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THE SECOND BOOK OF TELZEY AMBERDON

JAMES H. SCHMITZ

# Balanced Ecology AND OTHER STORIES

sequel to THE UNIVERSE AGAINST HER





# Balanced Ecology

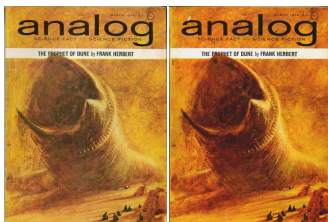
James Schmitz

Short Stories

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# "Balanced Ecology"

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Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.

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The diamondwood tree farm was restless this morning. If Cholm had been aware of it for about an hour but had said nothing to Auris, thinking he might be getting a summer fever or a stomach upset and imagining things, and that Auris would decide they should go back to the house so If's grandmother could dose him. But the feeling continued to grow, and by now If knew it was the farm.

Outwardly, everyone in the forest appeared to be going about their usual business. There had been a rainfall earlier in the day; and the tumbleweeds had uprooted themselves and were moving about in the bushes, lapping water off the leaves. If had noticed a small one rolling straight towards a waiting slurp and stopped for a moment to watch the slurp catch it. The slurp was of average size, which gave it a tongue-reach of between twelve and fourteen feet, and the tumbleweed was already within range.

The tongue shot out suddenly, a thin, yellow flash. Its tip flicked twice around the tumbleweed, jerked it off the ground and back to the feed opening in the imitation tree stump within which the rest of the slurp was concealed. The tumbleweed said "Oof!" in the surprised way they always did when something caught them, and went in through the opening. After a moment, the slurp's tongue tip appeared in the opening again and waved gently around, ready for somebody else of the right size to come within reach.





If, just turned eleven and rather small for his age, was the right size for this slurp, though barely. But, being a human boy, he was in no danger. The slurps of the diamondwood farms on Wrake didn't attack humans. For a moment, he was tempted to tease the creature into a brief fencing match. If he picked up a stick and banged on the stump with it a few times, the slurp would become annoyed and dart its tongue out and try to knock the stick from his hand.

But it wasn't the day for entertainment of that kind. If couldn't shake off his crawly, uncomfortable feeling, and while he had been standing there, Auris and Sam had moved a couple of hundred feet farther uphill, in the direction of the Queen Grove, and home. He turned and sprinted after them, caught up with them as they came out into one of the stretches of grassland which lay between the individual groves of diamondwood trees.

Auris, who was two years, two months, and two days older than If, stood on top of Sam's semiglobular shell, looking off to the right towards the valley where the diamondwood factory was. Most of the world of Wrake was on the hot side, either rather dry or rather steamy; but this was cool mountain country. Far to the south, below the valley and the foothills behind it, lay the continental plain, shimmering like a flat, green brown sea. To the north and east were higher plateaus, above the level where the diamondwood liked to grow. If ran past Sam's steadily moving bulk to the point where the forward rim of the shell made a flat upward curve, close enough to the ground so he could reach it.

Sam rolled a somber brown eye back for an instant as If caught the shell and swung up on it, but his huge beaked head didn't turn. He was a mossback, Wrake's version of the turtle pattern, and, except for the full-grown trees and perhaps some members of the clean-up

quad, the biggest thing on the farm. His corrugated shell was overgrown with a plant which had the appearance of long green fur; and occasionally when Sam fed, he would extend and use a pair of heavy arms with three-fingered hands, normally held folded up against the lower rim of the shell.

Auris had paid no attention to If's arrival. She still seemed to be watching the factory in the valley. She and If were cousins but didn't resemble each other. If was small and wiry, with tight-curled red hair. Auris was slim and blond, and stood a good head taller than he did. He thought she looked as if she owned everything she could see from the top of Sam's shell; and she did, as a matter of fact, own a good deal of it—nine tenths of the diamondwood farm and nine tenths of the factory. If owned the remaining tenth of both.

He scrambled up the shell, grabbing the moss-fur to haul himself along, until he stood beside her. Sam, awkward as he looked when walking, was moving at a good ten miles an hour, clearly headed for the Queen Grove. If didn't know whether it was Sam or Auris who had decided to go back to the house. Whichever it had been, he could feel the purpose of going there.

"They're nervous about something," he told Auris, meaning the whole farm. "Think there's a big storm coming?"

"Doesn't look like a storm," Auris said.

If glanced about the sky, agreed silently. "Earthquake, maybe?"

Auris shook her head. "It doesn't feel like earthquake."

She hadn't turned her gaze from the factory. If asked, "Something going on down there?"

Auris shrugged. "They're cutting a lot today," she said. "They got in a limit order."

Sam swayed on into the next grove while If considered the information. Limit orders were fairly unusual; but it hardly explained the general uneasiness. He sighed, sat down, crossed his legs, and looked about. This was a grove of young trees, fifteen years and less. There was plenty of open space left between them. Ahead, a huge tumbleweed was dying, making happy, chuckling sounds as it pitched its scarlet seed pellets far out from its slowly unfolding leaves. The pellets rolled hurriedly farther away from the old weed as soon as they touched the ground. In a twelve-foot circle about their parent, the earth was being disturbed, churned, shifted steadily about. The clean-up squad had arrived to dispose of the dying tumbleweed; as If looked, it suddenly settled six or seven inches deeper into the softened dirt. The pellets were hurrying to get beyond the reach of the clean-up squad so they wouldn't get hauled down, too. But half-grown tumbleweeds, speckled yellow-green and ready to start their rooted period, were rolling through the grove towards the disturbed area. They would wait around the edge of the circle until the clean-up squad finished, then move in and put down their roots. The ground where the squad had worked recently was always richer than any other spot in the forest.

If wondered, as he had many times before, what the clean-up squad

looked like. Nobody ever caught so much as a glimpse of them. Riqual Cholm, his grandfather, had told him of attempts made by scientists to catch a member of the squad with digging machines. Even the smallest ones could dig much faster than the machines could dig after them, so the scientists always gave up finally and went away.

. . .

"If, come in for lunch!" called If's grandmother's voice.

If filled his lungs, shouted, "Coming, grand--"

He broke off, looked up at Auris. She was smirking.

"Caught me again," If admitted. "Dumb humbugs!" He yelled, "Come out, Lying Lou! I know who it was."

Meldy Cholm laughed her low, sweet laugh, a silverbell called the giant greenweb of the Queen Grove sounded its deep harp note, more or less all together. Then Lying Lou and Gabby darted into sight, leaped up on the mossback's hump. The humbugs were small, brown, bobtailed animals, built with spider leanness and very quick. They had round skulls, monkey faces, and the pointed teeth of animals who lived by catching and killing other animals. Gabby sat down beside If, inflating and deflating his voice pouch, while Lou burst into a series of rattling, clicking, spitting sounds.

"They've been down at the factory?" If asked.



"Yes," Auris said. "Hush now. I'm listening."

was jabbering along at the rate at which the humbugs chattered among themselves, but this sounded like, and was, a recording of human voices played back at high speed. When Auris wanted to know what people somewhere were talking about, she sent the humbugs off to listen. They remembered everything they heard, came back and repeated it to her at their own speed, which saved time. If, if he tried hard, could understand scraps of it. Auris understood it all. She was hearing now what the people at the factory had been saying during the morning.

Gabby inflated his voice pouch part way, remarked in Grandfather Riquol's strong, rich voice, "My, my! We're not being quite on our best behavior today, are we, If?"

"Shut up," said If.

"Hush now," Gabby said in Auris' voice. "I'm listening." He added in If's voice, sounding crestfallen, "Caught me again!" then chuckled nastily.

If made a fist of his left hand and swung fast. Gabby became a momentary brown blur, and was sitting again on If's other side. He looked at If with round, innocent eyes, said in a solemn tone. "We must pay more attention to details, men. Mistakes can be expensive!"

He'd probably picked that up at the factory. If ignored him. Trying to hit a humbug was a waste of effort. So was talking back to them. He shifted his attention to catching what Lou was saying; but Lou had finished up at that moment. She and Gabby took off instantly in a leap from Sam's back and were gone in the bushes. If thought they were a little jittery and erratic in their motions today, as if they, too, were keyed up even more than usual. Auris walked down to the front lip of the shell and sat on it, dangling her legs. If joined her there.

"What were they talking about at the factory?" he asked.

"They did get in a limit order yesterday," Auris said. "And another one this morning. They're not taking any more orders until they've filled those two."

"That's good, isn't it?" If asked.

"I guess so."

After a moment, If asked, "Is that what *they're* worrying about?"

"I don't know," Auris said. But she frowned.

Sam came lumbering up to another stretch of open ground, stopped while he was still well back among the trees. Auris slipped down from the shell, said, "Come on but don't let them see you," and moved ahead through the trees until she could look into the open. If followed her as quietly as he could.

"What's the matter?" he inquired. A hundred and fifty yards away, on the other side of the open area, towered the Queen Grove, its tops dancing gently like armies of slender green spears against the blue sky. The house wasn't visible from here; it was a big one-story

numgalow built around the trunks of a number of trees deep within the grove. Ahead of them lay the road which came up from the valley and wound on through the mountains to the west.

Auris said, "An aircar came down here a while ago... . There it is!"

They looked at the aircar parked at the side of the road on their left, a little distance away. Opposite the car was an opening in the Queen Grove where a path led to the house. If couldn't see anything very interesting about the car. It was neither new nor old, looked like any ordinary aircar. The man sitting inside it was nobody they knew.

"Somebody's here on a visit," If said.

"Yes," Auris said. "Uncle Kugus has come back."

If had to reflect an instant to remember who Uncle Kugus was. Then it came to his mind in a flash. It had been some while ago, a year or so. Uncle Kugus was a big, handsome man with thick, black eyebrows, who always smiled. He wasn't If's uncle but Auris'; but he'd had presents for both of them when he arrived. He had told If a great many jokes. He and Grandfather Riquol had argued on one occasion for almost two hours about something or other; If couldn't remember now what it had been. Uncle Kugus had come and gone in a tiny, beautiful, bright yellow aircar, had taken If for a couple of rides in it, and told him about winning races with it. If hadn't had too bad an impression of him.

"That isn't him," he said, "and that isn't his car."

