vacation from Gall Stone, Arizona. Another is Marvin O'Shea, president of a chemical plant. Last and not least is Globber, of Globber and Globber, old firm of good repute that turns out bathing suits. (Guess what kind of bathing suits all contestants are going to wear.)

Everything is going cracky good. Excitement fills the air. Drive fills the columns. Merchants are rubbing their gnarled palms together, oiling up the wheels on their cash register drawers. Middle-aged men are packing duds and combing out toupees to attend the festival. Joy to the world. Everyone is animate. Especially me. I am raking in such matchless coin that I am tempted to slip Mae Bushkin the word to take a flying leap into blue underwear while drawing candied dental floss between the gaps in her bridge. But caution pre-

vails. My wife's middle name. She says you never can tell.

Truer words were never growled.

Because what happens, but three days before the contest starts Mrs. Local Dignitary Number One gets a severe case of galloping undefinable, and ends up in the hospital. Old Man Local Dignitary Number One gets the shakes, cancels his job, and hies to the bedside with roses and condolences. A sordid marital gesture, but rough on the contest.

WE REPLACE him with Sam Sampson, who owns five car lots. This is not too bad, because we now sidestep the need to hire cars for the babes to ride around Long Harbor in, and cause all male viewers to wax pop-eyed viewing how little material old man Globber weaves into his bathing suits.

So we are all squared off again. Until Marvin O'Shea, president of a chemical plant, is driving to see an infirm aunt in La Jolla, when his right rear goes "pow," and he and his ever-nagging go ploughing through the last two cabins of *Mackintoshe's Little Hawaiian Motel*.

The duo is not seriously injured, but both end up in the white place, flat on their backs and sniffing flowers of compassion. That takes care of another judge.

With mutters of "jinx" in our ears we find ourselves yet another replacement. Said replacement promptly gets himself in a drunken street brawl, and we have to ease him out of the picture fast. He screams foul and, true, it does seem undue odd. The joker has laid off the bottle for twenty-seven years. But testimony prevails. It emerges clear that the old gent had enough alcohol in him to light seventeen hurricane lamps.

We make the bid to replace this unfortunate with one Saul Mendelheimer, owner and producer of *Mendelheimer's Garden-of-Eden Pickles*. Mendelheimer acquiesces. We are set again. The machine shudders on.

Then, the day before the contest is to start, the pier collapses. Luckily no one is on it but Lewisohn Tamarkis, who is arranging floral wreaths. He dog paddles to shore, whilst cursing all living things, and drives off, dripping Pacific Ocean on the seat covers of his 1948 Studebaker.

Our brows knit with grave suspicions. Mutters of "Communists" falling from many a furtive lip, we acquire the Municipal Auditorium. This is not so good as the outdoors, but our hands are tied. I for one, being a superstitious crank, think there is a curse operating on the show. I have dealt with such ill-fated projects in my time and, say I, once a deal starts going sour there's nothing you can do.

This *Miss Stardust* contest was accursed, I decided. I didn't know the half of it.

So where was I? Oh, yeah. Well, we finally manage to reach the morning of the show with five breathing, walking judges. The day dawns bright and rainy. First time it rains on that date since 1867. We're all burned. The judges sit in their hotel suite and grouse. Get to the auditorium, I tell them. Then I run around trying to get things rolling.

First I send out sixteen Sampson cars with loudspeakers, and Long Harbor is informed that The Show Will Go On. On top of each car is a broad, gamuting from *Miss Alsace-Lorraine* to *Miss Pitkin Avenue*. They are dressed in flesh-colored bathing suits and transparent raincoats. They hold umbrellas with one hand and wave with the other. They giggle and give the come-on over the mike. If this, plus flesh-colored suits, fails, I will concede all to be over, and will wire Mae Bushkin for a rematch.

Also I send out little boys with handbills. I snatch a few minutes of radio time and get a local happyvoice announcer to give out with a come one, come all. I send up a balloon. *See Miss Stardust Today!!* it says. Someone

shoots it down. A prankster, I think.

