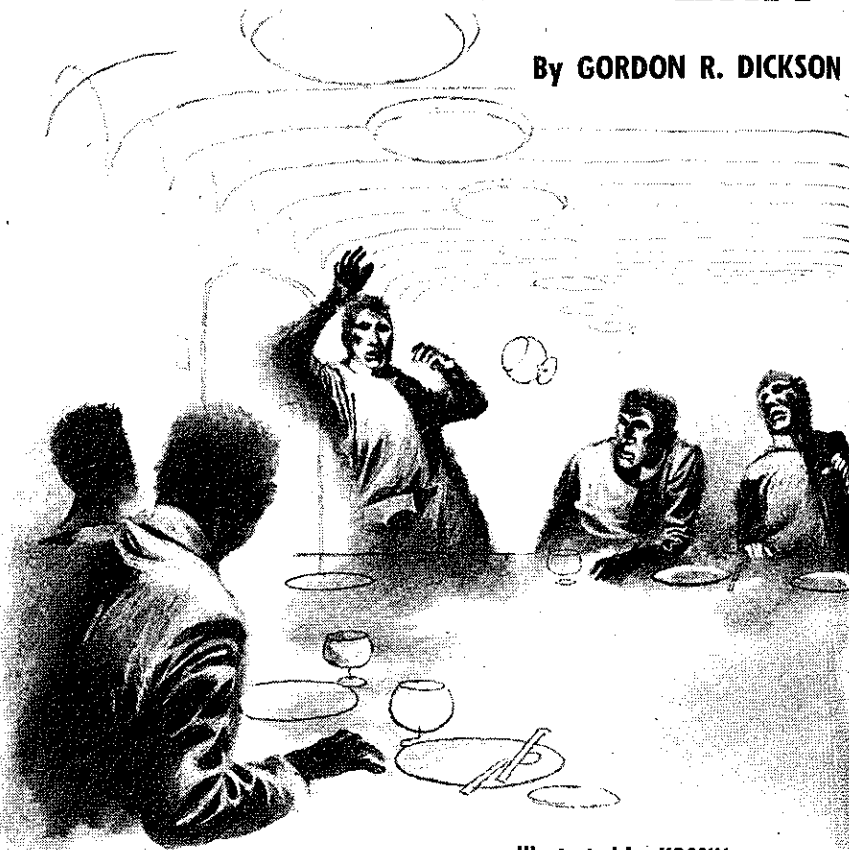


Be it ever so (A) impossibly squalid or (B)
impossibly lovely, there was, respectively,
no place in the Galaxy like Station 563 or:

LULUNGOMEENA

By GORDON R. DICKSON



Illustrated by KOSSIN



BLAME Clay Harbank, if you will, for what happened at Station 563 of the Sirius Sector; or blame William Peterborough, whom we called the Kid. I blame no one. But I am a Dorsai man.

The trouble began the day the kid joined the station, with his quick hands and his gambler's mind, and found that Clay, alone of all the men there, would not gamble with him—for all that he claimed to having been a gambling man himself. And so it ran on for four years of service together.

But the beginning of the end was the day they came off shift together.

They had been out on a duty circuit of the frontier station that housed the twenty of us—searching the outer bubble for signs of blows or leaks. It's a slow two hour tramp, that duty, even outside the station on the surface of the asteroid where there's no gravity to speak of. We, in the recreation room, off duty, could tell by the sound of their voices as the inner port sucked open and the clanging clash of them removing their spacesuits came echoing to us along the metal corridor, that the Kid had been needling Clay through the whole tour.

"Another day," came the Kid's voice, "another fifty credits. And

how's the piggy bank coming along, Clay?"

THERE was a slight pause, and I could see Clay carefully controlling his features and his voice. Then his pleasant baritone, softened by the burr of his Tarsusian accent, came smoothly to us.

"Like a gentleman, Kid," he answered. "He never overeats and so he runs no danger of indigestion."

It was a neat answer, based on the fact that the Kid's own service account was swollen with his winnings from the rest of the crew. But the Kid was too thick-skinned for rapier thrusts. He laughed; and they finished removing their equipment and came on into the recreation room.

They made a striking picture as they entered, for they were enough alike to be brothers—although father and son would have been a more likely relationship, considering the difference in their ages. Both were tall, dark, wide-shouldered men with lean faces, but experience had weathered the softer lines from Clay's face and drawn thin parentheses about the corners of his mouth. There were other differences, too; but you could see in the Kid the youth that Clay had been, and in Clay the man that the Kid would some day be.

