

Dull Drums

By Anne McCaffrey

THE TROUBLE WITH STUDENT-ISSUE CLOTHING

was not its neutrality, thought Nora Fenn, but its in-stability. Did the suppliers think students doddered about the academic cloisters like pensioners? She fingered together the rent across her hip, hoping that no one would brush against her and widen the tear. She must have overstressed the fabric when she stamped out of Con's last night. Wouldn't you know it'd be on the left side, where her tights had run this morning?

Doggedly she continued along the pedestrian way, toward the Metropolis' Main Computer Block, twist-ing through and dodging clumps of slower-moving citizens.

It had been such an honor to qualify for the special Cybernetics course, given by Master Scholar Siffert himself, that Nora didn't mind the twenty-minute commute from the University Complex to the Com-puter Block no matter how the others in the class complained. (Not much suited them anyhow!) After nearly a year, she still reacted to the metropolitan life with added alertness. Just to walk the pedestrian ways, to look at the variety of faces and costumes and shops was a treat for a Farm Complexbred girl. She usually started for this class early so she'd have time to window-shop and people-watch. But today Con's mean words leapt about her mind.

"Yeah, you say you like people, Nora Fenn, but I never saw anyone communicate less in my life."

"Just because I'm not always gibbering . . ." she'd said in self-defense.

Con had thrown back his head and howled. "The very notion of you . . . you . . . gibbering! May I be around to see the day!"

There was nothing wrong, Nora told herself stoutly, in taking pleasure in just being among people. You didn't have to participate actively ...

But last night's scathing accusations rang in her ears.

"You can't be a parameter cloddie forever, Nora. You'll never really know what life is about until you start communicating and experiencing actively. And don't tell me you're in computer programming be-cause that's your aptitude. That's your cop-out so you won't have to live and feel. If your Guidance Officer had wit one about him, he'd have phased you out of Computer Science, and shoved you into the Human-ities. And opened wide holes in your father's home-brewed homilies."

"My father . . ."

"Your father," and Con was so incensed the cords stood out in his neck, "your father is a throwback to all the parental autocracies, the chauvinistic, narrow-minded, sex-blocked, inhibiting, maladjusting, mar-tyrizing, egotistical, possessiveness that our present system of social harmony is supposed to correct!"

"How dare you say such things!"

"Because you have! Only you're still too much under your father's domineering influence to realize how much you resent him."

"I don't resent my father. I understand his-"

"Understand?" Con threw his arms up in dramatic frustration. "Understand why he's refused to give you any decent credit allowance? By the printed cir-cuits which feed us, every other Complex manager would do without so he could budget something for any youngster his unit can send on to Academic Ad-vancement! And for a kid on unlimited Academic Advancement . . . Wake up, Nora. Your ever-loving father has never forgiven you, his daughter, much less the Educational Committee, for letting you go on to university instead of the male, his son, your brother."

"I don't need credit allowances." Nora tried to

sound convincing, but she'd been hurt and confused by her father's parsimony. "I got an academic bonus of a hundred credits first term."

Con shook his finger right under her nose.

"You can fool yourself, Nora Fenn, but you, sure as zero times zero is zero, don't fool me! Your pater-nal parent has royally screwed you, and why you persist in trying to prove you're worth his disdainful notice, even if you are female, I don't understand. He isn't worth the effort."

Con had stepped forward then, his expression hard and angry as he grabbed her arms and gave her a good shaking. His manner was frighteningly different from the jovial, joke-cracking clown pose he usually affected.

"Abort the Computer courses, Nora. Get into Hu-manities. Take some Behavioral Psych. See objec-tively how futile it is to try and win your father over. And then grow up and live as Nora Fenn instead of George Fenn's unwanted female child."

"Thank you, Connor Clarke, for your lecture and your advice. Send me the bill! But don't try my num-ber. I'm writing you out of my program from now on."

She had grabbed up her cloak and strode from his room, racing down the hall to the anti-grav shaft. She'd entered it fast-that's probably when she'd torn her tunic-and cried all the way down the a.g. shaft to her own level, cursing Con under her breath and desperately trying not to remember what he'd said.