Not so.

After a morning of hasty relations with the public, I hie to the auditorium for a last confab with the judges. I note that carpenters are still banging away on the judges' booth on stage. A dry Lewisohn Tamarkis and crew are heaving bouquets around. I think, we may get this show on the road yet.

Then it comes.

I step into the elevator and zip up the shaft. I patter down the hallway. I enter the judges' room.

"Men," I say.

And that's all.

Because they are all sitting paralyzed in their chairs, gaping at a thing in the middle of the floor to which my eyes move.

My lower jaw hits the laces on my Florsheims.

EVER see a vacuum cleaner? With a head of cabbage on top? With a jacket on? Standing in the middle of a rug and giving you the eye?

Kiddo, I did.

I am verging on swoon when it addresses me.

"You are in charge?" it inquires.

I do not reply. My tongue is tied. It is strapped. My eyes roll out and bounce on the floor. Nearly.

The thing looks piqued—as much as a head of cabbage can look piqued.

"Very well," he-she-it says, "since no one present seems capable of speech, I shall state our case and depart."

Our case. I feel my skin tightening. We are all riven to our spots. We listen to the mechanical voice of the thing. No mouth is to be seen. Its pronunciation is stilted. It is something like hearing a monologue from that train that says "*Bromo Seltzer, Bromo Seltzer, Bromo Seltzer.*"

"This contest," it says, "is declared void."

Then, as he looks us over with his one oval yellow eye, I get me a glimmer. In my long years as drudge, rabble

rouser and savant of the public taste, I have seen many a weirdie in operation.

So I watch this article with sage eyes. I ponder the angle.

"I will elucidate," says cabbage head, "should your silence indicate vacuity of perception. You have, most inappropriately, named this tourney the *Miss Stardust* contest. Since your microbic *Earth*, as you call it, represents no more than the most infinitesimal mote in this galaxy, your choice of contest titling is more than inexpedient. It has been considered noxiously naive and insulting to a serious degree."

Too clever, I thought, too all-fire verbose. Nobody spiels like so except the English Department at Cambridge. This is a frame, I deduce. Someone is kidding us.

Used to know a guy named Campbell Gault. He made those novelties like joy buzzers and fake spiders and ashtrays that look like outhouses. Old Camp used to make robots too. Once during the war he had a steel Hirohito clanking up old 42nd Street singing *I'm A Japanese Sandman*. Clever, and just the sort of john to play a gag like this.

"Is this understood?" says cabbage skull with a toss of his leaves.

I smile knowingly. I look at the transfixed judges.

"All right," I say, "Let's cut it. We have work to do."

"Sit down," says the thing, "I am not addressing you."

"Go find yourself some corned beef," I say.

"I warn you."

"*Bromo Seltzer, Bromo Seltzer,*" I reply.

I find myself pinned to the broadloom by a bluish ray that buzzes out from the vacuum cleaner. It feels something like when you stand on one of those penny *Foot Easers*. Lots of vibration, and a numbing sensation. But I'm not standing on anything. I'm flat on my back.

"Hey!" I yell, confounded.

"May that strike some reason into you," quoth the vacuum cleaner. "I will

now conclude my statement."

The thing rolls around the floor, concluding.

"As I was saying before this intemperate intrusion on my words," he says, "Since your molecular planet is but the minutest portion of the vast spaces which this contest presumes to encompass, we can only assume grave intolerance, and demand retraction."

MAY I . . ." commences Mendelheimer of *Mendelheimer's Garden-of-Eden Pickles*, "May I, ulp, inquire . . . w-w-where you are from?"

"I have just arrived from Asturi Cridentia, as you might call it in your primitive linguistics."

"A . . . a . . . a . . ." Mendelheimer gags.

"An extra-terrestrial!" gasps Sam Sampson, who reads science fiction, between hooking car lovers.

"W-what do you want?"

That's me, a faint squeak in the vicinity of the carpet.

"One of two things," replies the interplanetary vegetable, "A change in the contest title, or representation."