"I know. He's in the house," Auris said. "He's got a couple of people with him. They're talking with Riquol and Meldy."

A sound rose slowly from the Queen Grove as she spoke, deep and resonant, like the stroke of a big, old clock or the hum of a harp. The man in the aircar turned his head towards the grove to listen. The sound was repeated twice. It came from the giant greenweb at the far end of the grove and could be heard all over the farm, even, faintly, down in the valley when the wind was favorable. If said, "Lying Lou and Gabby were up here?"

"Yes. They went down to the factory first, then up to the house."

"What are they talking about in the house?" If inquired.

"Oh, a lot of things." Auris frowned again. "We'll go and find out, but we won't let them see us right away."

Something stirred beside If. He looked down and saw Lying Lou and Gabby had joined them again. The humbugs peered for a moment at the man in the aircar, then flicked out into the open, on across the road, and into the Queen Grove, like small, flying shadows, almost impossible to keep in sight. The man in the aircar looked about in a puzzled way, apparently uncertain whether he'd seen something move or not.

"Come on," Auris said.

If followed her back to Sam. Sam lifted his head and extended his

neck. Auris swung herself upon the edge of the undershell beside the neck, crept on hands and knees into the hollow between the upper and lower shells. If climbed in after her. The shell-cave was a familiar place. He'd scuttled in there many times when they'd been caught outdoors in one of the violent electric storms which came down through the mountains from the north or when the ground began to shudder in an earthquake's first rumbling. With the massive curved shell above him and the equally massive flat shell below, the angle formed by the cool, leathery wall which was the side of Sam's neck and the front of his shoulder seemed like the safest place in the world to be on such occasions.

The undershell tilted and swayed beneath If now as the mossback started forward. He squirmed around and looked out through the opening between the shells. They moved out of the grove, headed towards the road at Sam's steady walking pace. If couldn't see the aircar and wondered why Auris didn't want the man in the car to see them. He wriggled uncomfortably. It was a strange, uneasy-making morning in every way.

They crossed the road, went swishing through high grass with Sam's ponderous side-to-side sway like a big ship sailing over dry land, and came to the Queen Grove. Sam moved on into the green-tinted shade under the Queen Trees. The air grew cooler. Presently he turned to the right, and If saw a flash of blue ahead. That was the great thicket of flower bushes, in the center of which was Sam's sleeping pit.

Sam pushed through the thicket, stopped when he reached the open space in the center to let If and Auris climb out of the shell-cave. Sam then lowered his forelegs, one after the other, into the pit, which was lined so solidly with tree roots that almost no earth showed between them, shaped like a mold to fit the lower half of his body, tilted forward, drawing neck and head back under his shell, slid slowly into the pit, straightened out and settled down. The edge of his upper shell was now level with the edge of the pit, and what still could be seen of him looked simply like a big, moss-grown boulder. If nobody came to disturb him, he might stay there unmoving the rest of the year. There were mossbacks in other groves of the farm which had never come out of their sleeping pits or given any indication of being awake since If could remember. They lived an enormous length of time and a nap of half a dozen years apparently meant nothing to them.

If looked questioningly at Auris. She said, "We'll go up to the house and listen to what Uncle Kugus is talking about."

They turned into a path which led from Sam's place to the house. It had been made by six generations of human children, all of whom had used Sam for transportation about the diamondwood farm. He was half again as big as any other mossback around and the only one whose sleeping pit was in the Queen Grove. Everything about the Queen Grove was special, from the trees themselves, which were never cut and twice as thick and almost twice as tall as the trees of other groves, to Sam and his blue flower thicket, the huge stump of the Grandfather Slurp not far away, and the giant greenweb at the other end of the grove. It was quieter here; there were fewer of the other animals. The Queen Grove, from what Riquol Cholm had told If, was the point from which the whole diamondwood forest had started a long time ago.

Auris said, "We'll go around and come in from the back. They don't have to know right away that we're here...."

"Mr. Terokaw," said Riquol Cholm, "I'm sorry Kugus Ovin persuaded you and Mr. Bliman to accompany him to Wrake on this business. You've simply wasted your time. Kugus should have known better. I've discussed the situation quite thoroughly with him on other occasions."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Mr. Cholm," Mr. Terokaw said stiffly. "I'm making you a businesslike proposition in regard to this farm of diamondwood trees—a proposition which will be very much to your advantage as well as to that of the children whose property the Diamondwood is. Certainly you should at least be willing to listen to my terms!"

Riquol shook his head. It was clear that he was angry with Kugus but attempting to control his anger.

"Your terms, whatever they may be, are not a factor in this," he said. "The maintenance of a diamondwood forest is not entirely a business proposition. Let me explain that to you—as Kugus should have done."

"No doubt you're aware that there are less than forty such forests on the world of Wrake and that attempts to grow the trees elsewhere have been uniformly unsuccessful. That and the unique beauty of diamondwood products, which has never been duplicated by artificial means, is, of course, the reason that such products command a price which compares with that of precious stones and similar items."

Mr. Terokaw regarded Riquol with a bleak blue eye, nodded briefly. "Please continue, Mr. Cholm."

"A diamondwood forest," said Riquol, "is a great deal more than an assemblage of trees. The trees are a basic factor, but still only a factor, of a closely integrated, balanced natural ecology. The manner of interdependence of the plants and animals that make up a diamondwood forest is not clear in all details, but the interdependence is a very pronounced one. None of the involved species seem able to survive in any other environment. On the other hand, plants and animals not naturally a part of this ecology will not thrive if brought into it. They move out or vanish quickly. Human beings appear to be the only exception to that rule."

"Very interesting," Mr. Terokaw said dryly.

"It is," said Riquol. "It is a very interesting natural situation and many people, including Mrs. Cholm and myself, feel it should be preserved. The studied, limited cutting practiced on the diamondwood farms at present acts towards its preservation. That degree of harvesting actually is beneficial to the forests, keeps them moving through an optimum cycle of growth and maturity. They are flourishing under the hand of man to an extent which was not usually attained in their natural, untouched state. The people who are at present responsible for them—the farm owners and their associates—have been working for some time to have all diamondwood forests turned into

preserves, with the right to harvest them retained by the present owners and their heirs under the same carefully supervised conditions. When Auris and Ilf come of age and can sign an agreement to that effect, the farms will in fact become Federation preserves. All other steps to that end have been taken by now.

"That, Mr. Terokaw, is why we're not interested in your business proposition. You'll discover, if you wish to sound them out on it, that the other diamondwood farmers are not interested in it either. We are all of one mind in that matter. If we weren't, we would long since have accepted propositions essentially similar to yours."

There was silence for a moment. Then Kugus Ovin said pleasantly, "I know you're annoyed with me, Riquol, but I'm thinking of Auris and Ilf in this. Perhaps in your concern for the preservation of a natural phenomenon, you aren't sufficiently considering their interests."

Riquol looked at him, said, "When Auris reaches maturity, she'll be an extremely wealthy young woman, even if this farm never sells another cubic foot of diamondwood from this day on. Ilf would be sufficiently well-to-do to make it unnecessary for him ever to work a stroke in his life--though I doubt very much he would make such a choice."

Kugus smiled. "There are degrees even to the state of being extremely wealthy," he remarked. "What my niece can expect to gain in her lifetime from this careful harvesting you talk about can't begin to compare with what she would get at one stroke through Mr. Terokaw's offer. The same, of course, holds true of Ilf."

"Quite right," Mr. Terokaw said heavily. "I'm generous in my business dealings, Mr. Cholm. I have a reputation for it. And I can afford to be generous because I profit well from my investments. Let me bring another point to your attention. Interest in diamondwood products throughout the Federation waxes and wanes, as you must be aware. It rises and falls. There are fashions and fads. At present, we are approaching the crest of a new wave of interest in these products. This interest can be properly stimulated and exploited, but in any event we must expect it will have passed its peak in another few months. The next interest peak might develop six years from now, or twelve years from now. Or it might never develop since there are very few natural products which cannot eventually be duplicated and usually surpassed by artificial methods, and there is no good reason to assume that diamondwood will remain an exception indefinitely.

"We should be prepared, therefore, to make the fullest use of this bonanza while it lasts. I am prepared to do just that, Mr. Cholm. A cargo ship full of cutting equipment is at present stationed a few hours' flight from Wrake. This machinery can be landed and in operation here within a day after the contract I am offering you is signed. Within a week, the forest can be leveled. We shall make no use of your factory here, which would be entirely inadequate for my purpose. The diamondwood will be shipped at express speeds to another world where I have adequate processing facilities set up. And we can hit the Federation's main markets with the finished products the following month."

Riquol Cholm said, icily polite now, "And what would be the reason



for all that haste, Mr. Terokaw?"

Mr. Terokaw looked surprised. "To insure that we have no competition, Mr. Cholm. What else? When the other diamondwood farmers here discover what has happened, they may be tempted to follow our example. But we'll be so far ahead of them that the diamondwood boom will be almost entirely to our exclusive advantage. We have taken every precaution to see that. Mr. Bliman, Mr. Ovin and I arrived here in the utmost secrecy today. No one so much as suspects that we are on Wrake, much less what our purpose is. I make no mistakes in such matters, Mr. Cholm!"

He broke off and looked around as Meldy Cholm said in a troubled voice, "Come in, children. Sit down over there. We're discussing a matter which concerns you."

"Hello, Auris!" Kugus said heartily. "Hello, Ilf! Remember old Uncle Kugus?"

"Yes," Ilf said. He sat down on the bench by the wall beside Auris, feeling scared.

"Auris," Riquol Cholm said, "did you happen to overhear anything of what was being said before you came into the room?"

Auris nodded. "Yes." She glanced at Mr. Terokaw, looked at Riquol again. "He wants to cut down the forest."

"It's your forest and Ilf's, you know. Do you want him to do it?"

"Mr. Cholm, please!" Mr. Terokaw protested. "We must approach this properly. Kugus, show Mr. Cholm what I'm offering."

Riquol took the document Kugus held out to him, looked over it. After a moment, he gave it back to Kugus. "Auris," he said, "Mr. Terokaw, as he's indicated, is offering you more money than you would ever be able to spend in your life for the right to cut down your share of the forest. Now ... do you want him to do it?"