But his words haunted her now as she walked into the shadow cast by the Computer Block. It was cold in the shade and Nora pulled her shabby cloak tighter around her. It had been the one piece of Complex-issue clothing she'd been able to bring with her. Not that her father had ever let his family use more than farm issue.

"No need to put credits into fancy fabrics and silly clothes you wear once a month. People should take us for what we are, not what we wear. It isn't needful for us to show our status."

"Needful," that was her father's operative word.

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What was needful was procured instantly, and ordered in the best quality, regardless of the cost. What was unnecessary was given scant consideration.

It hadn't been needful for Nora to have any credit allowance from the Fenn Farm Complex. She would, George Fenn had solemnly announced, have student quarters at the University Complex, adequate food since students did not eat subsistence-level but a high-calorie diet, and sufficient clothing to cover her decently. If Nora were as good a student as the Educational Committee (which had passed her for Advanced Study instead of her brother, Nick) had said, then she would earn credit bonuses with those brains of hers, wouldn't she? Privately, Nora had vowed she'd earn a bundle. And she had. But now she regretted her diplomacy-no, her subservient conciliatory gesture, as Con would say-in permitting her father to select a heavy CompSci program for her first year.

"That way you'll qualify as Computer Technician Grade n by spring instead of wasting your time on unnecessary trimmings," her father had said.

What he meant, Nora knew now, was it wouldn't be needful for the Fenn complex to pay the salary of the Grade II Comptech for the spring planting.

Six months at University and Nora Fenn knew that she wouldn't be able to go back to the Farm. It wasn't simply the knowledge that her father's basic sociological orientation was limited, but the realization that she'd hated her existence there, from fattening geese to the tractor work that all the automation in the world couldn't make much less bone-jarring. The glitter of bright lights and vapid entertainments in the Metropolis didn't attract her half as much as the people: crowds, mobs, groups, the antithesis of the lonely Farm Complex with its rigid society, seasons, and the so-well-known personalities.

She was gregarious-but she didn't have to be garrulous the way Con was-to enjoy a group situation. She didn't need to maul people with sweaty hands: she could enjoy the sound of voices, the play of emotions on faces, the interaction of brand-new combinations.

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Deep in thought, she arrived at the great Com-puter building. And crossed the magnificent inner hall without gawking at the famous sculpture depict-ing Man overpowering the Laeonia of Science. She passed but did not re-examine the tri-dex models reviewing the significant events leading to the Dicta -Ecology, Economy and Society-in which the technical sciences had swung violently to alleviate the crushing social problems and foster the conserva-tion of dwindling natural resources. She marched quickly past the programming desk with its lines of applicants and petitioners.

Every citizen had the right to Bank-storage: every citizen could apply for additional space, for more programming time, for re-programming: that was as much their right as subsistence, shelter, and educa-tion. Free access had ended citizen fear of a computer-controlled society and had proved to the doubtful that science worked for man's good, not his extinction or domination.

Nora took the anti-grav shaft up to the storage banks where the class was being held, and despite her depressing reflections, she experienced that curi-ous sense of elation, of purpose, that usually gripped her on the way to this course.

She knew that as a first-year student she was in-credibly lucky to be in Research Scholar SitEert's special course. Master Siffert was the man in Com-puter Programming. Each student had to be espe-cially recommended by his or herMentor and then passed on by Siffert himself. (Nora had lost pounds anticipating her qualifying interview with the man.) Their integrity had to be above reproach because the course included lift-lock privileges. All the laboratory work involved the erasure of private records to clear storage for new use, but lift-lock privileges meant the student would have access to any records in the mem-ory banks. Hence the care with which the candidates were chosen.

To clear obsolete records from the memory the
students had to cross-check references in Housing
and Obituary, audit the old text, and check a variety
of items on income, profession, and free individual

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use of computer access: the last chore was to provide statistical data for a fair apportionment of storage space to citizens. Nora wasn't certain of the exact goal of the course, although she'd learned a lot from the labs about data retrieval and erasure. Research Scholar Siffert was known for his eccentric methods, but undoubtedly all would be clear in the final lec-ture.

