

# **The Fixer**

**By WESLEY LONG**

# The Fixer

Sandra Drake sat in her perfect apartment on Telfu, and cursed in an unladylike manner. She was plying a needle with some difficulty, and the results of her work were decidedly amateurish. But her clothing was slowly going to pieces, and there was not a good tailor in nine light-years of Sandra Drake.

The Telfan tailors didn't understand Solarian tailoring; Sandra was forced to admit that they were good—for Telfans. But for Solarians, they didn't come up to the accepted standards.

They had tried, she gave them credit for that. But the Telfan figure did not match the Solarian, especially the four-breasted female Telfan woman did not match Sandra's thin-waisted, high breasted figure. Her total lack of the Telfan skin; part feathers, part hair, but actually classifiable as neither, caused a different "hang" to the clothing. Telfans wore practically nothing because of the pelt and though Sandra's figure was one of those that should have been adorned in practically nothing, Telfu was not sufficiently warm to go running around in a sunsuit.

And making over Telfan clothing to fit her was out of the question. She stood half a head above their tallest women, and the only clothing that would have fit was clothing made in outsizes for extremely huge Telfan women. Needless to say this size of garment was shapeless.

Sandra finished her mending, tried on the garment and made a wry face. "I used to curse the lack of humans here," she told her image

in the mirror, "but now I'm glad I'm the only one. I'd sure hate to have any of my old friends see me looking like this."

The image that repeated silently was not too far a cry from the Sandra Drake that had called the *Haywire Queen* in for a landing on Telfu some months ago. But they hadn't waited, and she now knew why. Well, she was forced to admit that her try at either trapping them here or getting off with them had failed, and therefore she had been outguessed.

That made her burn. Being outguessed by a man was something that Sandra didn't care to have happen. She could live through it; but it was the aftermath that really hurt. The Telfans came to understand her too well after that incident. They no longer looked upon her as a leading figure in her system. They knew that her knowledge of Solarian science was sketchy and incomplete. Therefore she had lost her hold upon Telfu, and was now forced to do her own mending.

On the other hand, Sandra Drake was an intelligent woman. Her contempt for the Telfan language was gone. It went on that memorable day when she discovered that everyone who understood any Terran had gone to greet the landing *Haywire Queen* and had left her unable to convey her desires. From that time on, Sandra plied herself and was quite capable of conversing in Telfan, and fluently.

So Sandra Drake had been living with the Telfans for several months. She had been forced to live with her wits and her mind and she found it interesting. Telfans were quite cold to her charms, which made her angry at times; on Terra she was used to admiration from anything masculine from fourteen to ninety-eight.

Below fourteen they didn't know any better and over ninety-eight they didn't care, but the years between were aware of Sandra Drake. On Telfu, posturing, posing, and offering had no effect. They looked upon her as an encyclopedia; an animate phonograph, which, upon proper stimulation, could be made to sound interesting.

They had their machinery of action, too. Either Sandra assisted them—or she did not find things easy. It was adjustable, too, and the better assistance she gave, the better she found things.

Well, thought Sandra, it has been interesting—

She was startled by a knock upon her door. She admitted two Telfan men and a Telfan woman. The woman she knew.

"Yes, Thuni?" she asked the woman.

"Sandrake," announced the woman, putting the Telfan pronunciation on the Terran name, "These are Orfall and Theodi, both of whom are among the leading medico-physicists of Telfu. They desire your help."

Sandra reflected quickly. After all, this ability to be of assistance did give her a sop to her vanity. The fact that as little as she really knew of Terran science she could assist, and at times direct, gave her first feeling of real self-assurance.

"I shall, if I can," she told them.

"You, in spite of your untrained mind, have been extremely valuable," Orfall said simply. "While you do not know the details, you at least have some knowledge of the channels of Terran science, and you may, and have, explained down which channel

lies truth, and along which line of endeavor lies but a blank wall. That in itself is valuable."

"Another item of interest," said Theodi, "is the fact that the books left us by the *Haywire Queen* are ponderous and often obscure; they assume that we have a basic knowledge which we have not. You have been able to direct us to the proper place in them to find the proper answer to many of our questions."

"I see," said Sandra. All too seldom had anyone told her she was valuable and interesting. It had been more likely a statement of her headstrong nature, her utter uselessness, and her nuisance value.

"As you know, we of Telfu are slightly ahead of you in chemistry. Yet there are things in chemistry that can not be solved without an advanced knowledge in the gravitic spectrum that Terra has exploited. Perhaps it was the lack of a channel in the gravitic that drove us into higher chemical development; but we are planet-locked until your people return to remove the block."

"Go on," said Sandra impatiently. "I gather that you are in trouble of some sort?"