"No," Auris said.

Riquol glanced at Ilf, who shook his head. Riquol turned back to Mr. Terokaw.

"Well, Mr. Terokaw," he said, "there's your answer. My wife and I don't want you to do it, and Auris and Ilf don't want you to do it. Now..."

"Oh, come now, Riquol!" Kugus said, smiling. "No one can expect either Auris or Ilf to really understand what's involved here. When they come of age--"

"When they come of age," Riquol said, "they'll again have the opportunity to decide what they wish to do." He made a gesture of distaste. "Gentlemen, let's conclude this discussion. Mr. Terokaw, we thank you for your offer, but it's been rejected."

Mr. Terokaw frowned, pursed his lips.

"Well, not so fast, Mr. Cholm," he said. "As I told you, I make no

mistakes in business matters. You suggested a few minutes ago that I might contact the other diamondwood farmers on the planet on the subject but predicted that I would have no better luck with them."

"So I did," Riquol agreed. He looked puzzled.

"As a matter of fact," Mr. Terokaw went on, "I already have contacted a number of these people. Not in person, you understand, since I did not want to tip off certain possible competitors that I was interested in diamondwood at present. The offer was rejected, as you indicated it would be. In fact, I learned that the owners of the Wrake diamondwood farms are so involved in legally binding agreements with one another that it would be very difficult for them to accept such an offer even if they wished to do it."

Riquol nodded, smiled briefly. "We realized that the temptation to sell out to commercial interests who would not be willing to act in accordance with our accepted policies could be made very strong," he said. "So we've made it as nearly impossible as we could for any of us to yield to temptation."

"Well," Mr. Terokaw continued, "I am not a man who is easily put off. I ascertained that you and Mrs. Cholm are also bound by such an agreement to the other diamondwood owners of Wrake not to be the first to sell either the farm or its cutting rights to outside interests, or to exceed the established limits of cutting. But you are not the owners of this farm. These two children own it between them."

Riquol frowned. "What difference does that make?" he demanded. "If is our grandson. Auris is related to us and our adopted daughter."

Mr. Terokaw rubbed his chin.

"Mr. Bliman," he said, "please explain to these people what the legal situation is."

. . .

Mr. Bliman cleared his throat. He was a tall, thin man with fierce dark eyes, like a bird of prey. "Mr. and Mrs. Cholm," he began, "I work for the Federation Government and am a specialist in adoptive procedures. I will make this short. Some months ago, Mr. Kugus Ovin filed the necessary papers to adopt his niece, Auris Luteel, citizen of Wrake. I conducted the investigation which is standard in such cases and can assure you that no official record exists that you have at any time gone through the steps of adopting Auris."

"What?" Riquol came half to his feet. Then he froze in position for a moment, settled slowly back in his chair. "What is this? Just what kind of trick are you trying to play?" he said. His face had gone white.

If had lost sight of Mr. Terokaw for a few seconds, because Uncle Kugus had suddenly moved over in front of the bench on which he and Auris were sitting. But now he saw him again and he had a jolt of fright. There was a large blue and silver gun in Mr. Terokaw's hand, and the muzzle of it was pointed very steadily at Riquol Cholm.

"Mr. Cholm," Mr. Terokaw said, "before Mr. Bliman concludes his explanation, allow me to caution you! I do not wish to kill you. This

gun, in fact, is not designed to kill. But if I pull the trigger, you will be in excruciating pain for some minutes. You are an elderly man and it is possible that you would not survive the experience. This would not inconvenience us very seriously. Therefore, stay seated and give up any thoughts of summoning help... . Kugus, watch the children. Mr. Bliman, let me speak to Mr. Het before you resume."

He put his left hand up to his face, and If saw he was wearing a wrist-talker. "Het," Mr. Terokaw said to the talker without taking his eyes off Riquol Cholm, "you are aware, I believe, that the children are with us in the house?"

The wrist-talker made murmuring sounds for a few seconds, then stopped.

"Yes," Mr. Terokaw said. "There should be no problem about it. But let me know if you see somebody approaching the area... ." He put his hand back down on the table. "Mr. Bliman, please continue."

Mr. Bliman cleared his throat again.

"Mr. Kugus Ovin," he said, "is now officially recorded as the parent by adoption of his niece, Auris Luteel. Since Auris has not yet reached the age where her formal consent to this action would be required, the matter is settled."

"Meaning," Mr. Terokaw added, "that Kugus can act for Auris in such affairs as selling the cutting rights on this tree farm. Mr. Cholm, if you are thinking of taking legal action against us, forget it. You may have had certain papers purporting to show that the girl was your adopted child filed away in the deposit vault of a bank. If so, those papers have been destroyed. With enough money, many things become possible. Neither you nor Mrs. Cholm nor the two children will do or say anything that might cause trouble to me. Since you have made no rash moves, Mr. Bliman will now use an instrument to put you and Mrs. Cholm painlessly to sleep for the few hours required to get you off this planet. Later, if you should be questioned in connection with this situation, you will say about it only what certain psychological experts will have impressed on you to say, and within a few months, nobody will be taking any further interest whatever in what is happening here today.

"Please do not think that I am a cruel man. I am not. I merely take what steps are required to carry out my purpose. Mr. Bliman, please proceed!"

If felt a quiver of terror. Uncle Kugus was holding his wrist with one hand and Auris' wrist with the other, smiling reassuringly down at them. If darted a glance over to Auris' face. She looked as white as his grandparents but she was making no attempt to squirm away from Kugus, so If stayed quiet, too. Mr. Bliman stood up, looking more like a fierce bird of prey than ever, and stalked over to Riquol Cholm, holding something in his hand that looked unpleasantly like another gun. If shut his eyes. There was a moment of silence, then Mr. Terokaw said, "Catch him before he falls out of the chair. Mrs. Cholm, if you will just settle back comfortably..."

There was another moment of silence. Then, from beside him, If heard Auris speak.

It wasn't regular speech but a quick burst of thin, rattling gabble, like

human speech speeded up twenty times or so. It ended almost immediately.

"What's that? What's that?" Mr. Terokaw said, surprised.

If's eyes flew open as something came in through the window with a whistling shriek. The two humbugs were in the room, brown blurs flicking here and there, screeching like demons. Mr. Terokaw exclaimed something in a loud voice and jumped up from the chair, his gun swinging this way and that. Something scuttled up Mr. Bliman's back like a big spider, and he yelled and spun away from Meldy Cholm lying slumped back in her chair. Something ran up Uncle Kugus' back. He yelled, letting go of If and Auris, and pulled out a gun of his own. "Wide aperture!" roared Mr. Terokaw, whose gun was making loud, thumping noises. A brown shadow swirled suddenly about his knees. Uncle Kugus cursed, took aim at the shadow and fired.

"Stop that, you fool!" Mr. Terokaw shouted. "You nearly hit me."

"Come," whispered Auris, grabbing If's arm. They sprang up from the bench and darted out the door behind Uncle Kugus' broad back.

"Het!" Mr. Terokaw's voice came bellowing down the hall behind them. "Up in the air and look out for those children! They're trying to get away. If you see them start to cross the road, knock 'em out. Kugus--after them! They may try to hide in the house."

Then he yowled angrily, and his gun began making the thumping noises again. The humbugs were too small to harm people, but their sharp little teeth could hurt and they seemed to be using them now.

"In here," Auris whispered, opening a door. If ducked into the room with her, and she closed the door softly behind them. If looked at her, his heart pounding wildly.

Auris nodded at the barred window. "Through there! Run and hide in the grove. I'll be right behind you... ."

"Auris! If!" Uncle Kugus called in the hall. "Wait--don't be afraid. Where are you?" His voice still seemed to be smiling. If heard his footsteps hurrying along the hall as he squirmed quickly sideways between two of the thick wooden bars over the window, dropped to the ground. He turned, darted off towards the nearest bushes.

He heard Auris gabble something to the humbugs again, high and shrill, looked back as he reached the bushes and saw her already outside, running towards the shrubbery on his right. There was a shout from the window. Uncle Kugus was peering out from behind the bars, pointing a gun at Auris. He fired. Auris swerved to the side, was gone among the shrubs. If didn't think she had been hit.

"They're outside!" Uncle Kugus yelled. He was too big to get through the bars himself.

Mr. Terokaw and Mr. Bliman were also shouting within the house. Uncle Kugus turned around, disappeared from the window.

"Auris!" If called, his voice shaking with fright.

"Run and hide, If!" Auris seemed to be on the far side of the shrubbery, deeper in the Queen Grove.

If hesitated, started running along the path that led to Sam's sleeping pit, glancing up at the open patches of sky among the treetops. He didn't see the aircar with the man Het in it. Het would be circling around the Queen Grove now, waiting for the other men to chase them into sight so he could knock them out with something. But they could hide inside Sam's shell and Sam would get them across the road. "Auris, where are you?" If cried.

Her voice came low and clear from behind him. "Run and hide, If!"

If looked back. Auris wasn't there but the two humbugs were loping up the path a dozen feet away. They darted past If without stopping, disappeared around the turn ahead. He could hear the three men yelling for him and Auris to come back. They were outside, looking around for them now, and they seemed to be coming closer.

If ran on, reached Sam's sleeping place. Sam lay there unmoving, like a great mossy boulder filling the pit. If picked up a stone and pounded on the front part of the shell.

"Wake up!" he said desperately. "Sam, wake up!"

Sam didn't stir. And the men were getting closer. If looked this way and that, trying to decide what to do.

"Don't let them see you," Auris called suddenly.

"That was the girl over there," Mr. Terokaw's voice shouted. "Go after her, Bliman!"

"Auris, watch out!" If screamed, terrified.

"Aha! And here's the boy, Kugus. This way! Het," Mr. Terokaw yelled triumphantly, "come down and help us catch them! We've got them spotted..."

If dropped to hands and knees, crawled away quickly under the branches of the blue flower thicket and waited, crouched low. He heard Mr. Terokaw crashing through the bushes towards him and Mr. Bliman braying, "Hurry up, Het! Hurry up!" Then he heard something else. It was the sound the giant greenweb sometimes made to trick a flock of silverbells into fluttering straight towards it, a deep drone which suddenly seemed to be pouring down from the trees and rising up from the ground.