The one aspect of the course she disliked was the attitude of the other students. Granted they'd all passed the same integrity clearance, but she did feel their approach to the lab work was improper. It had become the fashion to try and top each other with ridiculous anecdotes drawn from their auditing. Cal-lous and cruel, Nora thought, to ridicule the dead for their shortcomings and human follies.

As she entered the Data Erasure room, she heard Larry Asher's inane, cawing laughter above the gen-eral chuckles.

"Haven't you heard any good ones, Fenn?" Asher asked her as she slipped into a chair.

She shook her head.

"Fenn apparently specializes in dull drums," Clas Heineman said with a twitch of his lips for the pun.

"On the contrary," Nora replied, raising her voice above the laughter as she remembered Con's jibes, "I've had some very interesting ones. But I don't think they're ludicrous."

"Fenn also has no sense of humor," Clas remarked with a rueful grin.

"Humor has nothing to do with your quips, Clas Heineman. It's easy to mock something you've not the sensitivity to appreciate."

"Oho, Fenn's got opinions, too," Larry Asher said, chortling over the verbal tiff brewing between the two. Heineman was not only an upperclassman, with a high scholastic average, but also one of the univer-sity's dominant personalities. "Tell us more, Fenn."

Clas Heineman dared her, his eyes sparkling. The rest of the class waited, all too eager to see Heineman score her down.

She took a deep breath and stolidly addressed Heineman:

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"What you don't appreciate, Clas Heineman, is
what a panorama of the human condition you've been
auditing."

"Go on," Clas said in that poisonously quiet tone
she'd heard him use before he changed the state of
some unwary underclassman.

"I know what you'd find hilarious-the woman who recorded her husband snoring so she could prove to him that he did. After he died, she'd have that played back every night so she could get to sleep." Someone guffawed and she glared in his direction. "That isn't funny: it's human. So's the man who pro-grammed a report of his luxury credit standing to wake him up every morning and put him to sleep at night. Then he won the Index Lottery and canceled the instructions. Or the fat woman who had the words 'think thin' played back all day just below the audible level. It must have worked because three months later there's a stop-order. Of course, you're all so grand and well adjusted that you won't need to pro-gram such things. And all those would-be poets . . ."

Why are they so laughable? You all pinion your friends
and make them listen to your sonnets. At least the

dead poets only bored themselves!" She knew that the frustration and anger in her voice were not for the class alone but for her own personal situation. But she'd started to let go all those pent-up feelings. "And I'd just love to be around when someone, a hundred years from now, starts auditing your files. I wonder what will be risible to him."

The smirks had faded from some faces, but Clas Heineman's smile remained as fixed as the glittering eyes he focused on her.

"And for all your scholastic honors, I don't think you've realized just what all these so-funny incidents show."

"Since you're so acute, suppose you tell the rest of us obtuse clowns." Heineman's voice was deadly now and Nora was suddenly as scared as she'd been when she confronted her father and insisted on her student rights.

"The subtle change of fear and suspicion of his neighbors to fear and suspicion of the computer-based

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society: then a gradual acceptance of computer-assistance. We all started with records beginning in 1990 when the main Comp banks were switched on in this Metropolis, so you should all see what I mean. By mid-century I noticed a definite drop in the incidence of recorded paranoia, and the incidence and repetition of psycho-chem therapy. It's noticeable because people begin inputting the most deeply intimate secrets. They've realized that no one can break a privacy seal. . . until we come along with our sophomoric mentalities."

"Oh, come now, Nora," a girl said from the back of the room, "so much of it's pretty damned dull." But

she sounded embarrassed.

"I don't agree. I think it's fascinating to watch a saner mental outlook emerge."

"Thank you for the lecture, Miss Fenn," Larry Asher said with a jeer.

"Thank you, indeed. Miss Fenn," repeated a deep voice.

The entire class swiveled about, startled. In the doorway stood the substantial figure of Research Scholar Siffert. The students leapt to their feet. "Thank you, class. Remain standing, Fenn."