"Hi, Clay," I said.

"Hello, Mort," he said, sitting down beside me.

"Hi, Mort," said the Kid.

I ignored him; and for a moment he tensed. I could see the anger flame up in the ebony depths of his black pupils under the heavy eyebrows. He was a big man; but I come from the Dorsai Planets and a Dorsai man fights to the death, if he fights at all. And, in consequence, among ourselves, we of Dorsai are a polite people.

But politeness was wasted on the Kid—as was Clay's delicate irony. With men like the Kid, you have to use a club.

We were in bad shape. The twenty of us at Frontier Station 563, on the periphery of the human area just beyond Sirius, had gone sour, and half the men had applications in for transfer. The trouble between Clay and the Kid was splitting the station wide open.

We were all in the Frontier Service for money; that was the root of the trouble. Fifty credits a day is good pay—but you have to sign up for a ten year hitch. You can buy yourself out—but that costs a hundred thousand. Figure it out for yourself. Nearly six years if you saved every penny you got. So most go in with the idea of staying the full decade.

That was Clay's idea. He had

gambled most of his life away. He had won and lost several fortunes. Now he was getting old and tired and he wanted to go back—to Lulungomeena, on the little planet of Tarsus, which was the place he had come from as a young man.

But he was through with gambling. He said money made that way never stuck, but ran away again like quicksilver. So he drew his pay and banked it.

But the Kid was out for a killing. Four years of play with the rest of the crew had given him more than enough to buy his way out and leave him a nice stake. And perhaps he would have done just that, if it hadn't been that the Service account of Clay's drew him like an El Dorado. He could not go off and leave it. So he stayed with the outfit, riding the older man unmercifully.

HE harped continually on two themes. He pretended to disbelieve that Clay had ever been a gambler; and he derided Lulungomeena, Clay's birthplace: the older man's goal and dream, and the one thing he could be drawn into talk about. For, to Clay, Lulungomeena was beautiful, the most wonderful spot in the Universe; and with an old man's sick longing for home, he could not help saying so.

"Mort," said the Kid, ignoring

the rebuff and sitting down beside us, "what's a Hixabrod like?"

My club had not worked so well, after all. Perhaps, I, too, was slipping. Next to Clay, I was the oldest man on the crew, which was why we were close friends. I scowled at the Kid.

"Why?" I asked.

"We're having one for a visitor," he said.

Immediately, all talk around the recreation room ceased and all attention was focused on the Kid. All aliens had to clear through a station like ours when they crossed the frontier from one of the other great galactic power groups into human territory. But isolated as Station 563 was, it was seldom an alien came our way, and when one did, it was an occasion.

Even Clay succumbed to the general interest. "I didn't know that," he said. "How'd you find out?"

"The notice came in over the receiver when you were down checking the atmosphere plant," answered the Kid with a careless wave of his hand. "I'd already filed it when you came up. What'll he be like, Mort?"

I had knocked around more than any of them—even Clay. This was my second stretch in the Service. I remembered back about twenty years, to the Denebian Trouble.

"Stiff as a poker," I said. "Proud as Lucifer, honest as sunlight and tight as a camel on his way through the eye of a needle. Sort of a humanoid, but with a face like a collie dog. You know the Hixabrodian reputation, don't you?"

Somebody at the back of the crowd said no, although they may have been doing it just to humor me. Like Clay with his Lulungomeena, old age was making me garrulous.

"They're the first and only mercenary ambassadors in the known Universe," I said. "A Hixabrod can be hired, but he can't be influenced, bribed or forced to come up with anything but the cold truth—and, brother, it's cold the way a Hixabrod serves it up to you. That's why they're so much in demand. If any kind of political dispute comes up, from planetary to inter-alien power group levels, both sides have to hire a Hixabrod to represent them in the discussions. That way they know the other side is being honest with them. The opposing Hixabrod is a living guarantee of that."

"He sounds good," said the Kid. "What say we get together and throw him a good dinner during his twenty-four hour stop-over?"

"You won't get much in the way of, thanks from him," I

grunted. "They aren't built that way."

"Let's do it anyway," said the Kid. "Be a little excitement for a change."

A MURMUR of approval ran through the room. I was outvoted. Even Clay liked the idea.

"Hixabrods eat what we eat, don't they?" asked the Kid, making plans. "Okay, then, soups, salad, meats, champagne and brandy—" he ran on, ticking the items off on his fingers. For a moment, his enthusiasm had us all with him. But then, just at the end, he couldn't resist getting in one more dig at Clay.

