

ROBERT SILVERBERG

Company Store

The entrepreneurial spirit does find expression in contemporary science fiction. This interesting story conveys an important message: to be in debt is to be a slave. In an earlier era of America's history entire towns were controlled by business enterprises which rented the houses the workers lived in, owned the retail outlets that sold them the staples of life and buried them (for a price) when they

died. These company towns-and the workers' dilemma-have been immortalized in song by Tennessee Ernie Ford in "Sixteen Tons."

The salesman in Silverberg's tale has a compulsive drive to sell. In fact, the salesman must sell or face destruction, a fate that does not occur in the real world, unless one considers unemployment to be a form of destruction. The law in the story is on the side of the seller-it is strictly "buyer beware." Although written before the consumer movement, "Company Store" vividly portrays the feeling of entrapment present in the buyer-seller relationship.

Robert Silverberg is one of the finest contemporary science fiction writers. The excellence and the poetry of his recent work has overshadowed his creative social criticism, exemplified by stories like "Going Down Smooth," "Black Is Beautiful," and the present story.

Colonist Roy Wingert gripped his blaster with shaky hands. He took dead aim at the slimy wormlike creatures wriggling behind his newly deposited pile of crates.

They told me this planet was uninhabited, he thought. Hah I
He yanked back the firing stud. A spurt of violet light leaped out.

His nostrils caught the smell of roasting alien flesh. Shuddering, Wingert turned away from the mess before him, in time to see four more of the wormlike beings writhing toward him from the rear.

He ached those. Two more dangled invitingly from a thick-boled tree at his left.

Getting into the spirit of the thing now, Wingert turned the beam on

them, too. The clearing was beginning to look like the vestibule of an abattoir. Sweat ran down Wingert's face. His stomach was starting to get queasy, and his skin was cold at the prospect of spending his three year tour on Quellac doing nothing but fighting off these overgrown night crawlers.

Two more of them were wriggling out of a decaying log near his feet. They were nearly six feet long, with saw-edged teeth glistening in Quellac's bright sunlight. Nothing very dangerous, Wingert thought grimly. Ho! He recharged the blaster and roasted the two newcomers.

Loud noises back of him persuaded him to turn. Something very

much like a large gray toad, seven or eight feet high and mostly mouth, was hopping toward him through the forest. It was about thirty yards away now. It looked very hungry.

Squaring his shoulders, Wingert prepared to defend himself against this new assault. But just as he started to depress the firing stud a motion to his far right registered in the corner of his eye. Another of the things-approaching rapidly from the opposite direction.

"Pardon me, sir," a sharp crackling voice said suddenly. "You seem to be in serious straits. May I offer you the use of this Duarm Pocket Force-Field Generator in this emergency? The cost is only-" Wingert gasped. "Damn the cost! Turn the thing on! Those toads are only twenty feet away!"

"Of course, sir."

Wingert heard a click, and abruptly a shimmering blue bubble of force sprang up around them. The two onrushing pseudotoads cracked soundly into it and were thrown back.

Wingert staggered over to one of the packing cases and sat down limply. He was soaked with sweat from head to foot.

"Thanks," he said. "You saved my life. But who the hell are you, and where'd you come from?"

"Permit me to introduce myself. I am XL-ad41, a new-model Vending and Distributing Robot manufactured on Densobol II. I arrived here not long ago, and, perceiving your plight-"

Wingert saw now that the creature was indeed a robot, roughly humanoid except for a heavy pair of

locomotory treads. "Hold on! Let's go back to the beginning." The toad things were eyeing him hungrily from outside the force-field. "You say you're a new-model what?"

"Vending and Distributing Robot. It is my function to diffuse through the civilized galaxy the goods and supplies manufactured by my creators, Associated Artisans of Densobol II.- The robot's rubberized lips split in an oily smile. "I am, you might say, a mechanized Traveling Salesman. Are you from Terra, perhaps?"