"But . . ." from me.

"I will remind you," says the appliance from outer space, "We have the necessary potency to apply coercion on this body."

"Co-ercion?" says Globber of Globber and etcetera.

"We have already attempted to disappoint furtherance of this affair," says you-know-what, "but to no apparent avail."

"The accidents," murmur I.

"The pier!" cries Mendelheimer.

"The fight!" Sampson snaps words and fingers.

"The rain," says the vacuum cleaner.

"I *knew* it!" ejaculates Local Dignitary Number Two, "It never rains in Long Harbor unless there is foul play!"

"This is beside the actual point," says our visitor. "Being now aware of our potential effect, judge accordingly."

Outside, rain is dribbling on the win-

dows. Inside, judges are dribbling on their cravats. I am pale, and fain would conk out. We look at the cabbage, which poses a truculent pose on the rug.

"How d-did you get in here?" asks Mendelheimer.

"Make your decision," states the thing. "You will have the contest title changed, or accord us due representation."

"But, look," I start in, forgetting momentarily my head-to-toe hotfoot.

His eye is on me. I subside.

"We are not here to haggle." The Bromo-Seltzer train rattles angrily over a trestle. "The decision is made. Do not strain our patience."

Public relations to the rescue.

"But, look," I proceed. "We've already got a thousand posters that read *Miss Stardust Contest*. We've advertised that name. We've sold advance-ticket blocks and the tickets read *Admit One* to the *Miss Stardust* contest. Concessionaires have balloons that read . . ."

"Balloons can be punctured," says cabbage head, yet testier.

"You did that," I murmur, "too?"

"Enough of this!" bristles the vacuum cleaner from the black velocities. "If you wish to retain your title, then we demand representative rights."

In my true hack mind, Harry, already are wheels turning and buzzers buzzing and little factory workers hustling. The potential spread is before my mental eyes.

SEE MISS STARDUST!! THE
BEAUTY OF THE HEAVENS!!! PUL-
CHRITUDE FROM BEYOND THE
STARS!!!! THE GREATEST, THE
MOST SENSATIONAL.....!!!!

Exclamation point.

"All right," I say, getting the jump on a stunned board of judges, "You've got it."

"Now, *one* moment please." The mayor of Gall Stone, Arizona starts a slow-fission bombast. "This calls for discussion."

"Discussion!" I say, still flat on my back. "What do you want them to do—

disintegrate the Municipal Auditorium?"

LOCAL Dignitary Number Two leaps to his brogans.

"No sir!" he cries. "Not the Municipal Auditorium!"

Silence upon the babbling. The vacuum cleaner gives us the Once-over heavenly.

"Make your decision," he warns.

So we all nod, pale at the gills.

"Very well," he says.

"How long will it take to get your entry here?" I inquire politely.

"I will inform the member units of the alliance," he tells us, "The entries will be here within the hour."

"Entry-zzzz?" I gurgle.

"There are several thousand," he says.

I sag back on the carpeting. I appraise the ceiling and wish I am back plugging the virtues of blue underwear. I envision a stage sagging with several thousand interplanetary broads. I cannot envision the sight of female vacuum cleaners in Globber bathings suits.

"Thousands?" glups Mendelheimer.

"I note reluctance," says cabbage skull. "Your alternative is the simple act of changing the contest title."

"We're ruined," says Globber.

The yellow eye softens.

"As a matter of actual point" he says, "I named such a high figure in hopes of forcing you to accept the alternative. However, I see that you cannot. Know then that beyond your own system, our alliance has determined its own *Miss Stardust*, though hardly," he added snottily, "by that title. We will consent to allow her to represent the remainder of this galaxy. She, plus the four contestants from your own system, will make five. Fairness beyond this you cannot expect to receive."

"Four . . . in our system?" Sampson asks.

"There is no movable life on the four outermost planets of your system."

Now I am no devotee of Astronomy.

Harry, but, even for me, this is a hell of a way to get the word about life on other worlds. From the lips of an abusive cabbage. Lips? What lips?