"Oh, yes," he finished, "and for entertainment, you can tell him about Lulungomeena, Clay."

Clay winced—not obviously, but we all saw a shadow cross his face. Lulungomeena on Tarsus, his birthplace, held the same sort of obsession for him that his Service account held for the Kid; but he could not help being aware that he was prone to let his tongue run away on the subject of its beauty. For it was where he belonged, in the stomach-twisting, throat-aching way that sometimes only talk can relieve.

I was a Dorsai man and older than the rest. I understood. No one should make fun of the bond tying a man to his home world. It is as real as it is intangible.

And to joke about it is cruel.

But the Kid was too young to know that yet. He was fresh from Earth—Earth, where none of the rest of us had been, yet which, hundreds of years before, had been the origin of us all. He was eager and strong and contemptuous of emotion. He saw, as the rest of us recognized also, that Clay's tendency to let his talk wander ever to the wonder of Lulungomeena was the first slight crack in what had once been a man of unflawed steel. It was the first creeping decay of age.

But, unlike the rest of us, who hid our boredom out of sympathy, the Kid saw here a chance to break Clay and his resolution to do no more gambling. So he struck out constantly at this one spot so deeply vital that Clay's self-possession was no defense.

Now, at this last blow, the little fires of anger gathered in the older man's eyes.

"That's enough," he said harshly. "Leave Lulungomeena out of the discussion."

"I'm willing to," said the Kid. "But somehow you keep reminding me of it. That and the story that you once were a gambler. If you won't prove the last one, how can you expect me to believe all you say about the first?"

The veins stood out on Clay's forehead; but he controlled himself.

"I've told you a thousand times," he said between his teeth. "Money made by gambling doesn't stick. You'll find that out for yourself one of these days."

"Words," said the Kid airily. "Only words."

For a second, Clay stood staring whitely at him, not even breathing. I don't know if the Kid realized his danger or cared, but I didn't breathe, either, until Clay's chest expanded and he turned abruptly and walked out of the recreation room. We heard his footsteps die away down the corridor toward his room in the dormitory section.

LATER, I braced the Kid about it. It was his second shift time, when most of the men in the recreation room had to go on duty. I ran the Kid to the ground in the galley where he was fixing himself a sandwich. He looked up, a little startled, more than a little on the defensive, as I came in.

"Oh, hi, Mort," he said with a pretty good imitation of casualness. "What's up?"

"You," I told him. "Are you looking for a fight with Clay?"

"No," he drawled with his mouth full. "I wouldn't exactly say that."

"Well, that's what you're liable to get."

"Look, Mort," he said, and

then paused until he had swallowed. "Don't you think Clay's old enough to look after himself?"

I felt a slight and not unpleasant shiver run down between my shoulder-blades and my eyes began to grow hot. It was my Dorsai blood again. It must have showed on my face, for the Kid, who had been sitting negligently on one edge of the galley table, got up in a hurry.

"Hold on, Mort," he said. "Nothing personal."

I fought the old feeling down and said as calmly as I could, "I just dropped by to tell you something. Clay has been around a lot longer than you have. I'd advise you to lay off him."

"Afraid he'll get hurt?"

"No," I answered. "I'm afraid you will."

The Kid snorted with sudden laughter, half choking on his sandwich. "Now I get it. You think I'm too young to take care of myself."

"Something like that, but not the way you think. I want to tell you something about yourself and you don't have to say whether I'm right or wrong—you'll let me know without words."

"Hold it," he said, turning red. "I didn't come out here to get psyched."

"You'll get it just the same. And it's not for you only—it's for

all of us, because men thrown together as closely as we are choose up sides whenever there's conflict, and that's as dangerous for the rest of us as it is for you."

"Then the rest of you can stay out of it."

"We can't," I said. "What affects one of us affects us all. Now I'll tell you what you're doing. You came out here expecting to find glamor and excitement. You found monotony and boredom instead, not realizing that that's what space is like almost all the time."

HE picked up his coffee container. "And now you'll say I'm trying to create my own excitement at Clay's expense. Isn't that the standard line?"

"I wouldn't know; I'm not going to use it, because that's not how I see what you're doing. Clay is adult enough to stand the monotony and boredom if they'll get him what he wants. He's also learned how to live with others and with himself. He doesn't have to prove himself by beating down somebody either half or twice his age."