"Yes, but--"

"I thought as much. By comparing your physical appearance with the phenotype data in my memory banks I reached the conclusion that you were of Terra origin. The confirmation you have just given is most gratifying."

"Glad to hear it. Densobol II is in the Magellanic Cluster, isn't it? Lesser or Greater Cloud?"

"Lesser. One matter puzzles me, though. In view of your Teffan origin, it seems odd that you didn't respond when I mentioned that I am a traveling salesman."

Wingert frowned. "How was I supposed to respond? Clap my hands and wriggle my ears?"

"You were supposed to show humor response. According to my files on Terra, mention of traveling salesmen customarily strikes upon a common well of folklore implanted in the subconscious, thereby inducing a conscious humor reaction."

"Sorry," Wingert apologized. "I'm afraid I never was too interested in Earth. That's why I signed on with Planetary Colonization."

"Ali, yes. I had just concluded that your failure to show response to standard folklore indicated some fundamental dislocation of your position relative to your cultural Gestalt. Again, confirmation is gratifying. As an experimental model, I'm subject to careful monitoring by my makers. I'm anxious to demonstrate my capability as a salesman."

Wingert had almost completely recovered from his earlier exertions. He eyed the two toad beings uneasily and said, "That force-field generator--that's one of the things you sell?"

"The Duarm Generator is one of our finest products. It's strictly one-way, you know. They can't get in, but you can still fire at them."

"What? Why didn't you tell me that long ago?" Wingert drew his blaster and disposed of the toad creatures with two well-placed shots.

"That's that," he said. "I guess I sit inside this force-field and wait for the next ones, now."

"Oh, they won't be along for a while," the robot said lightly. "The creatures that attacked you are native to the next continent. They're not found here at all."

"Then how'd they get here?"

"I brought them," the robot said sunnily. "I collected the most hostile creatures I could find on this world, and left them in your vicinity in order to demonstrate the necessity for the Duarm Force Field Generator--"

"You brought them?" Wingert rose and advanced on the robot menacingly. "Deliberately, as a sales stunt? They could have killed and eaten me!"

On the contrary. I was controlling the situation, as you saw. When matters became serious I intervened."

"Get out of here!" Wingert raged. "Go on, you crazy robot! I have to set up my bubble. Go!"

"But you owe me--"

"We'll settle up later. Get going, fast!"

The robot got. Wingert watched it scuttle off into the underbrush.

He tried to control his rage. Angry as he was, he felt a certain amusement at the robot's crude sales tactics. It was clever, in a coarse way, to assemble a collection of menacing aliens and arrive at the last minute to supply the force-field. But when you poison a man in order to sell him the antidote, you don't boast about it afterward to the victim!

He glanced speculatively at the forest, hoping the robot had told the truth. He didn't care to spend his entire tour on Quellac fighting off dangerous beasts.

The generator was still operating; Wingert studied it and found a cam that widened the field. He expanded it to a thirty-yard radius and left it that way. The clearing was littered with alien corpses.

Wingert shuddered.

Well, now that amusement was over, it was time to get down to business. He had been on Quellac just an hour, and had spent most of that time fighting for his life.

The Colonists' Manual said, "The first step for a newly arrived colonist is to install his Matter-Transmitter." Wingert closed the book and peered at the scattered pile of crates that were his

possessions until he spied the large yellow box labeled Matter-Transmitter, Handle With Care. From the box marked Tools he took a crowbar and delicately pried a couple of planks out of the packing crate. A silvery metallic object was visible within. Wingert hoped the Matter-Transmitter was in working order; it was his most important possession, his sole link to far-off Terra. The Manual said, "All necessities of life will be sent via mattertransmitter without cost." Wingert smiled. Necessities of life? He could have magneboots, cigars, senso, tapes, low-power, short-range matter-transmitters, dream pellets, bottled Martinis and nuclear fizzes, simply by requisitioning them. All the comforts of home. They had told him working for Planetary Colonization was rugged, but it was hardly that. Not with the Matter-Transmitter to take the sting out of pioneering.