"We are, indeed. A plague of ... ah, there is no word for it in Terran"—he switched to Telfan, "Andryorelitis," and back again to Terran—"which is an air-borne disease of the virus type. No inoculation has been discovered, and no immunity zone can be established. Telfu is in danger of halving the population."

"Bad, huh?"

"It is terrible. It strikes unknown. Its incubation period is several days, and then the victim gets the first symptoms. Nine days later, the victim is dead. Unfortunately, the victim is a carrier of

andryorelitis during the incubation period, and therefore isolation is impossible."

"Sounds like real trouble to me," said Sandra. "Will examination reveal it?"

"Of course," answered Orfall. "But what planet can examine the population daily?"

"I see the impossibilities. Then what do you hope? We have nothing that will combat it; knowing nothing of it in Sol would preclude any possibility. What can we do?"

"To return to chemistry," said Theodi, "I will explain. Our chemico-physicists have predicted the combination of a molecule which will combat the virus selectively. It is a complex protein molecule of unstable nature—so unstable, unfortunately, that it will not permit us to compound it. We have used every catalyst in the book, and nothing works. Follow?"

"I think so," said Sandra. "What keeps it from forming?"

"As I said, it is very unstable. The atomic lattice appears to be structurally unsound. That happens in a lot of cases, you know. At any rate, we can make this molecule—and have made it successfully. But its yield is less than four ten-thousandths of one percent, and the residue precipitates out in an insoluble compound that can not be reprocessed."

"Otherwise you would keep the process going until completion?"

"Precisely. If reprocessing would work, we could leave the batch to cook until all of it went into combination. Or we could add fresh 'mix' to the processing batch and make the process continuous. But

the stuff is not re-processable. We must complete each batch, and then go on a long process of fractionation to distill the proper compound out of the useless residue."

"I can see that a process of that inefficiency would be bothersome," said Sandra.

"Not bothersome, Sandrake. Impossible. Imagine going into a project giving about .000,37% yield for two hundred-fifty billion Telfans. The required dose of the antibody is forty-seven milligrams. Call it fifty, for round numbers, Sandrake, and you get a total figure of one trillion, two hundred-fifty billion milligrams, or one million two hundred fifty thousand kilograms. At four ten-thousandths of one percent yield, we'd have to process something like three hundred billion kilograms of raw material and then rectify it through that long and laborious process of fractional crystallization, partial electrolysis, and fractional distillation—with a final partial crystallization. Processing that much raw material would be a lifetime job at best. Doing it under pressure, with the planning and procurement problems intensified by the certainty of the few short weeks we have ... ah, Sandrake, it is impossible."

"What is this trouble specifically?"

"The final addition of silicon. It will not enter the compound, but forces something less active from the combination."

"Making it useless?"

"Right."

"You've tried it?"

"And it works," nodded Orfall.

"And knowing that you of Terra have some wonders in science, we would like to know—"

"You see," interrupted Orfall, "they've figured that the catalyst would be less than sixty-one percent efficient, if we could combine the silicon with it and let it replace into the other compound. That would work. But again we are stuck. The catalyst is stable as it is. What has Terra done to assist in forcing combination in unstable compounds?"

"Must be something," said Sandra, thoughtfully. "May I have a moment to think?"

"Certainly."

"And one thing more. Haven't you anything that even resembles tobacco on this sterile planet?"

"I'm afraid not," said Theodi. "Believe me, we have sought it."

"Thanks," said Sandra. "I know it was for me. But, fellows, I think better with a cigarette."

"We have analyzed the one you gave us, and haven't found a similar weed—"

"O.K., I'll do my thinking in a higher plane," smiled Sandra.

A thought, fleeting as the touch of a moth's wing, crossed Sandra's mind. She fought to reclaim it. It had some association with an experience—some experience in which she had failed, somewhere.

Recently? It might have been.

Long ago?



Sandra didn't think so.

She sat there silent, and the Telfans left with a short statement to the effect that she might be able to think better alone. They would return later.

It had to do with something highly scientific; something of a nature that staggered her imagination. It was coupled with something vast, something deep, something complex.

Her eyes fastened on a spot of brilliant light, reflected from a polished and silvered glass vase at her bedside, and as she sat there with her eyes unseeing, deep in concentrated thought, her mind focused upon the one thing of vastness that she had been involved in.

Sandra's mind was good, in spite of her inferiority complex. It was sharp, retentive, and above all, imaginative. It is a point for speculation whether the imaginative qualities might not have been responsible for her antics; certainly her escapades were the result of some imaginative desire to excel. At any rate, she fastened her eyes on the spot of light, and concentrated herself into a partial self-hypnosis. The train of thought went on before her unseeing eyes with the vividness of a color moving picture, and she was not living the scene, but seeing herself live through a train of events that seemed to jump the unimportant parts like a well-planned motion picture.