He took a drink and set the container down on the table. "And I do?"

"All youngsters do. It's their way of experimenting with their potentialities and relationships with other people. When they find

that out, they can give it up—they're mature then—although some never do. I think you will, eventually. The sooner you stop doing it here, though, the better it'll be for you and us."

"And if I don't?" he challenged.

"This isn't college back on Earth or some other nice, safe home planet, where hazing can be a nuisance, but where it's possible to escape it by going somewhere else. There isn't any 'somewhere else' here. Unless the one doing the hazing sees how reckless and dangerous it is, the one getting hazed takes it as long as he can—and then something happens."

"So it's Clay you're really worried about, after all."

"Look, get it through your skull. Clay's a man and he's been through worse than this before. You haven't. If anybody's going to get hurt, it'll be you."

He laughed and headed for the corridor door. He was still laughing as it slammed behind him. I let him go. There's no use pushing a bluff after it's failed to work.

THE next day, the Hixabrod came. His name was Dor Lassos. He was typical of his race, taller than the tallest of us by half a head, with a light green skin and that impassive Hixabrodian canine face.

I missed his actual arrival, being up in the observation tower checking meteor paths. The station itself was well protected, but some of the ships coming in from time to time could have gotten in trouble with a few of the larger ones that slipped by us at intervals in that particular sector. When I did get free, Dor Lassos had already been assigned to his quarters and the time of official welcoming was over.

I went down to see him anyhow on the off-chance that we had mutual acquaintances either among his race or mine. Both of our peoples are few enough in number, God knows, so the possibility wasn't too far-fetched. And, like Clay, I yearned for anything connected with my home.

"*Wer velt d'hatchen, Hixabrod—*" I began, walking into his apartment—and stopped short.

The Kid was there. He looked at me with an odd expression on his face.

"Do you speak Hixabrodian?" he asked incredulously.

I nodded. I had learned it on extended duty during the Denebian Trouble. Then I remembered my manners and turned back to the Hixabrod; but he was already started on his answer.

"*En gles Ter, I tu, Dorsaiven,*" returned the collie face, expressionlessly. "*Da Tr'amgen lang.*"

Met zurres nebent?"

"Em getluc. Me mi Dorsai fene. Nono ne—ves luc Les Las-sos?"

He shook his head.

Well, it had been a shot in the dark anyway. There was only the faintest chance that he had known our old interpreter at the time of the Denebian Trouble. The Hixabrods have no family system of nomenclature. They take their names from the names of older Hixabrods they admire or like. I bowed politely to him and left.

It was not until later that it occurred to me to wonder what in the Universe the Kid could find to talk about with a Hixabrod.

I ACTUALLY was worried about Clay. Since my bluff with the Kid had failed, I thought I might perhaps try with Clay himself. At first I waited for an opportune moment to turn up; but following the last argument with the Kid, he'd been sticking to his quarters. I finally scrapped the casual approach and went to see him.

I found him in his quarters, reading. It was a little shocking to find that tall, still athletic figure in a dressing gown like an old man, eyes shaded by the lean fingers of one long hand, poring over the little glow of a scanner with the lines unreeling before his

eyes. But he looked up as I came in, and the smile on his face was the smile I had grown familiar with over four years of close living together.

"What's that?" I asked, nodding at the book scanner.

He set it down and the little light went out, the lines stopped unreeling.

"A bad novel," he said, smiling, "by a poor author. But they're both Tarsusian."

I took the chair he had indicated. "Mind if I speak straight out, Clay?"

"Go ahead," he invited.

"The Kid," I said bluntly. "And you. The two of you can't go on this way."

"Well, old fire-eater," answered Clay lightly, "what've you got to suggest?"

"Two things. And I want you to think both of them over carefully before answering. First, we see if we can't get up a nine-tenths majority here in the station and petition him out as incompatible."

CLAY slowly shook his head. "We can't do that, Mort."

"I think I can get the signatures if I ask it," I said. "Everybody's pretty tired of him . . . They'd come across."

"It's not that and you know it," said Clay. "Transfer by petition isn't supposed to be preju-

dicial, but you and I know it is. He'd be switched to some hard-case station, get in worse trouble there, and end up in a penal post generally shot to hell. He'd know who to blame for it, and he'd hate us for the rest of his life."

"What of it? Let him hate us."

"I'm a Tarsusian. It'd bother me and I couldn't do it."