Unless, Winger thought gloomily, that lunatic robot brings some more giant toads over from the next continent.

Wingert opened the packing crate and bared the Matter-Transmitter. It looked, he thought, like an office desk with elephantiasis of the side drawers; they bulged grotesquely, aproning out into shovel-shaped platforms, one labeled "Send" and the other "Receive."

An imposing-looking array of dials and meters completed the machine's face. Wingert located the red Activator Stud along the north perimeter and jammed it down.

The Matter-Transmitter came quiveringly to life.

Dials clicked; meters registered. The squarish device seemed to have taken on existence of its own. The view screen flickered polychromatically, then cleared.

A mild pudgy face stared out at Wingert.

"Hello. I'm Smathers, from the Earth Office. I'm the company contact man for Transmitters AZ-1061 right through BF-80. Can I have your name, registry number, and coordinates?"

"Roy Wingert, Number 76-032-100. The name of this planet is Quellac, and I don't know the coordinates offhand. If you'll give me a minute to check my contract- 11

"No need of that," Smathers said. "Just let me have the serial number of your Matter-Transmitter. It's inscribed on the plate along the west perimeter."

Wingert found it after a moment's search. " AZ- 1142.

"That checks. W611, welcome to the Company, Colonist Wingert. How's your planet?"

"Not so good," Wingert said.

"How so?"

"It's inhabited. By hostile aliens. And my contract said I was being sent to an uninhabited world."

"Read it again, Colonist Wingert. As I recall, it simply said you would meet no hostile creatures where you were. Our survey team re-. ' ported some difficulties on the wild continent to your west but-"

" You see these dead things here?"

"Yes."

"I killed them. To save my own neck. They attacked me about a minute after the Company ship dropped me off here."

"They're obviously strays from that other continent," Smathers said. "Most unusual. Be sure to report any further difficulties of this sort. "

'Sure," Wingert said. "Big comfort that is."

,To change the subject," Smathers said frigidly, "I wish to remind you that the Company stands ready to serve you. In the words of the contract, 'All necessities of life will be sent via Matter-Transmitter.' That's in the Manual too. Would you care to make your first order now? The Company is extremely anxious that its employees are well taken care of."

Wingert frowned. "Well, I haven't even unpacked, you know. I don't think I need anything yet-except-yes! Send me some old fashioned razor blades, will you? And a tube of shaving cream. I forgot to pack mine, and I can't stand these new vibroshaves."

Smathers emitted a suppressed chuckle. "You're not going to grow a beard?"

"No," Wingert said stiffly. "They itch."

" Very well, then. I'll have the routing desk ship a supply of blades,~ and cream to Machine AZ-1142. So long for now, Colonist Wingert, and good luck. The Company sends its best wishes."

"Thanks," Wingert said sourly. "Same to you."

He turned away from the blank'screen and glanced beyond the confines of his force-field. All seemed quiet, so he snapped off the generator.

Quellac, he thought ' had the makings of a damed fine world, except for the beasts on the western continent. The planet was Earth-type, sixth in orbit around a small yellow main-sequence star. The soil was red with iron salts, but looked fertile enough, judging from the thick

vegetation pushing up all around. Not far away a sluggish little stream wound through a sloping valley and vanished in a hazy cloud of purple mist near the horizon.

it would be a soft enough life, he thought, if no more toads showed up. Or worms with teeth. The contract specified that his job was to "prepare and otherwise survey the world assigned, for the purpose of admitting future colonists under the auspices of Planetary Colonization, Inc." He was an advance agent, sent out by the Company to smooth the bugs out of the planet before the regular colonists arrived.

For this they gave him \$1000 a month, plus "necessities of life" via Matter-Transmitter. There were worse ways of making a living, Wingert told himself.

A lazy green-edged cloud was drifting over the forest. He pushed aside a blackened alien husk and sprawled out on the warm red soil, leaning against the Matter-Transmitter's comforting bulk. Before him were the eight or nine crates containing his equipment and possessions.

