

Laurence M. Janifer

Sight Gag

DOUBLEDAY SCIENCE FICTION

**A BOOK OF
SHORT STORIES**

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SIGHT GAG

BY LARRY M. HARRIS

Intelligence is a great help in the evolution-by-survival—but intelligence without muscle is even less useful than muscle without brains. But it's so easy to forget that muscle—plain physical force—is important, too!

ILLUSTRATED BY SCHOENHERR

Downstairs, the hotel register told Fredericks that Mr. John P. Jones was occupying Room 1014. But Fredericks didn't believe the register. He knew better than that. Wherever his man was, he wasn't in Room 1014. And whoever he was, his real name certainly wasn't John P. Jones. "P for Paul," Fredericks muttered to himself. "Oh, the helpful superman, the man who knows better, the man who does better."

Fredericks had first known of him as FBI Operative 71-054P, under the name of William K. Brady. "And what does the K stand for?" Fredericks muttered, remembering. "Killer?" Brady

wouldn't be the man's real name, either. FBI Operatives had as many names as they had jobs, that much was elementary. Particularly operatives like Jones-Brady-X. "Special talents," Fredericks muttered. "Psi powers," he said, making it sound like a curse. "Superman."

Upstairs, in Room 1212, the superman sat in a comfortable chair and tried to relax. He wasn't a trained telepath but he could read surface thoughts if there were enough force behind them, and he could read the red thoughts of the man downstairs. They worried him more than he wanted to admit, and for a second he considered sending out a call for help. But that idea died before it

had been truly born.

Donegan had told him he could handle the situation. Without weapons, forbidden to run, faced by a man who wanted only his death, he could handle the situation.

Sure he could, he thought bitterly.

Of course, if he asked for reinforcements he would undoubtedly get them. The FBI didn't want one of its Psi Operatives killed; there weren't enough to go round as it was. But calling for help, when Donegan had specifically told him he wouldn't need it, would mean being sent back a grade automatically. A man of his rank and experience, Donegan had implied,

could handle the job solo. If he couldn't—why, then, he didn't deserve the rank. It was all very simple.

Unfortunately, he was still fresh out of good ideas.

The notion of killing Fredericks—using his telekinetic powers to collapse the hotel room on the man, or some such, even if he wasn't allowed to bear arms—had occurred to him in a desperate second, and Donegan had turned it down very flatly. "Look," the Psi Section chief had told him, "you got the guy's brother and sent him up for trial. The jury found him guilty of murder, first degree, no recommendation for mercy. The judge turned him over to the chair, and he fries next week."

"So let Fredericks take it out on the judge and jury," he'd said. "Why do I have to be the sitting duck?"

"Because ... well, from Fredericks' point of view, without you his brother might never have been caught. It's logic—of a sort."

"Logic, hell," he said. "The guy was guilty. I had to send him up. That's my job."

"And so is this," Donegan said. "That's our side of it. Fredericks has friends—his brother's friends. Petty criminals, would-be criminals, unbalanced types. You know that. You've read the record."

"Read it?" he said. "I dug up half of it."

Donegan nodded. "Sure," he said. "And we're going to have six more cases like Fredericks' brother—murder, robbery, God knows what else—unless we can choke them off somehow."

"Crime prevention," he said. "And I'm in the middle."

"That's the way the job is," Donegan said. "We're not superman. We've got limits, just like everybody else. Our talents have limits."

He nodded. "So?"

"So," Donegan said, "we've got to convince Fredericks' friends—the unbalanced fringe—that we are

supermen, that we have no limits, that no matter what they try against us they're bound to fail."

"Nice trick," he said sourly.

"Very nice," Donegan said. "And what's more, it works. Nobody except an out-and-out psychotic commits a crime when he hasn't got a hope of success. And these people aren't psychotics; most criminals aren't. Show them they can't get away with a thing—show them we're infallible, all-knowing, all-powerful supermen—and they'll be scared off trying anything."

"But killing Fredericks would do that just as well—" he began.