"All right," I said. "Dropping that, then, you've got nearly seven years in, total, and half the funds you need to buy out. I've got nearly enough saved, in spite of myself, to make up the rest. In addition, for your retirement, I'll sign over to you my pay for the three years I've got left. Take that and get out of the Service. It isn't what you figured on having, but half a loaf . . ."

"And how about your home-going?" he asked.

"Look at me."

He looked; and I knew what he was seeing—the broken nose, the scars, the lined face—the Dorsai face.

"I'll never go home," I said.

He sat looking at me for a long moment more, and I fancied I saw a little light burn deep in back of his eyes. But then the light went out and I knew that I'd lost with him, too.

"Maybe not," he said quietly. "But I'm not going to be the one that keeps you from it."

I left him to his book.

SHIFTS are supposed to run continuously, with someone on duty all the time. However, for special occasions, like this dinner we had arranged for the Hixabrod, it was possible, by getting work done ahead of time and picking the one four hour stretch during the twenty-four when there were no messages or ships due in, to assemble everybody in the station on an off-duty basis.

So we were all there that evening, in the recreation room, which had been cleared and set up with a long table for the dinner. We finished our cocktails, sat down at the table and the meal began.

As it will, the talk during the various courses turned to things outside the narrow limits of our present lives. Remembrances of places visited, memories of an earlier life, and the comparison of experiences, some of them pretty weird, were the materials of which our table talk was built.

Unconsciously, all of us were trying to draw the Hixabrod out. But he sat in his place at the head of the table between Clay and myself, with the Kid a little farther down, preserving a frosty silence until the dessert had been disposed of and the subject of Media unexpectedly came up.

"—Media," said the Kid. "I've heard of Media. It's a little

planet, but it's supposed to have everything from soup to nuts on it in the way of life. There's one little life-form there that's claimed to contain something of value to every metabolism. It's called—let me see now—it's called—

"It is called *nygti*," supplied Dor Lassos, suddenly, in a metallic voice. "A small quadruped with a highly complex nervous system and a good deal of fatty tissue. I visited the planet over eighty years ago, before it was actually opened up to general travel. The food stores spoiled and we had the opportunity of testing out the theory that it will provide sustenance for almost any kind of known intelligent being."

He stopped.

"WELL?" demanded the Kid. "Since you're here to tell the story, I assume the animal kept you alive."

"I and the humans aboard the ship found the *nygti* quite nourishing," said Dor Lassos. "Unfortunately, we had several Micrushni from Polaris also aboard."

"And those?" asked someone.

"A highly developed but inelastic life-form," said Dor Lassos, sipping from his brandy glass. "They went into convulsions and died."

I had had some experience

with Hixabrodian ways and I knew that it was not sadism, but a complete detachment that had prompted this little anecdote. But I could see a wave of distaste ripple down the room. No life-form is so universally well liked as the Micrushni, a delicate iridescent jellyfishlike race with a bent toward poetry and philosophy.

The men at the table drew away almost visibly from Dor Lassos. But that affected him no more than if they had applauded loudly. Only in very limited ways are the Hixabrod capable of empathy where other races are concerned.

"That's too bad," said Clay slowly. "I have always liked the Micrushni." He had been drinking somewhat heavily and the seemingly innocuous statement came out like a half-challenge.

Dor Lassos' cold brown eyes turned and rested on him. Whatever he saw, whatever conclusions he came to, however, were hidden behind his emotionless face.

"In general," he said flatly, "a truthful race."

That was the closest a Hixabrod could come to praise, and I expected the matter to drop there. But the Kid spoke up again.

"Not like us humans," he said. "Eh, Dor Lassos?"

I glared at him from behind

Dor Lassos' head. But he went recklessly on.

"I said, 'Not like us humans, eh?'" he repeated loudly. The Kid had also apparently been drinking freely, and his voice grated on the sudden silence of the room.

"The human race varies," stated the Hixabrod emotionlessly. "You have some individuals who approach truth. Otherwise, the human race is not notably truthful."

It was a typical, deadly accurate Hixabrodian response. Dor Lassos would have answered in the same words if his throat was to have been cut for them the minute they left his mouth. Again, it should have shut the Kid up, and again it apparently failed.

"Ah, yes," said the Kid. "Some approach truth, but in general we are untruthful. But you see, Dor Lassos, a certain amount of human humor is associated with lies. Some of us tell lies just for fun."

DOR Lassos drank from his brandy glass and said nothing.

"Of course," the Kid went on, "sometimes a human thinks he's being funny with his lies when he isn't. Some lies are just boring, particularly when you're forced to hear them over and over again.