Her semihypnotized mind seemed to know the right track, though Sandra's wide-awake mind either ignored the key to the problem or was not certain of the right path to follow.

She was in a room of steel. Steel and machinery and gleaming silver bars. There was some chaos there, too. The silver busbars had lost their die-straightness, and in one place, a single lamination of the main bus hung down askew. It was about a foot wide and one inch thick, and the nine-foot section that hung from the ceiling was slightly lower than the top of her head.

There was blood on the sharp corner, and Sandra looked down to see the red splotch on the floor. She shuddered.

Cables ran in wriggly tangles across the floor. Some were still smoking from some overload, and others, still new from their reels, were obviously part of a jury-rigged circuit. Boxes of equipment were broken open and their contents missing, though the spare parts in the boxes were intact. The whole scene spelled—

Trouble!

The floor was not level; a slight tilt made standing difficult, until a man from some other room shouted:

"The mechanograv is working—hold on!"

And the floor rotated until it was the usual, level platform. The huge busbar swung gently on its loose mooring like a ponderous, irresistible mass.

And there was a man who came striding in. His contempt for her still hurt, and Sandra winced. Even in that motion-picture dreaming, wherein the girl in the picture seemed apart from Sandra Drake, the ire vented upon the red-headed image made Sandra writhe in sympathy.

And then she heard the words come from the man's lips. They were clear and concise, and seemed to come from the man himself instead of from within her own memory:

"The electronic charge is great enough to force an inert element—xenon—to accept an additional electron in its ring-system. This permits combination with active elements such as bromine. When xenon-bromide forms, we know that our intrinsic charge is highly electro-negative. See?"

The scene within Sandra's mind dissolved, and she shook her head. It cleared, but the words remained.

"Orfall," she called. "Theodi! Thuni—bring them here!"

They returned. "McBride," she said. "He can do it!"

"How?" asked Theodi skeptically.

"You've read their books," said Sandra Drake. "You know the principle of the Plutonian Lens—and also that the alternating stations require terrible electronic charges to maintain the lens that focuses Sol on Pluto. They check that with the formation of xenon-bromide for negative, and decomposition of tetrachloro dibromomethane for the positive charge. They can do it."

"Can't they do it on a planet?" asked Orfall sadly.

"Not unless they can raise the whole planet to a high negative charge," snapped Sandra. "What do you think?"

"I don't know—none of us do. Can they?"

"No."

"Then—?"

"We'll call them, tell McBride what's the matter and what we need. He'll fix it."

"It sounds like a fool's gesture to me," said Theodi.

"Utterly impossible. How are we going to get in touch with them in the first place?"

"Look," said Theodi. "We can call them. See what McBride says and put the problem to them. If there's a way out, fine. If not, we've lost nothing."

"But how are we going to call them over nine light-years of space?"

"Ah—yes," said Theodi. "We can't."

"Maybe I can," said Sandra. "That'll be my contribution. I think I can call them."

"Nine light-years—" objected Theodi.

"Remember that the gravitic spectrum propagates at the speed of light raised to the 2.71828 ... th power. That'll make talking to Terra like calling across the room. May I try?"

"You think they'll be listening for you?"

"Can't miss," said Sandra with a positive gesture. "My ship, the *Lady Luck*, is equipped with the standard communications set. It puts out right in the middle of the main communications band of the electrogravitic. If I can get enough power to beam towards Sol, it'll hit them right in the middle."

"You intend to use the set in the *Lady Luck*?"

"Overloaded to the utmost. They tell me that they'll take one hundred percent overloads for an hour. Make that one thousand percent, and it may last ten minutes. Ten minutes is all I need to give them our trouble—they have recorders if McBride isn't there to hear it in person."

"Where are you going to get that power?" asked Theodi.

"From you."

"Impossible, Sandrake. You know that there is not sufficient power available to make such a program possible."

"Ridiculous. The resources of a planet are unmeasurable."

"Perhaps so," said Theodi. "But remember that our power, like Terra's power, is spread out all over the face. The transmission of power such as you will require would be impossible because the line losses will be greater than the power input. It might be possible to connect the networks together and draw the entire power output of Telfu into one district, but line losses would prohibit its operation."

"I only need ten minutes maximum," said Sandra.

"You're asking us to sacrifice—? You mean—overload every plant within efficiency-distance of your ship until it breaks down?"

"What have you to lose?"

"Can we do it?" asked Orfall.

"Of course," said Sandra. "You run your machinery at low load until it is running at ten times the velocity, and then I cram on the power. Momentum will carry me through."

"And if one machine goes, under that load, the entire district will go completely dead."