Well, to make a grotesque story short, we accept the conditions. We pick up his under-the-deck deal. If the talking Hoover can make piers collapse and skies liquify, who are we to argue with him? We say, "You win," and everything is cracky bad.

After that the vacuum cleaner from another world exits. Exeunt all on his heels, to view him passing through the hall ceiling, head first. We discover later, from a gibbering roof janitor, that cabbage head gazookahs himself up through the skylight and floats up to his interstellar crockery, which is hovering fifty feet over the building. Said saucer then whips into the blue yonder and is gone. As is the composure of one formerly sane janitor.

The judges and I have a session. A couple of them get brave and cry fraud. I tell them off. I inform them that they are not pinned to the floor by blue light and I am. They reflect on this.

The upshot is we have cards painted for the contestants we expect. I do the painting, not wishing to let some hand-painter blab about the new cards he did. I consult Sampson for the information. There should be a card for *Miss Mercury*, he says, one for *Miss Venus*, two others for *Miss Mars* and *Miss Jupiter*. Of course, he says, they doubtless have different names for their planets. Notwithstanding, blusters Mayor Grassblood, if they are taking part in an Earth contest, they'll take our names for them or leave them. I remind him of cabbage head making the rain, collapsing the pier and playing elevator with himself through the floors. Grassblood pauses a moment to reflect on that.

We deduce a slight problem on the title card for the last contestant. We cannot call her *Miss Stardust* because, by the standards of the contest, she ain't yet. But the vacuum cleaner says she is *their Miss Stardust*. So what to

do? We settle for an unsatisfactory *Miss Outer Space*.

"The monster will not take a shine to that," forbodes Mendelheimer.

We hush him up. We retire to the elevator, punchy but unbowed, wondering what the day will bring.

It brings headaches.

WE DECIDE to spread none of this about since we're not sure. I don't mean we're not sure the vacuum cleaner doesn't mean business, we're not sure we should let cat from bag, lest the walls of the auditorium get kicked down by the eager.

But, as per usual, some creep on the inside gives out with a strictly-between-you-and-me, and before you can say Coma Berenices the place is crawling with rumor. Add the eye witness of one hysterical frump who sights the crockery take off over the auditorium, and you have the seeds, the ripe beginning, and the rotten harvest.

I am stopped. Is it true about the saucer, they ask, about the literate head of cabbage? Ha ha, I say, that's a good one.

Reaching the stage forty minutes and many ha ha's later, I find out how good a one it really is.

The contestants have shown with their delegate, coach and chaperone, cabbage head. All the babes who are stacked in Earthly manner are gaping like kids at a sideshow. They stand around in their Globber suits with their eyes popping out.

This the-delegate does not like. Because, when I extend my hand with a Kingfish smile, the big yellow eye flashes over me like the headlight on a locomotive. I see there is nothing to shake anyway, swallow a *faux pas* lump, and pretend not to notice.

"Well, you made it," I chirp.

"Did you doubt it?" says he in a surly gasp which has all the amiability of a Bendix washer conversing.

"No! No!" I say, jollity flecking off my ashen jowls. "Not at all. We've been

waiting for you."

He ignores that. He gives the people on stage the single eye. He hisses.

"My wards are losing patience with your goggling Earthians. I demand you have the contest started immediately and see to it that this offensive staring ceases."

I nod, I smile, I make the rounds dispersing, my stomach doing pushups. That completed, I return to the vacuum cleaner. He says something which makes my heart bounce like a handball.

"If," he says, "I note the slightest prejudice toward my wards, the remotest suggestion of alien regard—there will be severe repercussions."

And so drags on stage the contest née Miss Stardust.

Ever have a dream where everything goes wrong? Where no matter what you try, it backfires? Where you're the eternal blunderer? That's what I feel like in that contest. The thing is a shambles.

There is a long rumble of curiosity when, after a few Earth babes have minced on and off stage, we hold up the card that reads *Miss Mercury*. Then a few hoots and catcalls. These suddenly ending when the kid herself makes her entrance.