But on the other hand, there are some champion liars who are so good that even you would find their untruths humorous."

Clay sat upright suddenly, and the sudden start of his movement sent the brandy slopping out over the rim of his glass and onto the white tablecloth. He stared at the Kid.

I looked at them all—at Clay, at the Kid and at Dor Lassos; and an ugly premonition began to form in my brain.

"I do not believe I should," said Dor Lassos.

"Ah, but you should listen to a real expert," said the Kid feverishly, "when he has a good subject to work on. Now, for example, take the matter of home worlds. What is your home world, Hixa, like?"

I had heard enough and more than enough to confirm the suspicion forming within me. Without drawing any undue attention to myself, I rose and left the room.

The alien made a dry sound in his throat and his voice followed me as I went swiftly down the empty corridor.

"It is very beautiful," he said in his adding machine tones. "Hixa has a diameter of thirty-eight thousand universal meters. It possesses twenty-three great mountain ranges and seventeen large bodies of salt water . . ."

The sound of his voice died away and I left it behind me.

I went directly through the empty corridors and up the ladder to the communications shack. I went in the door without pausing, without—in neglect of all duty rules—glancing at the automatic printer to see if any fresh message out of routine had arrived, without bothering to check the transmitter to see that it was keyed into the automatic location signal for approaching spacecraft.

All this I ignored and went directly to the file where the incoming messages are kept.

I flicked the tab and went back to the file of two days previous, skimming through the thick sheaf of transcripts under that dateline. And there, beneath the heading "Notices of Arrivals," I found it, the message announcing the coming of Dor Lassos. I ran my finger down past the statistics on our guest to the line of type that told me where the Hixabrod's last stop had been.

Tarsus.

CLAY was my friend. And there is a limit to what a man can take without breaking. On a wall of the communications shack was a roster of the men at our station. I drew the Dorsai sign against the name of William Peterborough, and checked my

gun out of the arms locker.

I examined the magazine. It was loaded. I replaced the magazine, put the gun inside my jacket, and went back to the dinner.

Dor Lassos was still talking. ". . . The flora and the fauna are maintained in such excellent natural balance that no local surplus has exceeded one per cent of the normal population for any species in the last sixty thousand years. Life on Hixa is regular and predictable. The weather is controlled within the greatest limits of feasibility."

As I took my seat, the machine voice of the Hixabrod hesitated for just a moment, then gathered itself, and went on: "One day I shall return there."

"A pretty picture," said the Kid. He was leaning forward over the table now, his eyes bright, his teeth bared in a smile. "A very attractive home world. But I regret to inform you, Dor Lassos, that I've been given to understand that it pales into insignificance when compared to one other spot in the Galaxy."

The Hixabrod are warriors, too. Dor Lassos' features remained expressionless, but his voice deepened and rang through the room.

"Your planet?"

"I wish it were," returned the Kid with the same wolfish smile. "I wish I could lay claim to it. But this place is so wonderful

that I doubt if I would be allowed there. In fact," the Kid went on, "I have never seen it. But I have been hearing about it for some years now. And either it is the most wonderful place in the Universe, or else the man who has been telling me about it—"

I pushed my chair back and started to rise, but Clay's hand clamped on my arm and held me down.

"You were saying—" he said to the Kid, who had been interrupted by my movement.

"—The man who has been telling me about it," said the Kid, deliberately, "is one of those champion liars I was telling Dor Lassos about."

Once more I tried to get to my feet, but Clay was there before me. Tall and stiff, he stood at the end of the table.

"My right—" he said out of the corner of his mouth to me.

Slowly and with meaning, he picked up his brandy glass and threw the glass straight into the Kid's face. It bounced on the table in front of him and sent brandy flying over the front of the Kid's immaculate dress uniform.

"Get your gun!" ordered Clay.

NOW the Kid was on his feet. In spite of the fact that I knew he had planned this, emotion had gotten the better of him

at the end. His face was white with rage. He leaned on the edge of the table and fought with himself to carry it through as he had originally intended.

"Why guns?" he said. His voice was thick with restraint, as he struggled to control himself.

"You called me a liar."

"Will guns tell me if you are?"

The Kid straightened up, breathing more easily; and his laugh was harsh in the room. "Why use guns when it's possible to prove the thing one way or another with complete certainty?" His gaze swept the room and came back to Clay.