If shook his head dizzily. The drone faded, grew up again. For a moment, he thought he heard his own voice call "Auris, where are you?" from the other side of the blue flower thicket. Mr. Terokaw veered off in that direction, yelling something to Mr. Bliman and Kugus. If backed farther away through the thicket, came out on the other side, climbed to his feet and turned.

He stopped. For a stretch of twenty feet ahead of him, the forest floor was moving, shifting and churning with a slow, circular motion, turning lumps of deep brown mold over and over.

Mr. Terokaw came panting into Sam's sleeping place, red-faced, glaring about, the blue and silver gun in his hand. He shook his head to clear the resonance of the humming air from his brain. He saw a huge, moss-covered boulder tilted at a slant away from him but no sign of If.

Then something shook the branches of the thicket behind the boulder. "Auris!" If's frightened voice called.

Mr. Terokaw ran around the boulder, leveling the gun. The droning in the air suddenly swelled to a roar. Two big gray, three-fingered hands came out from the boulder on either side of Mr. Terokaw and picked him up.

"Awk!" he gasped, then dropped the gun as the hands folded him, once, twice, and lifted him towards Sam's descending head. Sam opened his large mouth, closed it, swallowed. His neck and head drew back under his shell and he settled slowly into the sleeping pit again.

The greenweb's roar ebbed and rose continuously now, like a thousand harps being struck together in a bewildering, quickening beat. Human voices danced and swirled through the din, crying, wailing, screeching. If stood at the edge of the twenty-foot circle of churning earth outside the blue flower thicket, half stunned by it all. He heard Mr. Terokaw bellow to Mr. Bliman to go after Auris, and Mr. Bliman squalling to Het to hurry. He heard his own voice nearby call Auris frantically and then Mr. Terokaw's triumphant yell: "This way! Here's the boy, Kugus!"

Uncle Kugus bounded out of some bushes thirty feet away, eyes staring, mouth stretched in a wide grin. He saw If, shouted excitedly and ran towards him. If watched, suddenly unable to move. Uncle Kugus took four long steps out over the shifting loam between them, sank ankle-deep, knee-deep. Then the brown earth leaped in cascades about him, and he went sliding straight down into it as if it were water, still grinning, and disappeared.

In the distance, Mr. Terokaw roared, "This way!" and Mr. Bliman yelled to Het to hurry up. A loud, slapping sound came from the direction of the stump of the Grandfather Slurp. It was followed by a great commotion in the bushes around there; but that only lasted a moment. Then, a few seconds later, the greenweb's drone rose and thinned to the wild shriek it made when it had caught something big and faded slowly away...

If came walking shakily through the opening in the thickets to Sam's sleeping place. His head still seemed to hum inside with the greenweb's drone but the Queen Grove was quiet again; no voices called anywhere. Sam was settled into his pit. If saw something gleam on the ground near the front end of the pit. He went over and looked at it, then at the big, moss-grown dome of Sam's shell.

"Oh, Sam," he whispered, "I'm not sure we should have done it... ."

Sam didn't stir. If picked up Mr. Terokaw's blue and silver gun gingerly by the barrel and went off with it to look for Auris. He found her at the edge of the grove, watching Het's aircar on the other side of the road. The aircar was turned on its side and about a third of it was sunk in the ground. At work around and below it was the biggest member of the clean-up squad If had ever seen in action.

They went up to the side of the road together and looked on while the aircar continued to shudder and turn and sink deeper into the earth. If suddenly remembered the gun he was holding and threw it over on the ground next to the aircar. It was swallowed up instantly there. Tumbleweeds came rolling up to join them and clustered around the edge of the circle, waiting. With a final jerk, the aircar disappeared. The disturbed section of earth began to smooth over. The tumbleweeds moved out into it.

There was a soft whistling in the air, and from a Queen Tree at the edge of the grove a hundred and fifty feet away, a diamondwood seedling came lancing down, struck at a slant into the center of the circle where the aircar had vanished, stood trembling a moment, then straightened up. The tumbleweeds nearest it moved respectfully aside to give it room. The seedling shuddered and unfolded its first five-fingered cluster of silver-green leaves. Then it stood still.

If looked over at Auris. "Auris," he said, "should we have done it?"

Auris was silent a moment.

"Nobody did anything," she said then. "They've just gone away again." She took If's hand. "Let's go back to the house and wait for Riquol and Meldy to wake up."

The organism that was the diamondwood forest grew quiet again. The quiet spread back to its central mind unit in the Queen Grove, and the unit began to relax towards somnolence. A crisis had been passed--perhaps the last of the many it had foreseen when human beings first arrived on the world of Wrake.

The only defense against Man was Man. Understanding that, it had laid its plans. On a world now owned by Man, it adopted Man, brought him into its ecology, and its ecology into a new and again successful balance.

This had been a final flurry. A dangerous attack by dangerous humans. But the period of danger was nearly over, would soon be for good a thing of the past.

It had planned well, the central mind unit told itself drowsily. But now, since there was no further need to think today, it would stop thinking...

Sam the mossback fell gratefully asleep.

# "Faddist"

Published in *Bizarre! Mystery Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (January 1966), though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



He had promised Elaine that he would tend her garden organically.  
And he kept his word.

»

He had promised Elaine that he would tend her garden organically.  
And he kept his word.

Elaine's half-acre fruit and vegetable garden, Herman Broadbent told himself with a touch of somberness rather unusual in him, had never looked quite so lush, so deep-green-healthy, as it did today. Even the blood orange tree she used to worry about was responding nobly, with fruits and flowers, to the painstaking organic gardening methods in which his wife had schooled him, and formed a fitting centerpiece for the whole garden. It would have made Elaine very happy to see it.

With the edge of his fork, Herman broke a piece from the whipped-cream scone on the plate before him, and transferred it to his mouth. He was a plump, white-haired man, tanned and rosy-cheeked. Holding the morsel on his tongue for a moment, he half closed his eyes, appreciating the delicate combination of flaky pastry and almost ethereal cream, before closing his teeth slowly down on it. Munching, he let his gaze move over the other items on the porch table ... cinnamon rolls and jam tarts, grouped about a majestic chocolate buttercream cake.

Elaine, Herman Broadbent admitted to himself with a rueful little smile, had not been happy to see anything like that in her



me! When he thought of his wife, as he often did when sitting on the back porch these pleasant summer evenings, Herman would concede only one fault in Elaine. She had been a health food faddist and had tried very hard, throughout their nineteen years of married life, to turn Herman into one.

Herman, a French pastry and whipped cream man by nature, had gone along with her notions, in part because he was fond of Elaine, and in part because she was twice as strong-willed as he was. In time, he became habituated to wheat germ, yeast, desiccated liver, vegetarian beefsteaks, sunflower seeds, royal jelly, squawbush tea, and the long, long roster of nutritious growths, from apricots to zucchini squash, all exuberantly healthful, positively bursting with minerals and vitamins, which Elaine produced with relentless enthusiasm in her organic garden.

He grew used to this diet; but he never entirely forgot the devitalizing, unnatural, overprocessed goodies he had doted on before running into Elaine. Once, in their eighth year of marriage, as Herman recalled it now, he made the mistake of bringing a box of quite plain Vanilla Treats back from the market with him. Elaine had gone absolutely white. Without a word, she emptied the Treats into the garbage can, then wheeled on Herman.

"Are you trying to dig your grave with your teeth, Herman Broadbent?" she cried. "You *know* you like the wonderful, nutty flavor of homemade Brewer's Yeast cookies much better than that poisonous trash!"

Herman knew no such thing. But neither did he lapse again—except, on occasion, in his dreams. Nevertheless Elaine remained distrustful. When, in the nineteenth year of their marriage, she was invited to address the annual convention of the Association of Organic Garden Growers in Idaho, she hesitated, torn between delight at the prospect of being among kindred spirits for a whole week and a suspicion that Herman might go berserk in her absence. Finally, she exacted two solemn pledges from him. One, to take faithful care of the garden while she was gone; and the other, not to deviate by so much as a nibble from the list of menus she drew up for him.

Herman promised. Next afternoon, Elaine, having packed her bags and informed the neighbors of the honor awaiting her, drove off to the railway station.

Four days later, a telegram arrived from the Association asking why Mrs. Broadbent had not appeared to address them. Herman notified the police, and an investigation was instituted which led to nothing. Somewhere between the railroad station and Idaho, Elaine seemed to have vanished into thin air. In the eight months since that day, no trace of her ever had been reported.

\* \* \*

He could say with full honesty, Herman reflected, gazing out on the garden, that he had kept the first of the two pledges. Two hours each afternoon, he toiled away in the garden, removing each intruding sprout of a weed as it appeared, spreading compost heap material

about, spading, watering, and in the fullness of time harvesting each crop and shoving it carefully down the garbage disposal unit he'd installed in the kitchen sink. Elaine couldn't have found a word of fault with the garden's condition.

The other promise, of course, he hadn't kept. Not a single healthful, genuinely nourishing bite had he let pass his teeth since waving goodbye to Elaine from the front porch. For almost an hour after she left, he had held out while half-buried memories came crowding into his mind ... hot apple strudels and shortcakes, pecan rolls and tarts ... everything topped by snowdrifts of icing, by airy clouds of whipped cream. Finally, his mouth watering unbearably, Herman realized that the bakeries would soon be closed. His pledge forgotten, he rushed out...

What had possessed Elaine that fateful day to make her change her mind? Was it intuition? Some telepathic warning? Or just the sudden realization that she was testing her husband beyond his power to resist? Herman would never know. Lost in an orgiastic rapture, he had been in the kitchen, slicing off his fourth piece of lemon chiffon cake, with the bread knife, when the door to the porch opened. Appalled, he stared at his wife framed against the darkening garden beyond.

Wordlessly Elaine had pulled the garbage can out from under the sink and begun sweeping the remaining components of Herman's unrestrained feast into it. Still clutching the bread knife, he watched her in stunned silence. Having cleared the table, Elaine shoved the garbage can back under the sink, stood staring stonily out the window, arms folded over her chest.

"I saw you from the garden," she said heavily. "It was ... disgusting ... incredible! And after all these years! I shall never be able to trust you out of my sight again, Herman Broadbent!"