Now if a technicolor rock comes bobbing out on a stage, Harry, what would you do? The same as the audience did, I speck. Eyeballs protrude, faces blank, jaws gape; in a thousand brains comes the sole query:

Wot in 'ell is this?

Then some visiting fireman gives out with a guffaw and that starts it off. They all decide this is a wonderful gag. I glance a queasy shot over my trembling shoulder and see murder in that yellow eye. My Adam's apple does a swan dive into my lungs, and I turn back.

Applause now. Great little gag that, ha ha. Bring on some more. Some more comes.

Miss Venus.

A hothouse plant with eyes. It slips

across the stage on its bottom fronds. The eyes, three, look around the audience. They look ever so slightly disgusted.

ANOTHER roar from the audience, this one a little forced. Like the roar of a man who, by gosh, is going to have a good time even if his hair is starting to stand on end. This gag is almost *too* good. A guy could swear that green plant was walking around by itself, the wires are so well concealed.

I smell a breath over my shoulder. Rather foul.

"This reception is highly unsatisfactory," bubbles cabbage head. "You will alleviate the situation or there will be increasing trouble for you."

I look at him. I think of flying saucers and ray guns and California going up in toto.

That in mind, I bounce out on stage as Miss Venus exits. I raise the mike from the floor. I raise my palsied arms.

"May I have your attention," my voice booms through the place. Only electrically.

Brief pause in pandemonium.

"Listen, people," I say, "I know this is hard to swallow but those two contestants you just saw are really from Mercury and . . ."

I am laughed to scorn. I am inundated by Bronx cheers. A cushion flies in the air. Mocking airplanes fashioned from programs fill the auditorium sky. Confetti drizzles from the balconies.

"Wait a minute!" I shout. "You attention please."

More noise. I wait for the subsiding. I see flash bulb lightning everywhere. Story and pix will be in the newspapers post-haste. For the first time, unworked-for publicity gives me a pain. Let's face it, I'm scared, Harry. When heroes were made, I was sleeping one off in the next room.

"Let's be fair to these contestants," I say, my voice a lustrous croak, "Let's show them some real Earthlike sportsmanship."

I then let loose a flimsy wave of hand, sheathe the mike in the floor, beckon to the m.c. to take over, and traipse off stage. Right into the vacuum cleaner. I raise a shaky smile to the edifice of his dubious good nature. He glares at me.

"*Miss Mercury* is grossly offended," he tells me. "She states that if she is not chosen winner of the contest, there will be severe retaliation by her elders."

"What!"

I recoil against the curtain.

"Now wait a second," I gasp. "Have a heart. We can't rig the contest just because..."

I'm talking to deaf ears. To no ears, to be correct.

"You created your own problem," he says, "when you named your contest as you did."

"Buddy, I didn't name it!"

"Beside the actual point," he says, and wheels off. I turn back to the stage with haunted blinkers. Just in time to get a fast load of *Miss Mars* making her debut on old Earth.

More like an hors d'oeuvre than a female. The trunk and head are two Spanish olives, and the legs and arms are toothpicks stuck in them. I hang onto the curtain ropes with a sorry groan. The audience isn't catcalling so much now. It is sinking in. Even though it's a hard thing to admit and still claim sanity. You see a couple of olives stroll on stage, preceded by an ambulating tropical plant and a rainbow rock that crawls and first you laugh it off, then the creeps get to you.

The creeps are getting to them.

Miss Jupiter doesn't help any when she slides across stage in a transparent globe. She looks like a dirty iceberg. No face, arms, legs—no nothing. I hear someone in the audience gag. Someone says ugh. All we need now, I am thinking, is...

"*Miss Mars* has informed me," the vacuum cleaner say, "that unless she wins first prize, her injured emotions will result in venomous impulses toward revenge against this planet."

"Now, wait a minute, buddy," I implore.

"FINISH the contest quickly," he says.

"My wards are becoming violently ill at the sight of Earth people en masse."