She felt the hopeful aura of the class as they watched Master Siffert approaching her. She felt utterly miserable, but she held her chin up and her shoulders back. She was damned if she'd let anyone see her change state.

The Scholar closed the distance between them, with each step looming more and more forbiddingly. He isn't at all like Father, she told herself, half-heartedly. She steeled herself to look him in the eye and then realized that Master Siffert was by no means grim. His lined face was suddenly cut by an enormous grin. He seized Nora by the shoulder and turned her toward the expectant students, one arm proprietarily draped over her shoulder.

"Nora Fenn has just earned a scholarship bonus of three hundred luxury credits, and a distinctive honors scholastic credit."

There was an astonished mass gasp. Nora closed

her mouth with a snap when she realized that her

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jaw had dropped open. Three hundred l.c.'s? He couldn't possibly mean that! And a d.h.? What on earth had she done?

"We will dismiss the rest of you from today's auditing. I do not believe that you would be able to keep your mind on your work after Fenn's astute summation. And then, too, you will need considerable time for the essay, the length of which I leave to your judgment," and he swept the room with the stern glance, "on the psychological trends in personal programming in the early twenty-first century. I believe that most of you have penetrated the fifty-year mark of that era. Nora Fenn," and he gave her a paternal hug, "has spared you what I imagine would have been an unwelcome surprise at term end when this essay normally would have been announced. You are dismissed."

The group rapidly dispersed. Nora made an attempt to follow, but the Scholar's heavy arm remained about her shoulders and to disengage herself would be improper.

When the room had cleared, the Scholar released her, gesturing toward a chair. He seated himself next

to her, crossing his legs and beaming at her.

"I don't really deserve-"

"Nonsense, my girl. Not many students outsmart Siffert." His beam took on additional radiance.

Nora felt a blush rising in her cheeks. He chuckled and patted her hand.

"No, now. You were using your mind and your heart, which all too few computer programmers do. They tend to regard people as bits to be recorded or changed, instead of thinking, emoting humans with all the frailties of the human condition." He chuckled again. "I had rather counted, you know, on the no-torious student irreverence toward the task to obscure the ultimate goal of the course."

Nora groaned, realizing that she had undone some very careful manipulating.

"I do so enjoy the look on their faces when these young scuts have to change state to the proper polar-ity. There ought to be some very stimulating essays.

And," his eyes twinkled at Nora, "to have a student

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capable of some independent evaluation-outguess-ing a Research Scholar-delightful!" He beamed. "Really delightful!"

There was no question that she'd pleased him, and Nora began to relax though she still couldn't believe in her good fortune. With an alacrity at odds with his size and age, the Scholar rose and strode to the mas-ter panel that dominated the classroom. Nora heard his lift-lock slide in and then the click of rapidly de-pressed input keys: the almost negligible pause be-fore print-out occurred. Master Siffert grunted and turned, leaning against the control board and eying her thoughtfully.

"Really diverting but, my dear Fenn, whatever are you doing in Computer Sciences?" He waved a print-out sheet at her. "You'd be wasted on a Farm Com-plex. What on earth is your Complex Manager about? Not to say your Local Guidance Officer? And why have you been permitted to continue in a cross-aptitudinal course? Really, I shall have quite a deal to say to your Mentor. However could he encourage you in this gross misdirection of ability?"

"Sir, I applied for CompSci."

"What? How's that again? CompSci with your personality index? Good heavens, no! Won't dol I'd be going against the precepts of the Educational Act to condone that!" He strode over to her. "Don't look so woebegone, my dear. Do some serious re-evaluation yourself. I'd say you'd be much happier in socio-psych dynamics, for instance. Can't imagine how you've been permitted to continue almost a full academic year in the wrong field. I shall definitely have a word with your Mentor."

"Please, sir. It's not his fault. My Complex Man-ager needs a good Computer Technician ..."

"You'd be wasted on a farm, my dear Fenn. Wasted. Surely your parents have seen your real ap-titudes."