He had made the three-week journey from Earth to Quellac aboard the first-class liner Mogred. Matter-transmission would have been faster, but a Transmitter could handle a bulk of 150 pounds, which was Wingert's weight, only in three 50-pound installments. That idea didn't appeal to him. Besides, there had been no Matter-Transmitter set on Quellac to receive him, which made the whole problem fairly academic.

A bird sang softly. Wingert yawned. It was early afternoon, and he didn't feel impatient to set up his shelter. The Manual said it took but an hour to unpack. Later, then, when the sun was sinking behind those cerise mountains, he would blow his bubble home and unpack his goods. Right now he just wanted to relax, to let the tension of that first fierce encounter drain away.

"Pardon me, sir," said a familiar sharp voice. "I happened to overhear that order for razor blades, and I think it's only fair to inform you that I carry a product of much greater face appeal."

Wingert was on his feet in an instant, glaring at the robot. "I told you to go away. A-W-A-Y." Undisturbed, the robot produced a small translucent tube filled with a glossy green paste. "This," XL-ad41 said, "is Gloglam's Depilating Fluid, twelve units-ah, one dollar, that is-per tube." Wingert shook his head. "I get my goods free, from Terra. Besides, I like to shave with a razor. Please go away."

The robot looked about as crestfallen as a robot could possibly look.: "You don't seem to understand that your refusal to purchase from me reflects adversely on my abilities, and may result in my being dismantled at the end of this test. Therefore I insist you approach my merchandise with an open mind."

A sudden grin of salesman-like inspiration illuminated XL-ad41's face. "I'll take the liberty of offering you this free sample. Try Gloglam's Depilating Fluid and I can guarantee you'll never use a bladerazor again. "

The robot poured a small quantity of the green fluid into a smaller vial and handed it to Wingert. "Here. I'll return shortly to hear your decision. "

The robot departed, trampling down the shrubbery with its massive treads. Wingert scratched his stubbly chin and regarded the vial quizzically.

Gloglam's Depilating Fluid, eh? And XL-ad41, the robot traveling salesman. He smiled wryly. On Earth they bombarded you with singing commercials, and here in the wilds of deep space robots from Densobol came descending on you trying to sell shaving cream.

Well, if the robot salesman were anything like its Terran counterparts, the only way he'd be able to get rid of it would be by buying something from it. And particularly since the poor robot seemed to be on a trial run, and might be destroyed if it didn't make sales. As a onetime salesman himself, Wingert felt sympathy.

Cautiously he squeezed a couple of drops of Gloglam's Depilating Fluid into his palm and rubbed it against one cheek. The stuff was cool and slightly sharp, with a pleasant twang. He rubbed it in for a moment, wondering if it might be going to dissolve his jawbone, then pulled out his pocket mirror.

His face was neat and pink where he'd applied the depilator. He hadn't had such a good shave in years. Enthusiastically he rubbed the remainder of the tube on his face, thereby discovering that the robot had given him just enough to shave one cheek and most of his chin.

Wingert chuckled. Bumbling and pedantic it might be, but the creature knew a little basic salesmanship, at least.

"Well?" XL-ad4I asked, reappearing as if beckoned. "Are you satisfied?"

Grinning, Wingert said, "That was pretty sly-giving me enough to shave half my face, I mean. But the stuff is good; there's no denying that. "

"How many tubes will you take?"

Wingert pulled out his billfold. He had brought only \$16 with him; he hadn't expected to have any use for Terran currency on Quellac, but there had been a ten, a five, and a one in his wallet at blast-off time.

"One tube," he said. He handed the robot the tattered single. XLad41 bowed courteously, reached into a pectoral compartment, and drew out the remainder of the tube he had shown Wingert before. "Uh-uh," the Earthman said quickly. "That's the tube you took the sample from---and the sample was supposed to be free. I want a full tube.

"The proverbial innate shrewdness of the Terran," XL-ad41 observed mournfully. "I defer to it." It gave a second tube to Wingert, who examined it and slid it into his tunic. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have some unpacking to do," Wingert said.