Donegan shook his head. "Now, hold

on," he said. "You're getting all worked up about this. It's your first time with this stakeout business, that's all. But you can't kill him. You can't kill except when really necessary. You know that."

"All right. But if he's going to kill me—"

"That doesn't make it necessary, not this time," Donegan said. "This vengeance syndrome doesn't last forever, you know. Block it, and you're through with it. And think how much more effective it is, letting Fredericks go back alive to tell the tale."

"Think how much more effective it would be," he said, "if Fredericks managed to get me."

"He won't," Donegan said.

"But without weapons—"

"No Psi Operative carries weapons," Donegan said. "We don't need them. We're supermen ... remember?"

He twisted his face with a smile. "Easy for you to talk about it," he said. "But I'm going to have to go out and face it —"

"We've all faced it," Donegan said. "When I was an Operative I went through it, too. It's part of the job."

"But—"

"And I'm not going to tell you how to do the job," Donegan went on firmly.

"Either you know that by now, or you don't belong here."

He got up to leave, slowly. "It's a fine way to find out," he said mournfully.

Donegan rose, too. "Good luck," he said. And meant it, too.

That was the chief for you, he thought. Send you out into God knows what with no weapons, no instructions, lots of help planted for the man who wanted to kill you—and then wish you good luck at the end of it.

Sometimes he wondered why he didn't go in for some nice, peaceful job of work—like rocket testing, for instance.

Fredericks, downstairs, was deciding to do things the subtle way. The man upstairs—Jones, Brady or whatever his name was—deserved what he was going to get. Psi powers were all very well, but there were defenses against them. Briefly he thought of the man who'd sold him the special equipment, and wondered why more criminals didn't know the equipment existed. It worked; he was sure of that. Fredericks knew enough of general psi theory to know when somebody was handing him a snow job. And the equipment was no snow job.

A force shield, that was the basic thing.

A shield with no points of entrance for anything larger than air molecules. Sight and sound could get through, because the shield was constructed to allow selected vibrations and frequencies. But no psi force could crack the shield.

Fredericks has sat through a long explanation. Psi wasn't a physical force; it was more like the application of a mental "set," in the mathematical sense, to the existing order. But it could be detected by specially built instruments—and a shield could be set up behind which no detection was possible. It wasn't accurate to say that a psi force was blocked by the shield; no construct can block that which has

no real physical existence. It was, more simply, that the shield created a framework inside of which the universe existed in the absence of psi.

That wasn't very clear, either, Fredericks thought; but mathematics was the only adequate language for talking about psi, anyhow. It had been the theory of sets that had led to the first ideas of structure and rationality within the field, and the math had gotten progressively more complex ever since.

Psi couldn't get through the shield, at any rate; that was quite certain. And very little else could get in, or out. There was only one point of exit. Unholstering his gun and aiming it

automatically keyed the shield to allow passage of a bullet, and the point of exit was controlled by the gun's aiming. It was efficient and simple to handle.

But Fredericks wasn't depending on the shield alone. There was a binder field, too—a field which linked him to the surrounding area, quite tightly. That took care of the chance that the Psi Operative would try to pick him up, force shield and all, and throw him out a window or through the roof. With the binder field in operation, no psi force could move him an inch.

A plug gas mask, too, inserted into the nostrils. The shield plus the mask's pack held two hours' worth of air—just in case the Psi Operative tried to throw

poisonous molecules through the force shield, or deprive him of oxygen.

And then there was the blindfold. Such a simple thing, and so effective.

Upstairs, the Psi Operative caught the sequence of thoughts. Did the FBI have to do such a thorough job, he wondered bitterly. The equipment, he knew, would do everything Fredericks thought it would do. It was important that Fredericks go up against the Operative thinking he was completely protected—in that way his final defeat would be most effective. He'd have guarded against every possible failure

—so, when he failed, there would be nothing to explain it.

Except the "fact" that the Psi Operatives were supermen.