Herman had looked at her back, many things rushing through his mind ... yeast and steamed kale, sunflower seeds and wheat germ. Years and years of it still to come; for on such a diet he might well live to be over a hundred. And never, never in all that time, even one more spoonful of whipped cream!

Against that, there was the fact that he was really quite fond of Elaine.

One cannot have everything, Herman understood then. The time comes when one must decide.

Rather regretfully, but purposefully, he made his decision.

. . .

So Elaine was gone, but her garden remained. He would tend it faithfully as long as he stayed here. And he would stay here all the rest of his days.

It would never do if, during his lifetime, some unsentimental new tenant decided to uproot Elaine's magnificently blooming, organically nourished blood orange tree.



# "An Incident on Route 12"

Published in *If*, Vol. 11, No. 6 (January 1962).

(Please note that despite some sources and the cover layout, the magazine is not actually called *Worlds of If*—though two anthologies were published under that name—but simply *If*; the subtitle is *Worlds of Science Fiction*.)



He was already a thief, prepared to steal again.  
He didn't know that he himself was only booty!

[»](#)

Phil Garfield was thirty miles south of the little town of Redmon on Route Twelve when he was startled by a series of sharp, clanking noises. They came from under the Packard's hood.

The car immediately began to lose speed. Garfield jammed down the accelerator, had a sense of sick helplessness at the complete lack of response from the motor. The Packard rolled on, getting rid of its momentum, and came to a stop.

Phil Garfield swore shakily. He checked his watch, switched off the headlights and climbed out into the dark road. A delay of even half an hour here might be disastrous. It was past midnight, and he had another hundred and ten miles to cover to reach the small private airfield where Madge waited for him and the thirty thousand dollars in the suitcase on the Packard's front seat.

If he didn't make it before daylight...

He thought of the bank guard. The man had made a clumsy play at being a hero, and that had set off the fool woman who'd run screaming into their line of fire. One dead. Perhaps two. Garfield hadn't stopped to look at an evening paper.

But he knew they were hunting for him.

He glanced up and down the road. No other headlights in sight at the moment, no light from a building showing on the forested hills. He reached back into the car and brought out the suitcase, his gun, a big flashlight and the box of shells which had been standing beside the suitcase. He broke the box open, shoved a handful of shells and the .38 into his coat pocket, then took suitcase and flashlight over to the shoulder of the road and set them down.

There was no point in groping about under the Packard's hood. When it came to mechanics, Phil Garfield was a moron and well aware of it. The car was useless to him now ... except as bait.

But as bait it might be very useful.

Should he leave it standing where it was? No, Garfield decided. To anybody driving past it would merely suggest a necking party, or a drunk sleeping off his load before continuing home. He might have to wait an hour or more before someone decided to stop. He didn't have the time. He reached in through the window, hauled the top of the steering wheel towards him and put his weight against the rear window frame.

The Packard began to move slowly backwards at a slant across the road. In a minute or two he had it in position. Not blocking the road entirely, which would arouse immediate suspicion, but angled across it, lights out, empty, both front doors open and inviting a passerby's investigation.

Garfield carried the suitcase and flashlight across the right-hand shoulder of the road and moved up among the trees and undergrowth of the slope above the shoulder. Placing the suitcase between the bushes, he brought out the .38, clicked the safety off and stood waiting.

Some ten minutes later, a set of headlights appeared speeding up Route Twelve from the direction of Redmon. Phil Garfield went down on one knee before he came within range of the lights. Now he was completely concealed by the vegetation.

The car slowed as it approached, braking nearly to a stop sixty feet from the stalled Packard. There were several people inside it; Garfield heard voices, then a woman's loud laugh. The driver tapped his horn inquiringly twice, moved the car slowly forward. As the headlights went past him, Garfield got to his feet among the bushes, took a step down towards the road, raising the gun.

Then he caught the distant gleam of a second set of headlights approaching from Redmon. He swore under his breath and dropped back out of sight. The car below him reached the Packard, edged cautiously around it, rolled on with a sudden roar of acceleration.

. . .

The second car stopped when still a hundred yards away, the Packard caught in the motionless glare of its lights. Garfield heard the steady purring of a powerful motor.

For almost a minute, nothing else happened. Then the car came

sliding smoothly on, stopped again no more than thirty feet to Garfield's left. He could see it now through the screening bushes--a big job, a long, low four-door sedan. The motor continued to purr. After a moment, a door on the far side of the car opened and slammed shut.

A man walked quickly out into the beam of the headlights and started towards the Packard.

Phil Garfield rose from his crouching position, the .38 in his right hand, flashlight in his left. If the driver was alone, the thing was now cinched! But if there was somebody else in the car, somebody capable of fast, decisive action, a slip in the next ten seconds might cost him the sedan, and quite probably his freedom and life. Garfield lined up the .38's sights steadily on the center of the approaching man's head. He let his breath out slowly as the fellow came level with him in the road and squeezed off one shot.

Instantly he went bounding down the slope to the road. The bullet had flung the man sideways to the pavement. Garfield darted past him to the left, crossed the beam of the headlights, and was in darkness again on the far side of the road, snapping on his flashlight as he sprinted up to the car.

The motor hummed quietly on. The flashlight showed the seats empty. Garfield dropped the light, jerked both doors open in turn, gun pointing into the car's interior. Then he stood still for a moment, weak and almost dizzy with relief.

There was no one inside. The sedan was his.

The man he had shot through the head lay face down on the road, his hat flung a dozen feet away from him. Route Twelve still stretched out in dark silence to east and west. There should be time enough to clean up the job before anyone else came along. Garfield brought the suitcase down and put it on the front seat of the sedan, then started back to get his victim off the road and out of sight. He scaled the man's hat into the bushes, bent down, grasped the ankles and started to haul him towards the left side of the road where the ground dropped off sharply beyond the shoulder.

The body made a high, squealing sound and began to writhe violently.

. . .

Shocked, Garfield dropped the legs and hurriedly took the gun from his pocket, moving back a step. The squealing noise rose in intensity as the wounded man quickly flopped over twice like a struggling fish, arms and legs sawing about with startling energy. Garfield clicked off the safety, pumped three shots into his victim's back.

The grisly squeals ended abruptly. The body continued to jerk for another second or two, then lay still.

Garfield shoved the gun back into his pocket. The unexpected interruption had unnerved him; his hands shook as he reached down again for the stranger's ankles. Then he jerked his hands back, and straightened up, staring.

From the side of the man's chest, a few inches below the right arm, something like a thick black stick, three feet long, protruded now through the material of the coat.

It shone, gleaming wetly, in the light from the car. Even in that first uncomprehending instant, something in its appearance brought a surge of sick disgust to Garfield's throat. Then the stick bent slowly halfway down its length, forming a sharp angle, and its tip opened into what could have been three blunt, black claws which scrabbled clumsily against the pavement. Very faintly, the squealing began again, and the body's back arched up as if another sticklike arm were pushing desperately against the ground beneath it.

Garfield acted in a blur of horror. He emptied the .38 into the thing at his feet almost without realizing he was doing it. Then, dropping the gun, he seized one of the ankles, ran backwards to the shoulder of the road, dragging the body behind him.

In the darkness at the edge of the shoulder, he let go of it, stepped around to the other side and with two frantically savage kicks sent the body plunging over the shoulder and down the steep slope beyond. He heard it crash through the bushes for some seconds, then stop. He turned, and ran back to the sedan, scooping up his gun as he went past. He scrambled into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut behind him.

His hands shook violently on the steering wheel as he pressed down the accelerator. The motor roared into life and the big car surged forward. He edged it past the Packard, cursing aloud in horrified shock, jammed down the accelerator and went flashing up Route Twelve, darkness racing beside and behind him.

. . .

*What had it been?* Something that wore what seemed to be a man's body like a suit of clothes, moving the body as a man moves, driving a man's car ... roach-armed, roach-legged itself!

Garfield drew a long, shuddering breath. Then, as he slowed for a curve, there was a spark of reddish light in the rear-view mirror.

He stared at the spark for an instant, braked the car to a stop, rolled down the window and looked back.

Far behind him along Route Twelve, a fire burned. Approximately at the point where the Packard had stalled out, where something had gone rolling off the road into the bushes... .

Something, Garfield added mentally, that found fiery automatic destruction when death came to it, so that its secrets would remain unrevealed.

But for him the fire meant the end of a nightmare. He rolled the window up, took out a cigarette, lit it, and pressed the accelerator... .

In incredulous fright, he felt the nose of the car tilt upwards, headlights sweeping up from the road into the trees.

then the headlights winked out. Beyond the windshield, dark tree branches floated down towards him, the night sky beyond. He reached frantically for the door handle.

A steel wrench clamped silently about each of his arms, drawing them in against his sides, immobilizing them there. Garfield gasped, looked up at the mirror and saw a pair of faintly gleaming red eyes watching him from the rear of the car. Two of the things ... the second one stood behind him out of sight, holding him. They'd been in what had seemed to be the trunk compartment. And they had come out.

The eyes in the mirror vanished. A moist, black roach-arm reached over the back of the seat beside Garfield, picked up the cigarette he had dropped, extinguished it with rather horribly human motions, then took up Garfield's gun and drew back out of sight.

He expected a shot, but none came.

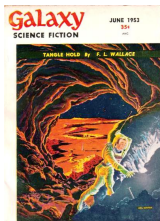
One doesn't fire a bullet through the suit one intends to wear... .

It wasn't until that thought occurred to him that tough Phil Garfield began to scream. He was still screaming minutes later when, beyond the windshield, the spaceship floated into view among the stars.



# "We Don't Want Any Trouble"

Published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (June 1953), illustrated by Ed Emshwiller, though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.





***What chance can you possibly  
have of whipping an enemy who  
insists on joining your side?***

"Well, that wasn't a very long interview, was it?" asked the professor's wife. She'd discovered the professor looking out of the living room window when she'd come home from shopping just now. "I wasn't counting on having dinner before nine," she said, setting her bundles down on the couch. "I'll get at it right away."

"No hurry about dinner," the professor replied without turning his head. "I didn't expect we'd be through there before eight myself."