"Sir, my father is the Complex Manager and it's

my wish to-

Scholar Siffert pinned her with an astonished stare.

"Your father? Is the Complex Manager and . . .

Good heavens, I thought such situations couldn't

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happen anymore." Siffert blinked and regarded her with outright horror. Then his expression softened. "You appear to me to be a very level-headed young woman, Nora Fenn."

"The situation has been difficult, sir. You see, my twin brother, Nick, opted for animal husbandry. He wasn't qualified for Academic Advancement, just Applied." Nora knew she was expressing things badly and stammered on: "Father'd always expected that Nick would be the Computer Technician and-well, it wasn't socially harmonious to do anything else just then."

Siffert regarded her sternly. "The situation is out-rageous. Parents cannot be permitted to live vicariously through their children. Can't be permitted. You should not be in Computer Sciences. You're ex-cused from the rest of the course."

"I'd really like to continue ..."

The Scholar made a rueful noise and then smiled kindly at her. "Well, it wouldn't be good for class morale for you to stay on, my dear. Besides, you've already accomplished what the course was designed to effect: an understanding of the human condition behind the bits and program status. No, my dear. Use this course time to find out where you really belong. Consult your floor psychman." He gave her a warm, reassuring smile. "I'll register your scholastic rating and bonus. Why don't you ring up your boyfriend and sport him to a real-meal? And I warn you, I shall have a few words with your Mentor. In person." He wheeled, his Scholar's robe billowing behind him, to the master panel, in effect dismissing her. As she left the room, she heard him typing, heard the printout chatter a rebuttal.

She couldn't believe what had happened: a fan-tastic credit bonus and a distinctive honors. Just wait until she told Con! She could feed him . . . And then she realized that she couldn't tell Con for several very good reasons: Scholar Siffert supported Connor Clarke's opinion that she shouldn't be in CompSd at all...

"Nora..."

Clas Heineman blocked her path.

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She ducked, ran to the grav shaft, and entered it

fast. If Con was the last person she wanted to see

right now, Clas Heineman was the next to last. She

whipped out of the grav shaft on the ground level and dodged through the throng in the Main Hall. She underestimated Heineman's determination to intercept her.

He caught up at the entrance, grabbed her hand and, when she wrenched free, caught at her tunic, all but ripping the student-issue clothing from her.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he cried, dismayed. Before Nora could protest, he'd wrapped her tightly in his own cloak and hustled her onto the fast pedestrian way, speeding toward the edge of the metropolis. She couldn't struggle with her clothing in shreds and only his cloak saving her from an immodesty citation.

Shaken by the morning's events and last night's scene, Nora began to cry.

"Hey, don't get in that state, Fenn," Clas said, concerned. "I'm not polarized. In fact, I owe you an apology. Two." Clas Heineman grinned at her, his eyes anxious. His arm tightened reassuringly, his fingers pressing into her waist under the cloak. When he felt her bare flesh, he politely took a new hold. "I didn't mean to tear your clothes. This student issue isn't worth a discarded bit, is it? Good thing you've got three hundred Ic's."

Clas reminded her in the nicest way that people were looking at them, even if they were on the fast belt and speeding by. It wasn't good manners to publi-cize intimacy.

"Oh, Clas, it's so far back to the U!"

"Back to the U? For more student issue? Don't be silly, Fenn. We're transferring ... now!"

He half lifted her to the moderate-speed belt and then, with a second warning, to the slow one. At the next shopping center, he guided her off and straight into the clothing section.

"I've always wondered what you'd look like in a decent outfit," he said conversationally as he steered her into the shop. He gave her an appraising look. "Deep red ... like that suit, for instance."

"Oh, no! That's fourteen credits." But Nora

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couldn't help coveting the smart tunic suit with its silver piping, the ample sleeves, and the matching garnet cape. It was made of a tightly woven durable material.

"A first-year student who has copped a dh in Siffert's course cannot appear back on campus in tatters," Clas told her, and before she could protest, he dragged her up to the shop's computer and shoved her

wrist ID disc into the slot, punching out a data request. She wasn't certain if Clas made a deliberate or an unconscious mistake in data retrieval. A credit balance was all that the shop required, but he'd punched for a credit check. The entries made a dis-tressing picture of her economic status. There was the student bonus for her midterm and the shocking al-lowance of ten credits from her Complex.