"What do you mean, ill?"

"They find your appearance surpassingly repugnant," he says.

"Now, look," I say.

He is gone.

I watch him roll off. They find us repugnant. If I were not ready to cry I would laugh. But I am ready to cry.

Highlight of the show, *Miss Stardust*, their own *Miss Stardust*, comes out of the wings.

I can't say she walked. She didn't roll. It wasn't a crawl. You might say she slobbered her way across the stage.

She was an orange jellyfish with a skirt and eyes. She was some jello quivering from the bowl in search of whipped cream. I better shut up, I'm making myself sick.

No, I keep telling myself, she wouldn't do that. She couldn't possibly think that...

"Our *Miss Stardust* has informed me..." starts the delegate.

That's all, brother.

"Oh she has!" I yell. "What's the matter with Venus and Jupiter, are they sick?"

"They also demand first prize," says the vacuum cleaner with the head like a cabbage.

I melt, I drip into the floorboards and disappear between the cracks. In wishful imagination anyway. I really just stand there, my mouth offering a large home for needy flies.

"How can they all win?" I ask in a gurgling mutter.

"Beside the actual point," he says and I think in unison.

Briefly, my dander goes up again.

"I think you came here just to start trouble," I tell him.

His eye is on me like an exterminator's lining sights on a particularly odious specimen.

"We do not like you Earthmen," he says. "My wards and I find you both obnoxious to the mind and unwholesome to the eye. My wards and I will be glad when they have all won first prize and can leave your loathsome presence."

I stare at his receding dustbag back. I ponder slipping out the back way and hopping a raft for South America. In the pit the band is playing *I'm In Love With The Man In The Moon*, the only interplanetary song they know. The judges are stumbling off stage for a break, looking for a good ten fingers of anything potent. They had become judges in the hope of rousing senile corpses by viewing luscious femalia. Instead . . . this.

I shepherd them all into a dressing room the size of an occupied closet. They all stand there with untended sweat drops dripping from their portly faces. They direct smitten eyes in my direction.

"We have a first-class hellish problem," I tell them. I enlarge.

"But . . . *that's impossible!*" cries Local Dignitary Number Two, unable to smite his noble brow because the room is two small.

"I've told him that," I say, "He's not buying."

GLOOBER of etcetera and etcetera sinks down into a chair which just manages to support ample him.

"I'm sick," he announces.

Grassblood pounds his well-pounded palm.

"This is un-American!" he says and purses lips.

"And I have a niece who wanted to win the contest," says Mendelheimer sadly.

"What!" cries Local Dig 2. "Fraud! Calumny!"

"Awright awready—*stow it!*" That is an angry me, fed up to here.

I ease immediate tension. I tell Mendelheimer that even if his niece, *Miss Ailamentary Canal*, is impartially judged best-looking head, she can't win

now because we are hung up. One of the outer spacers *has* to get the prize.

"Or . . . *what?*" asks Globber of . . .

"Or else we get pulverized," I say.

"You think they can really do this thing?" asks Mendelheimer.

"Buddy, after what I've seen that character do, I'll take his word on the rest."

"But which contestant should we give it to?" Sampson poses the big question.

Local Dig 2 throws up his hands in municipal despair.

"We are trapped!" he cries.

I think so too.

Well, we have to adjourn, because the contest must go on. I advise them to stall as long as possible, measure everything twice, ogle slow. They file back to their stand with the gaiety of nobles climbing into tumbrils. They sit there, and I know they are worried when *Miss Brooklyn* writhes by and they don't bat an eyelash. When such a stack passing before the eye causes no reaction, you are either powerful worried or you are dead.

Again I attempt to reason with cabbage head.

"Look," I say, "you're intelligent. Isn't it obvious that we can't give *one* prize to *five* contestants?"

Earthian math is lost on him.

"This contest must end soon," is all he tells me, "This superficial chatter is merely irritating us further. There is obviously no competition between my lovely wards and those hideous creatures parading out there. No judge, be he of Earth or Heaven, could possibly award a prize to such manifest hideousness."