He had clasped his hands on his back and was swaying slowly, backward and forward on his feet, staring out at the street. It was a favorite pose of his, and she never had discovered whether it indicated deep thought or just daydreaming. At the moment, she suspected uncomfortably it was very deep thought, indeed. She took off her hat.

"I suppose you could call it an interview," she said uneasily. "I mean

you actually talked with it, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, we talked with it," he nodded. "Some of the others did, anyway."

"Imagine *talking* with something like that! It really *is* from another world, Clive?" She laughed uneasily, watching the back of his head with frightened eyes. "But, of course, you can't violate the security rules, can you? You can't tell me anything about it at all... ."

He shrugged, turning around. "There'll be a newscast at six o'clock. In ten minutes. Wherever there's a radio or television set on Earth, everybody will hear what we found out in that interview. Perhaps not quite everything, but almost everything."

"Oh?" she said in a surprised, small voice. She looked at him in silence for a moment, her eyes growing more frightened. "Why would they do a thing like that?"

"Well," said the professor, "it seemed like the right thing to do. The best thing, at any rate. There may be some panic, of course." He turned back to the window and gazed out on the street, as if something there were holding his attention. He looked thoughtful and abstracted, she decided. But then a better word came to her, and it was "resigned."

"Clive," she said, almost desperately, "what happened?"

He frowned absently at her and walked to the radio. It began to make faint, humming noises as the professor adjusted dials unhurriedly. The humming didn't vary much.

"They've cleared the networks, I imagine," he remarked.

The sentence went on repeating itself in his wife's mind, with no particular significance at first. But then a meaning came into it and grew and swelled swiftly, until she felt her head would burst with it. They've cleared the networks. All over the world this evening, they've cleared the networks. Until the newscast comes on at six o'clock... .

"As to what happened," she heard her husband's voice saying, "that's a little difficult to understand or explain. Even now. It was certainly amazing--" He interrupted himself. "Do you remember Milt Caldwell, dear?"

"Milt Caldwell?" She searched her mind blankly. "No," she said, shaking her head.

"A rather well-known anthropologist," the professor informed her, with an air of faint reproach. "Milt got himself lost in the approximate center of the Australian deserts some two years ago. Only we have been told he didn't get lost. They picked him up--"

"*They?*" she said. "You mean there's more than one?"

"Well, there would be more than one, wouldn't there?" he asked reasonably. "That explains, at any rate, how they learned to speak English. It made it seem a little more reasonable, anyhow," he added, "when it told us that. Seven minutes to six... ."

"What?" she said faintly.

"Seven minutes to six," the professor repeated. "Sit down, dear. I believe I can tell you, in seven minutes, approximately what occurred... "

. . .

The Visitor from Outside sat in its cage, its large gray hands slackly clasping the bars. Its attitudes and motions, the professor had noted in the two minutes since he had entered the room with the other men, approximated those of a rather heavily built ape. Reporters had called it "the Toad from Mars," on the basis of the first descriptions they'd had of it--the flabby shape and loose, warty skin made that a vaguely adequate identification. The round, horny head almost could have been that of a lizard.

With a zoologist's fascination in a completely new genus, the professor catalogued these contradicting physical details in his mind. Yet something somewhat like this might have been evolved on Earth, if Earth had chosen to let the big amphibians of its Carboniferous Period go on evolving.

That this creature used human speech was the only almost-impossible feature.

It had spoken as they came in. "What do you wish to know?" it asked. The horny, toothed jaws moved, and a broad yellow tongue became momentarily visible, forming the words. It was a throaty, deliberate "human" voice.

For a period of several seconds, the human beings seemed to be shocked into silence by it, though they had known the creature had this ability. Hesitantly, then, the questioning began.

The professor remained near the back of the room, watching. For a while, the questions and replies he heard seemed to carry no meaning to him. Abruptly he realized that his thoughts were fogged over with a heavy, cold, physical dread of this alien animal. He told himself that under such circumstances fear was not an entirely irrational emotion, and his understanding of it seemed to lighten its effects a little.

But the scene remained unreal to him, like a badly lit stage on which the creature in its glittering steel cage stood out in sharp focus, while the humans were shadow-shapes stirring restlessly against a darkened background.

"This won't do!" he addressed himself, almost querulously, through the fear. "I'm here to observe, to conclude, to report--I was selected as a man they could trust to think and act rationally!"

He turned his attention deliberately away from the cage and what it contained, and he directed it on the other human beings, to most of whom he had been introduced only a few minutes before. A young, alert-looking Intelligence major, who was in some way in charge of this investigation; a sleepy-eyed general; a very pretty captain acting as stenographer, whom the major had introduced as his fiancée. The handful of other scientists looked for the most part like brisk business executives, while the two Important Personages representing the government looked like elderly professors.

He almost smiled. They were real enough. This was a human world. He returned his attention again to the solitary intruder in it.

"Why shouldn't I object?" the impossible voice was saying with a note of lazy good humor. "You've caged me like--a wild animal! And you haven't even informed me of the nature of the charges against me. Trespassing, perhaps--eh?"

The wide mouth seemed to grin as the Thing turned its head, looking them over one by one with bright black eyes. The grin was meaningless; it was the way the lipless jaws set when the mouth was closed. But it gave expression to the pleased malice the professor sensed in the voice and words.

The voice simply did not go with that squat animal shape.

Fear surged up in him again. He found himself shaking.

If it looks at me now, he realized in sudden panic, I might start to scream!

One of the men nearest the cage was saying something in low, even tones. The captain flipped over a page of her shorthand pad and went on writing, her blonde head tilted to one side. She was a little pale, but intent on her work. He had a moment of bitter envy for their courage and self-control. But they're insensitive, he tried to tell himself; they don't know Nature and the laws of Nature. They can't feel as I do how *wrong* all this is!

Then the black eyes swung around and looked at him.

Instantly, his mind stretched taut with blank, wordless terror. He did not move, but afterward he knew he did not faint only because he would have looked ridiculous before the others, and particularly in the presence of a young woman. He heard the young Intelligence officer speaking sharply, the eyes left him unhurriedly, and it was all over.

"You indicate," the creature's voice was addressing the major, "that you can force me to reveal matters I do not choose to reveal at this time. However, you are mistaken. For one thing, a body of this type does not react to any of your drugs."

"It will react to pain!" the major said, his voice thin and angry.

Amazed by the words, the professor realized for the first time that he was not the only one in whom this being's presence had aroused primitive, irrational fears. The other men had stirred restlessly at the major's threat, but they made no protest.

The Thing remained silent for a moment, looking at the major.

"This body will react to pain," it said then, "only when I choose to let it feel pain. Some of you here know the effectiveness of hypnotic blocks against pain. My methods are not those of hypnosis, but they are considerably more effective. I repeat, then, that for me there is no pain, unless I choose to experience it."

"Do you choose to experience the destruction of your body's tissues?" the major inquired, a little shrilly.

The captain looked up at him quickly from the chair where she sat, but the professor could not see her expression. Nobody else moved.

The Thing, still staring at the major, almost shrugged.

"And do you choose to experience death?" the major cried, his face flushed with excitement.

In a flash of insight, the professor understood why no one was interfering. Each in his own way, they had felt what he was feeling: that here was something so outrageously strange and new that no amount of experience, no rank, could guide a human being in determining how to deal with it. The major was dealing with it—in however awkward a fashion. With no other solution to offer, they were, for the moment, unable or unwilling to stop him.

The Thing then said slowly and flatly, "Death is an experience I shall never have at your hands. That is a warning. I shall respond to no more of your threats. I shall answer no more questions.

"Instead, I shall tell you what will occur now. I shall inform my companions that you are as we judged you to be—foolish, limited, incapable of harming the least of us. Your world and civilization are of very moderate interest. But they are a novelty which many will wish to view for themselves. We shall come here and leave here, as we please. If you attempt to interfere again with any of us, it will be to your own regret."

"Will it?" the major shouted, shaking. "Will it now?"

The professor jerked violently at the quick successive reports of a gun in the young officer's hand. Then there was a struggling knot of figures around the major, and another man's voice was shouting hoarsely, "You fool! You damned hysterical fool!"

The captain had dropped her notebook and clasped her hands to her face. For an instant, the professor heard her crying, "Jack! Jack! Stop—don't—"

But he was looking at the thing that had fallen on its back in the cage, with the top of its skull shot away and a dark-brown liquid staining the cage floor about its shoulders.

What he felt was an irrational satisfaction, a warm glow of pride in the major's action. It was as if he had killed the Thing himself.

For that moment, he was happy.

\* \* \*

Because he stood far back in the room, he saw what happened then before the others did.

One of the Personages and two of the scientists were moving excitedly about the cage, staring down at the Thing. The others had grouped around the chair into which they had forced the major. Under the babble of confused, angry voices, he could sense the undercurrent of almost joyful relief he felt himself.

The captain stood up and began to take off her clothes.

She did it quickly and quietly. It was at this moment, the professor thought, staring at her in renewed terror, that the height of insanity appeared to have been achieved in this room. He wished fervently that he could keep that sense of insanity wrapped around him forevermore, like a protective cloak. It was a terrible thing to be rational! With oddly detached curiosity, he also wondered what would happen in a few seconds when the others discovered what he already knew.

The babbling voices of the group that had overpowered the major went suddenly still. The three men at the cage turned startled faces toward the stillness. The girl straightened up and stood smiling at them.

The major began screaming her name.

There was another brief struggling confusion about the chair in which they were holding him. The screaming grew muffled as if somebody had clapped a hand over his mouth.

"I warned you," the professor heard the girl say clearly, "that there was no death. Not for us."

Somebody shouted something at her, like a despairing question. Rigid with fear, his own blood a swirling roar in his ears, the professor did not understand the words. But he understood her reply.

"It could have been any of you, of course," she nodded. "But I just happened to like *this* body."

After that, there was one more shot.

. . .

The professor turned off the radio. For a time, he continued to gaze out the window.

"Well, they know it now!" he said. "The world knows it now. Whether they believe it or not-- At any rate... ." His voice trailed off. The living room had darkened and he had a notion to switch on the lights, but decided against it. The evening gloom provided an illusion of security.

He looked down at the pale oval of his wife's face, almost featureless in the shadows.