He strode around the smiling robot, grabbed the crowbar, and began opening the crate that housed his bubble home. Suddenly the Mattertransmitter emitted a series of loud buzzes followed by a dull clonk.

"Your machine has delivered something," XL-ad41 ventured.

Wingert lifted the lid of the "Receive" platform and drew out a small package wrapped neatly in plastofil. He peeled away the wrapping.

Within was a box containing twenty-four double-edged blades, a tube of shaving cream and a bill folded lengthwise. Wingert read it:

Razor blades, as ordered	\$00.23
Shaving cream, as ordered	00.77
Charge for transportation	50.00
Total	\$51.00

"You look pale," the robot said. "Perhaps you have some disease. You might be interested in purchasing the Derblong Self-Calibrating Medical Autodiagnostical Servomechanism, which I happen to-" "No," Wingert said grimly. "I don't need anything like that. Get, out of my way."

He stalked back to the Transmitter and jabbed down savagely on the Activator Stud. A moment later Smathers' bland voice said, "Hello, Colonist Wingert. Something wrong?"

"There sure is," Wingert said in a strangled voice. "My razor blades just showed up-with a \$50 bill for transportation! What kind of racket is this, anyway? I was told that you'd ship my supplies out free of charge. It says in the contract--"

"The contract says," Smathers interrupted smoothly, "that all necessities of life will be transmitted without cost, Colonist Wingert. It makes no mention of free supply of luxuries. The Company would be unable to bear the crushing financial burden of transporting any and all luxury items a colonist might desire."

"Razor blades are luxury items?" Wingert choked back an impulse to kick the Transmitter's control panel in. "How can you have the audacity to call razor blades luxury items?"

"Most colonists let their beards grow," Smathers said. "Your reluctance to do so, Colonist Wingert, is your own affair. The Company--"

"I know. The Company cannot be expected to bear the crushing financial burden. Okay," Wingert said. "In the future I'll be more careful about what I order. And as for now, take these damned razor blades back and cancel the requisition." He dumped the package in the "Send" bin and depressed the control stud.

"I'm sorry you did that," Smathers said. "It will now be necessary for us to assess you an additional \$50 to cover the return shipping."

"What?"

"However," Smathers went on, "we'll see to it after this that you're notified in advance anytime there may be a shipping charge on goods sent to you."

":,Thanks," Wingert said hoarsely.

"Since you don't want razor blades, I presume you're going to grow a beard. I rather thought you would. Most colonists do, you know. "

"I'm not growing any beards. Some vending robot from the Densobol system wandered through here about ten minutes ago and sold me a tube of depilating paste."

Smathers' eyes nearly popped. "You'll have to cancel that purchase," he said, his voice suddenly stern.

Wingert stared incredulously at the pudgy face in the screen. "Now you're going to interfere with that, too?"

"Purchasing supplies from anyone but the Company is a gross violation of your contract, Colonist Wingert! It makes you subject to heavy penalty! After all, we agreed to supply you with your needs. For you to call in an outside supplier is to rob the Company of its privilege of serving you, Colonist Wingert. You see?"

Wingert was silent for almost a minute, too dizzy with rage to frame words. Finally he said, "So I get charged \$50 shipping costs every time I requisition razor blades from you people, but if I try to buy depilating paste on my own it violates my contract? Why, that's that's usury! Slavery! It's illegal!"

The voice from the Matter-Transmitter coughed warningly. "Powerful accusations, Colonist Wingert. I suggest that before you hurl any more abuse at the Company you read your contract more carefully."

"I don't give a damn about the contract! I'll buy anywhere I please! "

Smathers grinned triumphantly. "I was afraid you'd say that. You realize that you've now given us legal provocation to slap a spybeam on you in order to make sure you don't cheat us by violating your contract'?",

Wingert sputtered. "Spybeam? But-I'll smash your accursed Transmitter! Then try to spy on me!"