"Oh no," said Sandra. "The closer and most powerful one will not be used. That one will be used to talk to the boys when they arrive. They'll only have a distress signal, and the details must be held until they come investigating. They can't land, and so we'll have to tell 'em the story while they're in space. We'll need that power."

"Small consolation. Then Indilee will be an oasis of power in a radius of powerless country."

Sandra looked Theodi in the eye and said in a cold voice:

"Then go on out and die with the rest of your kind. What good will your machinery do you if you're all dead?"

"This is a democracy, Sandrake. We cannot just take the machinery and the equipment of others—even to save ourselves."

"How's your red tape factory?" she asked with a smile.

"Meaning?"

"Either you get those power plants or die. I don't care if you steal them, buy them, or borrow them. But get them—and quick."

"But there is a chance to save Telfu," suggested Orfall.

"Sensible fellow," smiled Sandra. In her mind she cursed the whole planet. This was a place for Sandra to undulate a bit; to turn on

those two-million kilovolt-ampere eyes; to stretch one rounded arm out straight, putting the other hand below the ear and raising the elbow to a level just above those eyes and shielding the victim from the warmth in them. This showed off Sandra's svelte figure to perfection, and few men in Sol could have refused Sandra anything after that perfect performance.

But they were very few.

The Telfan ideal of beauty did not include Sandra Drake's perfection. She could have postured from now until galaxy's end, and they wouldn't have known her intent. Against their women, Sandra was alien—not sickeningly ugly or deformed, but alien and acceptable—and totally undesirable.

Sandra sighed, told the subconscious mind not to bother with the spotlights and provocative sultriness, and tried to think her way to the mastery of these Telfans.

"Couldn't we divert the electrical supply plants across Telfu?" objected Theodi. "Seems to me—"

"Not a chance," said Sandra. "You have no idea of the power required. I must shoot the works all at once. The set, the generators, and the supply lines will all go out at once. That'll give me ten minutes, I hope."

"But the dissipation of such power—Where can we collect it?"

"There's only one place on Telfu. That's in the power room of the *Lady Luck*. That is still intact?"

"Yes. Handled, inspected, photographed, and manipulated without driving power, of course, but it is still intact."

"Should be," commented Sandra wryly. "After all, my trouble was not being able to make the drive work. Couldn't get any push. Used up my entire stock of cupralum. So, do we?"

"I hate to say 'yes,'" said Theodi.

"Look," said Sandra, realizing something for the first time. "We have lots of gravitic machinery. Give me your useless power plants and I'll see that you get gravitic machinery to replace them."

"Um-m-m."

"Look, Theodi, you're used to thinking in Telfan terms—which means no gravitics. Think in Terran terms. You are no longer alone in the universe. You are in contact with a race that has gravitic power."

"Well—"

Sandra smiled. "Take it or leave it—and die," she told him. "Think of it. Andryorelitis comes like a thief in the night, giving no warning. Like the black wings of a gigantic, clutching bat, silent and ominous and unseen it comes and spreads its horde of hell on the city. Men go on in their way, meeting other men and inoculating them, passing the germ of death to whomever the black visitor may have missed on his visit. Men take it to their families and spread it from hand to hand, from lip to lip, from mother to babe to grandparent and beyond. The unborn is as cursed as the almost-dead, for it is within their bodies. The days pass in which every soul is given the opportunity of catching and spreading the dread disease.

"Then in this peaceful, unawareness of the terror, nine days pass and one sees a red spot on his arm. He shies away from his friends



not knowing that they, too, have red blotches. The city is made of slinking men, ashamed women, and scared children. The newspaper headlines scream of the plague, but none will buy, for they fear inoculation on the part of the newsboy. They fight and fear one another, and the plague has its way, spreading across the city like the falling of night and missing none.

"The Grim Reaper swings his sharp scythe, and the populace falls like shorn wheat.

"And the stricken city becomes a place of horror. The smell of rotting bodies taints the air and makes life impossible for those unlucky few who have not been given the peace of death. None are interested in the cries of the dying, and no one sees the sunken cheeks, the withered bodies, the redding flesh. Do you like that picture, Theodi?"

"You speak harshly, Sandrake."

"You paint a prettier one," said Sandra, scorning him. "Go home and dream. Let your imagination roam—or haven't you Telfans got imagination?"

"We have, but—"

"You utter fool! To stand there like a stick of wood between Telfu and some lumps of worthless metal! Like the drowning man that clutched his gold—which pulled him under. Fool's gold. Theodi."

"There is much in what she says, Theodi," added Orfall.

"It is hard to think, sometimes," said Theodi slowly.

"Men!" sneered Sandra. "The whole sex is the same, here or on any inhabited planet. You know so much! Your vaunted power of

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