"Clas, that's not fair ..."

His eyes were thoughtful as he looked at her.

"You got a lousy Complex, girl. Well, you can tell 'em to feck off if that's all they can scrape up for a student with your ability. Why, my Complex . . . Change state! Let's get you dressed, girl."

The attendant had appeared, prompted by the use of the computer panel. Clas erased all but the credit balance and the attendant's smile was correspondingly affable.

"If you're going to feel guilty about spending for clothes, Nora Fenn, I'll drag you to the nearest psych machine," Clas Heineman said later as they emerged, socially apart, from the shop.

"I shouldn't have let you talk me into buying so much," Nora said, but she smiled at him. He'd over-ridden her objections and, neatly reinforced by the shop attendant, who had visions of a respectable commission, talked her into buying not only the garnet-red suit but two other outfits and some pseudo-leather boots: all completely unnecessary since Nora had maintained that the one good outfit would do for social occasions, and she could, after all, do well in student issue for classes.

"A d.h. has a certain position to maintain, Nora," Clas informed her, and told the attendant to airshoot the rest of the purchases to Nora's student quarters.

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"Now, I'll do some spending," he said, and steered her to the nearest eating house.

He didn't consult her, just punched out a high-protein lunch, definitely luxury class.

"If I asked you what you wanted you'd probably insist on ordering basic standard, and this is not the day to be basic or standard. Not after your class per-formance."

That reminded Nora of the remarks she'd directed at him and, abashed, she stared down at her hands. He started to laugh.

"Nora," he said in a wheedling tone that surprised her into looking up, "do you know the real aim of Siffert's courses?" Then, before she could speak, he shook his head. "No, not the humanistic approach to computer programming. Think again?"

Nora shook her head, too confused by the day's events to be able to think logically.

"It's to puncture the pomposity of computer pro-grammers. You were the only one," and Clas waggled a finger at her, "who wasn't trying to figure out what technical trick Siffert had up his sleeve this semester. The trick was not technical, of course, and the rest of us smart-ass d.h. and student programmers have been neatly deflated to size. By you and by Siffert. Oh, for the love of little apples, Nora Fenn, will you stop blushing? Ah, here's food. Real food! Not student pap or subbie wad."

Nora ate with as much relish as Clas, although she was shocked at such profligate expenditure of credit on food. Clas was amusing company, too, completely unlike Connor, whose single-minded intensity when ingesting food left no time for conversation. Naturally they discussed the course and Clas urged Nora to expand on her observations. Although it seemed to Nora that she was monopolizing the conversation, Clas gave no indication that he was bored by what she had to say. It wasn't until the lights began glowing on the walkways that Nora realized how late it was.

"I've got to get back to my Dormblock. I've an assignment to research," she said.

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"Say, it is rather late. And I've work for tomorrow, too. Not to mention that essay next week."

"Well, you've more than enough material now to get an honors grade on Siffert's essay," Nora said as she settled her new cloak about her shoulders and smoothed the fabric with an appreciative hand. Then she noticed Clas staring at her in a guilty fashion.

"Did you think I'd-"

"Why not?" Nora was puzzled. "I was afraid you'd be furious with me for what I said in front of the class. And then you gave me this lovely treat..."

Why on earth did Clas look so stunned?

"Fenn . . . Nora, you've an alarming habit of changing state when no one expects it." He got to his feet.

It was difficult to talk on the fast belt back to the University Complex, but Clas kept one hand firmly about her waist and whenever she looked up at him, he smiled down at her and gave her a little squeeze. When they finally hopped over to the University Plaza, he took both her hands in his.

"What's your call sequence?"

She stammered it out, because she certainly hadn't expected him to ask for it. He gave her hands one more squeeze.

"You'll be hearing from me, Nora Fenn. After I've turned in that essay."

And somehow, to her surprise, she believed him.