"It won't be too bad," he explained, "if not too many of them come. Of course, we don't know how many there are of them, actually. Billions, perhaps. But if none of our people try to make trouble--the aliens simply don't want any trouble."

He paused a moment. The death of the young Intelligence major had not been mentioned in the broadcast. Considering the issues involved, it was not, of course, a very important event and officially would be recorded as a suicide. In actual fact, the major had succeeded in wresting a gun from one of the men holding him. Another man had shot him promptly without waiting to see what he

intended to do with it.

At all costs now, every rational human being must try to prevent trouble with the Visitors from Outside.

He felt his face twitch suddenly into an uncontrollable grimace of horror.

"But there's no way of being absolutely sure, of course," he heard his voice tell the silently gathering night about him, "that they won't decide they just happen to like *our* kind of bodies."

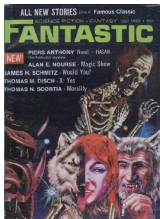
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# "Would You?"

Published in *Fantastic*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (December 1969), though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



Suppose--just suppose--that you were offered the opportunity to play God with your past life... .

»

After dinner Markus Menzies suggested he might show Geoffrey about the chalet. Geoffrey agreed. The place had belonged previously to some Liechtenstein, and Marcus had bought it five years ago. What a man like Menzies could want with an expensive antique in the heart of the Alps, Geoffrey couldn't imagine. It wasn't the proximity of the ski slopes which had drawn Geoffrey into the area for the season. Markus always had looked on sporting activities involving physical exertion or risk as an occupation for lunatics. And he was an old man now. Though, Geoffrey reminded himself, only fifteen years his senior.

And what, for that matter, what had induced Markus to invite him here for dinner tonight? It had been eight years since they last met, considerably longer than that since they'd had any significant dealings with each other. There'd been a time, of course, when Markus Menzies and Geoffrey Bryant had made a great team ... in aircraft, in textiles, in shipping, in one thing and another, legitimate for the most part, occasionally not quite so legitimate. They'd both made their pile in the process; and then they'd split up. Markus went on to become extremely wealthy; Geoffrey remained as wealthy as he wanted to be or saw any use in being. It made sense to start to enjoy what he had rather than continue maneuvering for more. He wasn't married, had no intention of getting married, had no dependents of any kind. The world waited to be savored at leisure.

He'd accepted the telephoned invitation to dinner mainly out of curiosity. Markus wasn't prone to nostalgic sentimentality; he should have something in mind, and it might be interesting to find out what it was. But nothing was said over dinner to give Geoffrey a definite clue. The talk ranged widely but comfortably. Markus had acquired a variety of hobbies; the chalet might be one of them. He seemed completely relaxed, which meant nothing. If he had a purpose, it would show when he intended it to show, not before.

"I had quite a start the other day," he was remarking. "I was coming through the village, and there was a tall slender woman who ... well, for an instant I actually believed I was looking, over a space of not more than twenty feet, at Eileen Howard."

After a moment Geoffrey said soberly, "I've made similar mistakes more than once."

Markus glanced across the table at him. Briefly his face looked worn and tired, more so than his age indicated. "Not at all like seeing a ghost," he said, as if to himself. "A compellingly vivid impression of Eileen as she was then. All life, warmth!" He shook his head. "Immediately afterwards, I was unable to understand what could have given me the idea. There was some general resemblance, of course." His voice trailed off.

Something in a motion or gesture could be enough, Geoffrey thought. The glimpse of a finely drawn profile, the inflection in a laugh. It hadn't happened to him in some time. They'd both wanted Eileen; probably they'd both loved her. And because of that, between them in their maneuverings, they shared in a way the responsibility for her accidental death. They'd never talked about it, rarely mentioned Eileen again. But the other's presence soon became a growing irritation. It was a relief when their informal partnership ended.

It might have been simply that chance incident in the village which caused Markus to extend his invitation, some sudden urge to speak of Eileen. But he did not seem to want to pursue the subject farther. Geoffrey was glad of it.

The talk shifted to impersonal things. It was after the brandy that Markus suggested a tour of the chalet. For a while they moved unhurriedly about the big hall downstairs, along corridors, in and out of rooms. Markus had taken the house with its furnishings and left most of those untouched. Landscapes and portraits shared the walls with formidably antlered and horned heads. Markus kept up a line of talk about the chalet's history and the affairs of previous owners. Geoffrey found himself getting bored.

"Where's the mysterious chair you mentioned?" he asked.

Markus nodded towards the stairway. "Upstairs." He smiled. "I was saving it for the last. Would you like to see it now?"

Geoffrey said he would, hoping that would end the tour. He followed his host up a narrow flight of stairs to the third floor of the chalet. Markus stopped before a door, took out a key. Geoffrey looked at him curiously. "You keep the room locked?"

"Some of the servants know the story," Markus said. "They have a superstitious feeling about the chair. I think they're a little afraid of it."

the room remains locked mainly for their peace of mind." He opened the door, switched on overhead lights. "There it is."

The room was not large and the chair dominated it. It stood on a low dais, evidently constructed for the purpose. A sizable chair of smoothly polished wood, rather heavily built but in lines of flowing grace. The carvings were restrained, barely more than indicated, except for an animal head at the end of each broad armrest. The heads lifted out from the chair, pointing into the room. They were oblong and flattened, somewhat like the heads of lizards or snakes.

Well, it's a chair, Geoffrey thought. He realized Markus was watching him. "Markus," he said, "do you expect me to be impressed?"

Markus smiled. "Why not? You're looking at a mystery. Do you recognize the period?"

Geoffrey shook his head. "Period furniture isn't one of my interests."

"The chair is at least two hundred years old," Markus said. "Records show it was acquired that long ago. They don't show from whom it was acquired. But it belongs to no definable period."

He moved towards the chair, Geoffrey following him. "What would you call that wood?" Markus asked.

Geoffrey shrugged. "Oak, possibly."

Markus stroked a finger along the armrest. "Touch it," he suggested.

Geoffrey laid the palm of his hand on the chair, moved it tentatively back and forth, frowned, and pressed down with his fingers.

"That's very odd!" he said.

"What impression do you get?"

"A smoothness, almost like velvet. Not only that. I had the feeling it was soft, that it was giving a little under my touch. But it obviously is quite solid."

He drew his hand away, looked at Markus with increased interest. "What was that story again? That anyone who sits in this chair can change his past life?"

"That's it. One sits in the chair. One places his hands"--Markus nodded at the armrests--"on those carved heads--"

"--and makes a wish, eh?" Geoffrey concluded.

"No. Not a wish. One is then able, quite literally, to edit the events in his past. Say you made a wrong decision twenty years ago. You can now undo that mistake, and remake the decision. Lost opportunities can be regained, and your life up to the present will have been changed correspondingly. Anything can be changed. Anything. That's the story."

Geoffrey smiled uncomfortably. "You sound almost as if you believed it!"

"Perhaps I do."

Now this was getting eerie. Geoffrey stared at his host. Had Markus gone out of his mind? "You've tried it?" he asked.

"Should I want to change my life? I have my health, my hobbies, my money."

"Isn't there anything you'd like to have done differently?"

Markus said slowly, "I'm not sure there is."

"How did the people who are supposed to have used the chair make out?" Geoffrey asked, smiling to indicate he wasn't taking this seriously.

Markus shook his head. "Whoever has tried it evidently preferred not to put the fact on record. Would you?"

"Probably not." Geoffrey laughed. "Well, it's a good story, Markus. And perhaps I'm a little sorry it isn't true. Because there might be things in my life I would prefer to be otherwise. That wood—it must be wood—is certainly odd! I can't imagine what kind of treatment was given it to produce that effect."

"Put your hand on one of the reptile heads," Markus said.

Geoffrey looked at him, then cupped his palm over the carved head nearest him. "Now what?" he asked.

"Leave it there a moment."

Geoffrey shrugged mentally, let his hand rest on the wood. After some seconds his expression changed. Perhaps a minute later, he removed his hand. "This is very curious!" he remarked.

"What did you experience?" Markus asked.

"Something like a current of energy. It built up gradually, then held at a steady level. Almost electric. But not at all unpleasant. I gather you've felt it."

"Yes, I've felt it."

"While I was sensing this," Geoffrey said. "I found myself beginning to believe that I *could* change the past. If I wanted to."

"If you'd like to experiment," Markus told him, "the chair is yours."

"How does it work?"

"The way it's been described," said Markus, "you will be in contact with your past as long as you are seated in the chair and keep your hands on the carved heads. You'll begin to remember past events in all detail and find yourself a part of them again. And if you wish to change them then, turn them into something other than you recall as having happened, you'll be able to do it. When you're ready to stop the process, simply lift your hands from the heads. That's all there is to it..."

Geoffrey sat in the chair. He gave Markus, standing near the center of the room, watching him, a final probing glance. Then he clasped his hands firmly about the snakelike or lizardlike heads.

For a few seconds there was nothing. Then came the sense of flowing power, faint and far away, but growing stronger as if he were being drawn towards it, until it seemed all about him and streaming through him.

Like a great recording tape unreeling in all his senses, the past burst in.

It was a swift blur of impressions at first. Glimpses of color and motion, the ghostly murmuring of voices, flicks of smell and taste, a sense of shifting physically, a jerking in the muscles. It all rushed past him, or he was rushing, being rushed, through it. There remained some awareness of the room dimly about, of the motionless shadowy shape of Markus Menzies. Emotions began to wash through Geoffrey, a hurrying tide of anxieties, grief, furious anger, high delight, changing from moment to moment...

And then, somewhere in darkness, it all stopped. As if he'd touched a button or switch on a machine, bringing it to a standstill. The awareness arose that he could control this.

At that point he was caught midway between apprehension—because of the strangeness of the experience—and fascinated interest. Something in him kept insisting that his sensations had been simply sensations, without further significance. That the chair, whatever strange machine the chair might be, was stirring up memories and drawing on them to produce such effects, and that there was nothing else to it, no preternatural connection at all with the realities of the past. But there was also the growing sense of power, of almost godlike power, and of being in control of what occurred here.

So all right, he thought, let's try it out. Let's select some occasion when something went wrong, some very minor thing for a start, and see if I can edit out the mistakes I made.