"For years now you've been telling me all sorts of things," he said. "But two things you've told me more than all the rest. One was that you used to be a gambler. The other was that Lulungomeena—your precious Lulungomeena on Tarsus—was the most wonderful place in the Universe. Is either one of those the truth?"

Clay's breath came thick and slow.

"They're both the truth," he said, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"Will you back that up?"

"With my life!"

"Ah," said the Kid mockingly, holding up his forefinger, "but I'm not asking you to back those statements up with your life—"

but with that neat little hoard you've been accumulating these past years. You claimed you're a gambler. Will you bet that those statements are true?"

Now, for the first time, Clay seemed to see the trap.

"Bet with me," invited the Kid, almost lightly. "That will prove the first statement."

"And what about the second?" demanded Clay.

"Why—" the Kid gestured with his hand toward Dor Lassos—"what further judge do we need? We have here at our table a Hixabrod." Half-turning to the alien, the Kid made him a little bow. "Let him say whether your second statement is true or not."

Once more I tried to rise from my seat and again Clay's hand shoved me down. He turned to Dor Lassos.

"Do you think you could judge such a point, sir?" he asked.

The brown inhuman eyes met his and held for a long moment.

"I have just come from Tarsus," said the Hixabrod. "I was there as a member of the Galactic Survey Team, mapping the planet. It was my duty to certify to the truth of the map."

THE choice was no choice. Clay stood staring at the Hixabrod as the room waited for his answer. Rage burning within me, I looked down the table for a

sign in the faces of the others that this thing might be stopped. But where I expected to see sympathy, there was nothing. Instead, there was blankness, or cynicism, or even the wet-lipped interest of men who like their excitement written in blood or tears.

And I realized with a sudden sinking of hopes that I stood alone, after all, as Clay's friend. In my own approaching age and garrulity I had not minded his talk of Lulungomeena, hour on repetitive hour. But these others had grown weary of it. Where I saw tragedy, they saw only retribution coming to a lying bore.

And what Clay saw was what I saw. His eyes went dark and cold.

"How much will you bet?" he asked.

"All I've got," responded the Kid, leaning forward eagerly. "Enough and more than enough to match that bank roll of yours. The equivalent of eight years' pay."

Stiffly, without a word, Clay produced his savings book and a voucher pad. He wrote out a voucher for the whole amount and laid book and voucher on the table before Dor Lassos. The Kid, who had obviously come prepared, did the same, adding a thick pile of cash from his gambling of recent weeks.

"That's all of it?" asked Clay.

"All of it," said the Kid.

Clay nodded and stepped back.

"Go ahead," he said.

The Kid turned toward the alien.

"Dor Lassos," he said. "We appreciate your cooperation in this matter."

"I am glad to hear it," responded the Hixabrod, "since my cooperation will cost the winner of the bet a thousand credits."

The abrupt injection of this commercial note threw the Kid momentarily off stride. I, alone in the room, who knew the Hixabrod people, had expected it. But the rest had not, and it struck a sour note, which reflected back on the Kid. Up until now, the bet had seemed to most of the others like a cruel but at least honest game, concerning ourselves only. Suddenly it had become a little like hiring a paid bully to beat up a stationmate.

But it was too late now to stop; the bet had been made. Nevertheless, there were murmurs from different parts of the room.

THE Kid hurried on, fearful of an interruption. Clay's savings were on his mind.

"You were a member of the mapping survey team?" he asked Dor Lassos.

"I was," said the Hixabrod.

"Then you know the planet?"

"I do."

"You know its geography?" insisted the Kid.

"I do not repeat myself." The eyes of the Hixabrod were chill and withdrawn, almost a little baleful, as they met those of the Kid.

"What kind of a planet is it?" The Kid licked his lips. He was beginning to recover his usual self-assurance. "Is it a large planet?"

"No."

"Is Tarsus a rich planet?"

"No."

"Is it a pretty planet?"

"I did not find it so."

"Get to the point!" snapped Clay with strained harshness.

The Kid glanced at him, savoring this moment. He turned back to the Hixabrod.

"Very well, Dor Lassos," he said, "we get to the meat of the matter. Have you ever heard of Lulungomeena?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been to Lulungomeena?"

"I have."

"And do you truthfully—" for the first time, a fierce and burning anger flashed momentarily in the eyes of the Hixabrod; the insult the Kid had just unthinkingly given Dor Lassos was a deadly one—"truthfully say that in your considered opinion Lulungomeena is the most wonderful place in the Universe?"