He gritted his teeth. It would be nice, he reflected, to be a real superman. But any talent has its limits. And, even allowing for that, only Donegan and a very few others could handle the full theoretical potentials of their talents. In theory, a telekineticist could move any object with his mind that he could move with his hands. That was a rough rule of thumb, but it worked. The larger objects were barred by sheer mass; no matter what kind of force you're using, there's a limit to how much of it you can apply.

The smaller objects—molecules, electrons, photons—simply took practice and training. First the object had to be visualized, and the general structure memorized. Then the power had to be controlled carefully enough so that you moved just what you wanted to move and not, for instance, shift the Empire State Building while trying to lift a molecule out of its topmast.

It was possible, in theory, to create full sensory hallucinations by juggling electron streams and molecules within the brain. But memorizing the entire structure of the brain was a lifelong task, since you also had to allow for individual variation, and that meant

working with "tracking" molecules inside each brain before any work began. Most Operatives stuck to one area—usually, as most effective, sight or sound.

He was a sight man. He could create any visual hallucination, as long as the subject was within a twenty-five-foot range. Beyond that, control of the fantastically small electrons and photons simply became too diffused.

But Fredericks had a shield. And in case the shield didn't work, he was coming with a blindfold.

The Psi Operative had no weapons, no reinforcements, no chance to run—nothing except his psi talent, which

Fredericks had defenses against, and his brains.

But there had to be a way out.

Didn't there?

The desk clerk looked young and comparatively innocent. Fredericks ambled over, taking his time about it. The clerk looked up and smiled distantly. "Yes, sir?"

"You've got a man registered here," Fredericks said, in crisp, official tones. "He gave the name of John P. Jones—" The clerk was consulting a card file.

"Yes, sir," he said brightly. "Room 1014."

"He's at work on an FBI matter," Fredericks said. "Naturally, this is private and confidential—"

"Naturally," the clerk said in a subdued tone. "But I—"

"I'm assigned to work with him," Fredericks said. "You understand."

"Of course, sir," the clerk said, trying to look as if he did.

Fredericks took a deep breath. "I know he's here, but I don't know his room number," he said. "Some red-tape mixup."

"He's in 1014," the clerk said hopefully.

Fredericks shook his head. "Not that," he said. "The real room number. Look, I've got to get to him immediately—"

"Of course, sir," the clerk said. "Identification, sir?"

Fredericks grinned and fished in pockets. Naturally, he didn't come up with a thing, FBI identification was infra-red tested, totally unmistakable and unavailable to non-Operatives under any circumstances whatever. "Got it here some place," he muttered.

The clerk nodded. "Of course, sir," he said. "No need to waste time. I understand."

Fredericks stopped and stared. "You what?"

"The room, sir, is 1212," the clerk said. "Would you like me to accompany you —"

"No thanks," Fredericks breathed. "I'll find it myself." The man was too easy to find, he thought savagely. It ought to be tough to find him—but it's easy.

Remotely, that idea bothered him. But what difference did it make, after all? He had all the protection in the world. He had all the protection he was going to need. And all the time to fire one shot. Doing it blindfolded was going to be tough, but not insuperably tough. Fredericks had spent a week

practicing, and he could locate a fly by sound within two inches, nineteen times out of twenty. That, he thought, was going to be good enough.

Upstairs, the Psi Operative thought so, too.

There had to be a way out, he told himself desperately.

But he couldn't find it.

He couldn't even come close.

On the way to Room 1212, he flipped on the shield, the mask, the binder field. Now let the superman

try something, he thought wildly. Now let him try his tricks! He attached the blindfold as he got off the elevator. He could see Room 1212, three doors down the corridor, twenty steps—and then the blindfold was on. From now on he worked in the dark.

He felt the skeleton key in his palm and flipped the shield off for a second; then the key was in the lock, the shield back on, protecting him. The door opened slowly.

He heard it shut behind him. Then there was silence. He drew his gun.

"Go ahead," a muffled voice said from his right. "Go ahead and try something, Fredericks."