"We won't be able to," Smathers conceded. "But destroying a Transmitter is a serious felony, punishable by heavy fine. Good afternoon, Colonist Wingert."

"Hey! Come back here! You can't-"

Wingert punched the Activator Stud three times, but Smathers had broken the contact and would not reopen it.

Scowling, Wingert turned away and sat down on the edge of a crate.

"Can I offer you a box of Sugrath Anti-Choler Tranquilizing Pills?" XL-ad41 said helpfully. "Large economy size.-

"Shut up and leave me alone!"

Wingert stared moodily at the shiny tips of his boots. The Company, he thought, had him sewed up neatly. He had no money and no

way of returning to Earth short of dividing himself into three equal chunks and teleporting. And though Quellac was an attractive planet ' it lacked certain aspects of Earth. Tobacco, for one. Wingert enjoyed smoking.

A box of cigars would be \$2.40 plus \$75 shipping costs. And Smathers would smirk and tell him cigars were luxuries.

Sensotapes? Luxuries. Short-range transmitters? Maybe those came under the contract, since they were tools. But the pattern was clear. By the time his three-year tour was up, there would be \$36,000 in salary waiting in his account-minus the various accumulated- charges. He'd be lucky if he came out owing less than \$20,000.

Naturally, he wouldn't have that sort of money, and so the benevolent Company would offer a choice: either go to jail or take another three-year term to pay off your debt. So they'd ship him someplace else, and at the end of that time he'd be in twice as deep.

Year after year he would sink further into debt, thanks to that damnable contract. He'd spend the rest of his life opening up new planets for Planetary Colonizations, Inc., and never have anything to show for it but a staggering debt.

It was worse than slavery.

There had to be some way out.

But after ransacking the contract for nearly an hour, Wingert concluded that it was airtight. Angrily he glared up at the beaming robot.

"What are you hanging around here for? You've made your sale. Shove off!"

XL-ad41 shook its head. "You still owe me \$500 for the generator. And surely you can't expect me to return to my manufacturers after having made only two sales. Why, they'd turn me off in an instant and begin developing an XL-ad42!"

' ' Did you hear what Smathers said? I'll be violating my contract if they see me buying anything more from you. Go on, now. Take your generator back. The sale is cancelled. Visit some other planet; I'm in enough hot water as it is without-"

"Sony," the robot said, and it seemed to Wingert that there was an ominous note in its mellow voice. "This is the seventeenth planet I've called at since being sent forth by my manufacturers, and I have no sale to show for it but one tube of Gloglam Depilating Fluid. It's a poor record. I don't dare return yet."

"Try somewhere else, then. Find a planet full of suckers and give 'em the hard sell. I can't buy from you."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," the robot said mildly. "My specifications call for me to return to Densobol for inspection after my seventeenth visit." A panel in the robot's abdomen opened whirringly and Wingert saw the snout of a Molecular Disruptor emerge.

"The ultimate sales tactic, eh? If the customer won't buy, pull a gun and make him buy. Except it won't work here. I haven't any money. "

"Your friends on Terra will send some. I must return to Densobol with a successful sales record. Otherwise--

"I know. They'll dismantle you."

"Correct. Therefore, I must approach you this way. And I fully intend to carry out my threat if you refuse. "

"Hold on here!" a new voice cut in. "What's going on, Wingert?"

Wingert glanced at the Transmitter. The screen was lit, and Smathers' plump face glared outward at him.

"It's this robot," Wingert said. "It's under some sort of sales compulsion, and it just pulled a gun on me."

"I know. I saw the whole thing on the spybeam.

"I'm in a nice spot now," Wingert said dismally. He glanced from the waiting robot to the unsmiling Smathers. "If I don't buy from this robot, it'll murder me--and if I do buy anything, you'll spy it and fine me." Wingert wondered vaguely which would be worse.