Dor Lassos turned his gaze away from him and let it wander over the rest of the room. Now, at last, his contempt for all there was plain to be read on his face.

"Yes, it is," said Dor Lassos.

HE rose to his feet at the head of the stunned group around the table. From the pile of cash he extracted a thousand credits, then passed the remainder, along with the two account books and the vouchers, to Clay. Then he took one step toward the Kid.

He halted before him and offered his hands to the man—palms up, the tips of his fingers a scant couple of inches short of the Kid's face.

"My hands are clean," he said.

His fingers arced; and, suddenly, as we watched, stubby, gleaming claws shot smoothly from those fingertips to tremble lightly against the skin of the Kid's face.

"Do you doubt the truthfulness of a Hixabrod?" his robot voice asked.

The Kid's face was white and his cheeks hollowed in fear. The needle points of the claws were very close to his eyes. He swallowed once.

"No—" he whispered.

The claws retracted. The hands returned to their owner's sides. Once more completely withdrawn and impersonal, Dor Lassos turned and bowed to us all.



"My appreciation of your courtesy," he said, the metallic tones of his voice loud in the silence.

Then he turned and, marching like a metronome, disappeared through the doorway of the recreation room and off in the direction of his quarters.

AND so we part," said Clay Harbank as we shook hands. "I hope you find the Dorsai Planets as welcome as I intend to find Lulungomeena."



I grumbled a little. "That was plain damn foolishness. You didn't have to buy me out as well."

"There were more than enough credits for the both of us," said Clay.

It was a month after the bet and the two of us were standing in the Deneb One spaceport. For miles in every direction, the great echoing building of this central terminal stretched around us. In ten minutes I was due to board my ship for the Dorsai Planets.

Clay himself still had several days to wait before one of the infrequent ships to Tarsus would be ready to leave.

"The bet itself was damn foolishness," I went on, determined to find something to complain about. We Dorsai do not enjoy these moments of emotion. But a Dorsai is a Dorsai. I am not apologizing.

"No foolishness," said Clay. For a moment a shadow crossed his face. "You forget that a real gambler bets only on a sure

thing. When I looked into the Hixabrod's eyes, I was sure."

"How can you say 'a sure thing?'"

"The Hixabrod loved his home," Clay said.

I stared at him, astounded. "But you weren't betting on Hixa. Of course he would prefer Hixa to any other place in the Universe. But you were betting on Tarsus—on Lulungomeena—remember?"

The shadow was back for a moment on Clay's face. "The bet was certain. I feel a little guilty about the Kid, but I warned him that gambling money never stuck. Besides, he's young and I'm getting old. I couldn't afford to lose."

"Will you come down out of the clouds," I demanded, "and explain this thing? Why was the

bet certain? What was the trick, if there was one?"

"The trick?" repeated Clay. He smiled at me. "The trick was that the Hixabrod could not be otherwise than truthful. It was all in the name of my birthplace—Lulungomeena."

He looked at my puzzled face and put a hand on my shoulder.

"You see, Mort," he said quietly, "it was the name that fooled everybody. Lulungomeena stands for something in my language. But not for any city or town or village. Everybody on Tarsus has his own Lulungomeena. Everybody in the Universe has."

"How do you figure that, Clay?"

"It's a word," he explained. "A word in the Tarsusian language. It means 'home.'"

—GORDON R. DICKSON

THE MAN WHO KNEW

Back in 1893, while other tourists were paying to see Little Egypt's famous dance, a shrewd young chap instead bought sheets of commemorative postage stamps. Wise fellow, he later sent his children through college by selling his increasingly valuable hoard one by one. With so many people saving stamps now, a profit like that is unlikely.

But there is a smart investment you can make today. Full sets of GALAXY are steadily bringing higher prices. If that's true after only three and a half years—well, you see what we mean.

We don't have Vol. 1, Nos. 1 and 2, and very few of the next few issues, but we'll sell whatever we do have at 35c each, postpaid. (Except overseas, of course; we have to charge 10c extra per copy for mailing.) That stamp-buyer knew a good thing when he saw it. So can you! Besides, who ever heard of reading postage stamps?



For Your Information

By WILLY LEY

SMALL BODIES NEAR HEAVY PLANETS

ONLY a few issues back, I devoted a portion of this column to the moons of Mars, prompted by repeated questions from readers who wondered whether they might not actually be Martian space stations, possibly still active, but more likely abandoned for ages. Well, they are unquestionably small natural moons.

The reason I have to return

FOR YOUR INFORMATION