She had to take the cross-campus belt to her dormitory quad, a trip she'd found rather chilling in the old cloak with the wet spring winds knifing around building corners. She pulled the new, windproof cloak more tightly around her, secure in its warmth and in the warmth of the day's miracles. Just wait till she showed Con ...

The day's pleasures diminished. It'd been gratifying to have Clas Heineman interested in her, prod her into buying more clothes than were really needful, and luxuriating in a high-credit meal, but she'd rather have shared her triumphs with Con. He'd shared her miseries.

She was half tempted to go to the Commons and

see if, by any chance, he might be about. But he

wouldn't want to see her, not after the way she'd stormed out of his place yesterday. She'd even told him she'd canceled his number from her program. She hadn't, of course, but he wouldn't know that.

She cudged her brain to think of some way of apologizing to him, of making amends. She couldn't help him with any of his courses because he was in a different discipline. She'd darned all his socks and patched his good cloak where the fastening had torn. She'd . . .

"Hey, don't you speak to old friends now you're a d.h., with a five-hundred-credit bonus?"

Con's bony fingers clutched her arm and swung her about. She searched his long, doleful face, with the shock of bird's nest hair, the rather ludicrous black handlebar moustache, and saw only comic dismay in the wide-set intelligent grey eyes.

"You mean, you're still speaking to me?"

"Whaddya mean? Am I still speaking to you?" He frowned and then, seeing they were attracting attention, pulled her out of the walkway and into the angle of the building. "You mean, because of last night?"

She nodded, swallowing anxiously, watching the shift of expression on his mobile face. He was no Clas Heineman for looks, but she felt much more comfortable with Connor Clarke. He took her by both arms now and gave her a rough shake, his thin fingers biting into her flesh.

"Aw, Nora," he said in a cajoling tone, his eyes tender, "friends can get mad at each other, you know, without printing out a major disaster. Besides," and he recovered himself with a characteristic shrug, "I was right and you ought to know it today. Say, gal, have I been strutting for you since I heard. A d.h. and 500 Ic's? And you scored oS Clas Heine-man and all those wire-brained plug-in artists . . ."

"The bonus was only three-hundred and Clas

Heineman-

"You watch that soft-soaper, Nora," and with one

of his sudden switches, Con was in a sober phase

again. "He may come trying to pick your brains

'cause he's got to maintain his-

"He already has," Nora said, giggling. Now she knew what had disconcerted Clas Heineman in the food shop. He'd laid on the charm thick and figured he'd taken her in when he was pumping her about her files. Only it'd never occurred to her that that wasn't a fair exchange for the way she'd talked to him in class and for the meal he'd bought her. She did know more about people than programming.

"He has?" Con was nonplussed.

"He waylaid me after Siffert excused me and-

"He didn't!"

"And," Nora giggled again, twirling on her toes to show off her cape and the tunic suit underneath, "he made me spend money on new clothes. D'you like 'em? The student issue j'ust tore right off me."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, nice- Tore right off you!" Con looked angry enough to take Clas Heineman apart bit by bit.

"Mind your thoughts, Con. Really, you're over-reacting in a gross fashion. Besides which, you caused the first rip in my s.i. last night . . . All Clas wanted was to pump me and-well, after the way I rounded on him in front of the class . . ."

"Nora!" Con roared her name with a most reas-suring possessiveness in his tone. "Nora . . ." Then he deflated with misery. "Nora, I was wrong last night. You don't have to gabble like me to relate to people.

You know\"

"No, Con, you were right. And I am out of CompSci. Master Siffert is ordering me out," she said, patting Con's face to reassure him and grinning affectionately at his miserable expression.

"Well, then," and Con brightened immediately, putting his arm around her waist and drawing her over to the cross-campus walk, "since that's settled, let's go eat and you can tell me all about it. Mind you, I've heard some state-changing versions that don't sound like my Nora at all." He stopped in his tracks, so that she all but tripped over his feet. "That is, if you want to ... after the way I treated you last night."

Nora smiled up at him. "Oh, go tell it to the com-puter. It has to listen to you!"