He whirled and almost fired—but voices could be thrown. He listened again. There was silence ... not quite silence ... a movement ... a rustle—

Breathing was faint but unmistakable. It gave him a new direction. Breathing couldn't be faked.

He pictured the Psi Operative, in one flash of imagination, trying to get through the shield, sweating as he strained helplessly against the force shield, the binder field, the mask, the blindfold—oh, there was no way out for the poor superman, no way at all.

And Psi Operatives didn't carry weapons or anything else. They depended on their powers, and that

was all.

And he'd neutralized those powers.

The breathing gave him the direction. He turned again, bringing the gun up, and fired six shots without a second's break between them. There was a sound like a gasp, and then nothing.

Nothing at all.

Grinning wildly, Fredericks whipped off the blindfold and switched off his shield in one triumphant motion. There, on the floor—

There, on the floor, was a nice gray rug with nobody at all lying dead on top of it. In the half-second it took Fredericks to see that, the Psi Operative moved.

Fredericks tossed the empty gun at him and missed; the man was coming too fast. He guarded his face but the Psi Operative didn't go for the face. Instead his hands went swinging up and out and *back*.

The sides of the palms landed neatly on the twin junctions of Fredericks' arms and shoulders. Fredericks let out a shriek as his arms turned to acutely painful stone, and the Psi Operative stepped back and moved again in one blinding motion. This time the solar plexus was the target for one balled fist.

And then, of course, it was all over.

“Of course it was simple,” Donegan said. “Anyone could have thought of it—and I knew you would.”

“All the same,” the Psi Operative said, “I nearly didn’t.”

Donegan nodded. “If you hadn’t,” he said, “we’d stationed a man downstairs who’d memorized your room. He could have done the job, too.”

The Operative blinked. “Who?” he said.

“Desk clerk,” Donegan said.

“Why didn’t you tell me—”

“Now, use your head,” Donegan said. “If you’d known you were all right, you’d

never have thought of the answer. You had to prove you could do it—prove it to yourself as well as to me."

"But—"

"And you had to prove you could beat him on his grounds, too, as well as yours," Donegan went on. "You had to take him, not only with psi forces, but with the only weapons a Psi Operative is allowed to carry."

"Fists," the Operative said. "Sure Judo and Karate are standard subjects—every Operative has to know them. What's so tough about that?"

"Nothing," Donegan said. "Nothing at all—except for Fredericks. He's been beaten on your ground, and on his

own. Now he *knows* he's licked. Standard operating procedure."

"I guess so," the Operative said.

"And after all," Donegan said, "now that you're going up a grade—"

"Now that I'm what?"

"That," Donegan said, "was your promotion test, friend. And you passed."

There was a second of absolute silence. Then the Operative said: "And it was all so simple."

"Sure," Donegan said. "Simple enough so that you get a promotion out of it—and Fredericks gets sixty days for

attempted assault."

"Not ADW—assault with a deadly weapon—because we've got to keep up the myth," the Operative said. "Psi Operatives are untouchable. No such thing as a deadly weapon for a Psi Operative."

"Which is nonsense," Donegan said, "but necessary nonsense. I wonder if Fredericks will ever figure out how you got him."

"I wonder," the Operative said. "He'll know about karate, of course."

"Karate's hand-to-hand fighting." Donegan said. "That was *his* field. No, I mean *our* field. Psi."

"It makes a nice puzzle for him, doesn't it?" the Operative said, and grinned. "After all, I didn't touch him—couldn't, in any way. He'd shielded himself perfectly from any telekinetic force—and I had no weapons. I couldn't even get to him barehanded because of his shield and the binder field. He had me located—no tomfoolery about that. He fired six shots at me, point-blank at can't-miss range."

"But you got him," Donegan said.

"Sure," the Operative said. "Simplest thing in the world."

"All you had to do—" Donegan began.

"All I had to do," the Operative finished for him, "was use my mind to move the

bullets—as he fired them."



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