Glimmers. A germ.

"*Hideous?*" I say, "You think they're hideous?"

"You are *all* hideous."

I turn away. Suddenly I have it. My brain is clicking at last. I rush to a phone and make my bid to save pore Earth.

Then I ease on stage and slide in beside Sampson. There, while eying

morsels of perfect 36-22-36, I slip him the word from the corner of my mouth.

He breaks into the smile reserved for cash buyers of this year's Cadillac. Then he leans over and whispers the news to Gall Stone's civic pride. The mayor passes it on to Mendelheimer's shell-like ears, Mendelheimer to Globber, and Globber to Loc Dig 2.

Now they are all grinning and looking with revitalized leers at passing pulchritude, and I am feeling like a very clever publicity man.

This is probably the longest beauty contest known to man. It has to be. My plan needs time, and we have to buy it expensive. We have the contestants coming on frontways, sideways and backwards. Singly, in pairs, in groups, and in a long zofftic line. They do everything but walk on their hands. The babes start jawing about it. Even the audience gets a gutfull of willowy shapes. And when glassy-eyed males get tired of looking at babes, man, you've overdone it.

But by then it is all right, because my plan is ready to go.

I go to the mike.

LADIES and gentlemen," I say. "Before we announce our winner, I want to add another surprise award to our list of prizes. We had formerly announced the loving cup, the car, the Hollywood contract, the years' free servicing and chassis work at Max Factor's, and other smaller items. Now we have another prize."

I pause for my coup.

"A month's vacation in the Mediterranean with none other than . . ."

I wave my arm toward the wings.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I ham it, "*Mister Universe!*"

The big blond giant comes padding out in his tights, and fed-up housewives do nip-ups in their seats.

While the cheers and groans ring out over my weary but joyous head, I gaze off stage.

As I figure, the broads from space are crowding around their delegate. I nod to the m.c. and amble off the boards, my mind cool with victory.

So we're hideous, are we? Well, that's too bad. If they want the first prize, they have to take that vacation too. A month in the Mediterranean with *Mister Manifest Hideousness*. Take it or leave it.

Cabbage head spies me now, and whizzes across the floor. I gulp as he approaches, the feeling of victory sort of dying. That eye looks *mad*.

"You attempt trickery!" he accuses me.

"Trickery?" I make with the bland face.

"You intend to carry this ruse out?" he asks.

"Mister," I say, "This is *our* contest. We'll give you first prize, but we have the right to say what the prize will be."

"Beside the actual point," he says.

"*What?*" I feel something giving.

"How *dare* you proclaim that creature *Mister Universe!*" he gargles, "Are you not aware that the *Universe* contains more galaxies than there are stars in your *own* galaxy?"

"Huh?"

"This calls for drastic action. I must call immediately on the alliance of galaxies. There will be a contest held in this building to decide who is really entitled to the name *Mister Universe*. Let me see, there are approximately seven million, five hundred and ninety-five thousand base representatives which, divided into their integral parts, makes . . ."

Harry, what do you say? Can you use a weak assistant to help you push beans? Harry, I'll work for nothing. Please!
Joe.

Coming Soon: **WHITE SPOT**, a Brilliant Novelet by Murray Leinster

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The BOX

By
**ARTHUR
PORGES**

*Problem: How can
you break
the unbreakable?*

SELDOM has an object no bigger than a pound cake and far less complicated-looking had the eyes of so many eminent scientists fastened upon it with greedy concentration. Most of them knew something of the box's history, but Dr. Soulie, Director of the Research Foundation, summarized it once more.

"This metal—ah—object, which arrived by parcel post from Arizona today," he said proudly, "is almost certainly the first non-terrestrial artifact ever discovered. As you've heard, it was found among the deepest fragments of Meteor Crater, and to this organization has been assigned the delicate and intriguing task of opening it. Quite an honor, our selection, believe me, gentlemen."

"Is there anything in it?" At least four of the guest scientists asked that question.