"I stock many fine devices unknown on Earth," the robot said proudly. "A Pioneer-Model Dreeg-Skinner, in case there are dreegs on Quellac--though frankly I doubt that. Or else you might want our Rotary Diatom-Strainer, or perhaps a new-model Hegley Neuronic Extractor--"

"Quiet," Wingert snapped. He turned back to Smathers. "Well, what do I do? You're the Company; protect your colonist from this marauding alien."

"We'll send you a weapon, Colonist Wingert."

"And have me try to outdraw a robot? You're a lot of help," Wingert said broodingly. Even if he escaped somehow from this dilemma, he knew the Company still had him by the throat over the "Necessities of Life" clause. His accumulated shipping charges in three years would--

He sucked his breath in sharply. "Smathers?" "Yes?"

"Listen to me: if I don't buy from the robot, it'll blast me with a Molecular Disruptor. But I can't buy from the robot, even if the Company would let me, because I don't have any money. Money's necessary if I want to stay alive. Get it? Necessary?"

"No," Smathers said. "I don't get it."

"What I'm saying is that the item I most need to preserve my life is money. It's a necessity of life. And therefore you have to supply me gratis with all the money I need, until this robot decides it's sold me enough. If you don't come through, I'll sue the Company for breach of contract."

Smathers grinned. "Try it. You'll be dead before you can contact a lawyer. The robot will kill you.--

Sweat poured down Wingert's back, but he felt the moment of triumph approaching. Reaching inside his khaki shirt, he drew out the thick pseudoparchment sheet that was his contract.

"You refuse! You refuse to supply a necessity of life! The contract," Wingert declared, "is therefore void." Before Smathers' horrified gaze he ripped the document up and tossed the pieces over his shoulder carelessly.

"Having broken your end of the contract," Wingert said, "you relieve me of all further obligations to the Company. Therefore I'll thank you to remove your damned spybeam from my planet.

"Your planet?"

"Precisely. Squatter's rights--and since there's no longer a contract between us, you're forbidden by galactic law to spy on me!"

Smathers looked dazed. "You're a fast*talker, Wingert. But we'll fight this. Wait till I refer this upstairs. You won't get out of this so easily!"

Wingert flashed a cocky grin. "Refer it upstairs, if you want. I've got the law on my side."

Smathers snarled and broke the contact.

"Nicely argued," said XL-ad41 approvingly. "I hope you win your case.

"I have to," Wingert said. "They can't touch me, not if their con-

tract is really binding on both parties. If they try to use their spybeam record as evidence against me, it'll show you threatening me. They don't have a leg to stand on."

"But how about me? I--

"I haven't forgotten. There is a Molecular Disruptor in your belly waiting to disrupt me." Wingert

grinned at the robot. "Look here, XL-ad41, face facts: you're a lousy salesman. You have a certain degree of misused guile, but you lack tact, subtlety. You can't go selling people things at gunpoint very long without involving your manufacturers in an interstellar war. As soon as you get back to Densobol and they find out what you've done, they'll dismantle you quicker than you can sell a Dreeg-Skinner."

"I was thinking that myself," the robot admitted.

"Good. But I'll make a suggestion: I'll teach you how to be a salesman. I used to be one, myself; besides, I'm an Earthman, and innately shrewd. When I'm through with you, you move on to the next planet-I think your makers will forgive you if you make an extra stop-and sell out all your stock."

:"It sounds wonderful," XL-ad4I said.

"One string is attached. In return for the education I'll give you, you're to supply me with such things as I need to live comfortably here on a permanent basis. Cigars, magneboots, short-range transmitters, depilator, etc. I'm sure your manufacturers will think it's a fair exchange, my profit-making shrewdness for your magneboots. Oh, and I'll need one of those force-field generators too--just in case the Company shows up and tries to make trouble."

The robot glowed happily. "I'm sure such an exchange can be arranged. I believe this now makes us partners."

"It does indeed," Wingert said. "As your first lesson, let me show you an ancient Terran custom that a good salesman ought to know." He gripped the robot's cold metal hand firmly in his own.

"Shake, partner! "