And he found such an occasion.

And then another, and another—

Until presently he discovered he was sitting in the chair again. His hands were still closed on the carved heads, but the feeling of the flow of power was gone. Markus Menzies stood staring at him, his face set and tense.

Geoffrey pushed himself rather stiffly to his feet and stepped down from the dais.

"Well?" Markus said harshly. "What happened?"

Geoffrey shook his head. "Oh, I was back there all right," he said. "At least, that was my impression." He smiled carefully. "This is some kind of trickery, I think, Markus. But very clever trickery."

"It's no trick, you fool! Did you change anything?"

"No, I didn't change anything. Though I admit I was tempted. Oh, yes!

strongly tempted—" To Geoffrey's surprise, his voice shook for an instant. "In particular," he went on, "in that series of events which ended, as you recall, in Eileen's death."

Markus's face was white now. "You were *there*--and you did nothing?"

"I changed nothing," Geoffrey said irritably. "I felt I could do it. I believe now that feeling was part of the deception. But if it wasn't deception, if it would have been possible, then I think I was wise not to make the attempt."

"You wouldn't save Eileen?"

"Markus. Eileen is dead. Quite dead. How could she be made alive again? And assuming she still were alive, had never died, the recent years would not have been at all what they were. That was a consideration. I realized during this that I've been very fortunate. The decisions I made, right and wrong, brought me safely to this point in life and into not unfavorable circumstances. In retrospect I know now that the odds were against that, though day by day, as I lived it, I never was fully conscious of them. Think of the countless opportunities each of us is given to turn unawares into the wrong path, the less satisfactory path, even the fatal path ... no, I don't care to gamble deliberately against those odds, to place what I am and have now at stake again. And if I had acted in any way, that's what I would have done. To force change on the past, even in one minor aspect, might alter all the subsequent past in unforeseeable ways. That very well could be disastrous."

Markus said, with intense bitterness, "You're a coward!"

"Aren't you?" Geoffrey asked.

"Yes. I am," Markus said. "I once sat in that chair as you have done."

"I was sure you had," Geoffrey said. "And I don't blame you entirely for trying to get me to do something for which you didn't have the courage. But to do it was quite out of the question. Perhaps I might have modified the past without affecting the present external world in any noticeable way. Even that would have brought an element of intolerable uncertainty into my personal existence. As things are, I believe I understand the world and its realities well enough. My life has been based on the feeling of understanding it and being able to deal with it. I want to retain the feeling. And I would have lost it if I had attempted to change the past and succeeded. If I knew that was possible, I could never be sure of the reality of anything about me again. The world would have become as insubstantial and meaningless as a madman's dream."

"I don't want that. I couldn't live that way. So I won't put your device to the test. If I haven't proved that it can do what it is supposed to do, I can continue to believe that it's impossible. I prefer to believe it." He added, after a moment, "And so, I think, do you."

Markus shrugged heavily. "Did you have the feeling that this was the one opportunity you would be given--that if you didn't change the past now, you wouldn't have another chance?"

"Yes, I had that feeling," Gregory said. "It was part of the temptation." He looked over at the dais, and his gaze stayed for a moment on the

carved animalic heads lifting silently into the room. "It doesn't matter," he said, "whether it was a valid feeling or not. Because nothing would induce me to sit in that chair again."

He started out of the room. Markus followed and locked the door behind them. As they went down the stairs, Geoffrey said, "I imagine that was your purpose in inviting me here tonight."

"Of course it was," Markus said.

"When did you have the experience?"

"Shortly after I bought this place. Almost five years ago."

"Have you ever tried to repeat it?"

Markus shook his head.

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# "The Pork Chop Tree"

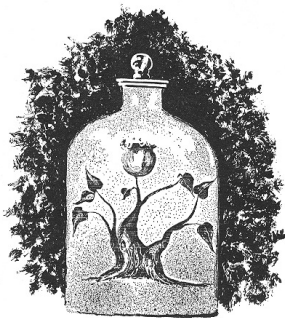
Published in *Analog Science Fiction* → *Science Fact*, Vol. 74, No. 6 (February 1965), though this version is taken from *T'nT: Telzey & Trigger* (2000, where it is made into the Prologue to "Compulsion"), and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



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In research laboratory 3230 of the Planetary Quarantine Station two thousand miles out from the world of Maccadon, Professor Mantelish of the University League stood admiringly before a quarantine object. It had been unloaded from his specimen boat some hours ago and aroused from the state of suspended animation in which he had transported it back to the Hub from its distant native world.





It was a plant-form and a beautiful one, somewhere between a tree and a massive vine in appearance, its thick, gray-sheened trunk curving and twisting up to a point about twenty-five feet above the conditioning container in which it was rooted. Great heart-shaped leaves of a deep warm green sprang from it here and there; and near the top was a single huge white flower cup. A fresh and pleasant fragrance filled the laboratory.

Mantelish, an immense old man, scratched his scalp reflectively through his thick white hair, his gaze shifting from this point to that about the plant. Then his attention centered on a branch immediately above him where something had begun to move. A heavy, tightly coiled tendril swung slowly out from the branch, unwinding with a snaky motion until it lay flat in the air. Simultaneously, three new leaves, of a lighter green and smaller than the mature ones about them, unfolded along the tendril's length and spread away from it.

"So it started right in growing again as soon as you woke it up!" a voice said behind Mantelish.

He looked around. A slim red-headed girl in shorts had entered the laboratory and was coming over to him.

"Yes, it did, Trigger," he said. "As I've suspected, it will speed up or slow down its growth and reproduction processes in accordance with the area it finds available to it."

"Until it's covered a planet." Trigger studied the new tendril a moment. "Pretty ambitious for a tree, isn't it?"

Mantelish shrugged. "It's a prolific and highly adaptable life form. Do you happen to know where Commissioner Tate is at present?"

"Dissecting one of the specimens from the other boat," said Trigger.

I stopped by there just now, and he told me not to come in ... what he was doing was pretty goooey and I wouldn't want to see it. He said he'd be along in a few minutes. There was something he wanted to find out about the thing. Have you fed baby those slow-down hormones you were talking about?"

"Yes. They're having the expected effect. The new branch you saw it put out is the only indication of growth it's given during the past twelve minutes."

"So that will work, eh?"

"Under laboratory conditions we certainly can control its growth," Mantelish said. "But let's not be too hasty. Much more definite safeguards will be required before there can be any question of releasing the tree to the public. There's the matter of curbing its various forms of propagation, particularly the periodic release of self-propelled airborne seeds. Under present circumstances, our beautiful tree could become a very definite nuisance on any Hub world to which it was introduced."

"Well, those are problems which simply will have to be solved!" Trigger said. "Because everyone who has a garden is going to want to have one of them. You hear that, pet?" She stepped out on the conditioning container, ran her palms lightly along the tree's trunk. "You're not only about the most *edible* thing around," she told it, "and you're not only beautiful--you also have a wonderful personality. You're going to become a great big fad everywhere in the Federation!"

Mantelish laughed. "Trigger, you're crooning to it."

"Well, I feel like crooning to it," she said. "I feel very affectionate toward it. Did I tell you that on the trip back, when it was in stasis and I couldn't go near it, I'd dream about the trees every night?"

"No."

"I did. There I'd be climbing around in that wonderful forest again, or stretching out for a nap on one of the leaves--and they curl up around you so nicely when you lie down on them! You know, I think I'll climb up baby right now... ."

"Why not?" said Mantelish. "If it weren't for my weight, I might try it myself."

"If you ate just what you got from the tree," Trigger told him, "you'd trim down fast." She caught a branch above her, swung herself over to a level section of the main trunk, and walked along it till it curved upward. Then she clapped her hands to the trunk and went up quickly all fours style like a cat to the highest point where the tree turned level again. She stood up there, reached for the white flower cup overhead and drew it toward her.

"When did the bud open?" she asked.

"Almost immediately after I brought it out of stasis," Mantelish said, looking up. "Is it in seed?"

Trigger peered into the cup.

Full of seeds! But they're still soft and unfeathered. We're not going to let you puff those away on the wind, baby. You have to become civilized now. Ah!" She reached back of the flower, plucked something from its stem.

"What have you found?" asked Mantelish.

"Some of the black cherry things," said Trigger. "I do believe baby remembered how much I like them and grew them especially for me." She sat down on the trunk, legs dangling, popped one of the black cherry things into her mouth. "Did you get the reports on the samples you sent back?"

"Yes, they were waiting for me here," Mantelish said.

"Well?"

He shrugged. "They confirm officially what we already know. Almost every part of the trees has a high nutritional value for the human organism."

"Yes, of course. But what do they say about the flavors?"

"The reports don't mention flavors, Trigger. They weren't checking on that."

"Well, they should have been checking on it," said Trigger. "The flavors certainly are important. So is the variety—something new being put out every few days, so that you could get your meals from one tree all your life and never grow tired of the diet! Along with hammock leaves, and warm cubbyholes in the trunks to snuggle up in when it rains too hard... . You know what the very special thing is, though? It's the feeling that you're so welcome to everything—that the trees like you and want you to be around!"

Mantelish cleared his throat. "I had that impression occasionally. It's quite curious. Others also reported it."

"Of course, they reported it. It's a very definite thing. I had the feeling strongly all the time we were there." Trigger patted the trunk beside her. "And I'm getting it—very strongly—from baby right now. It's *glad* I'm sitting up here with it again!"

Mantelish shook his head slowly.

"It would be difficult to prove," he said, with some uneasiness in his tone, "that your imagination isn't simply running away with you there... ."

"Well, I don't think it's my imagination," Trigger told him. "And you know, it shouldn't really be too surprising. Because there the trees are—and everyone agrees they're a highly evolved life-form. But they're the only highly evolved life-form on their world. All the other creatures we saw around looked as dull as anything alive can get."

Mantelish frowned. "I didn't find them at all dull," he remarked. "It was a fauna of well-adapted parasites. A successful parasite, of course, may appear oversimplified to the untrained eye. But with the trees' forests almost covering that world, there would be little reason for other organisms to develop qualities that might have made them more intriguing to you. After all, the trees supply them with everything

they require."

"Yes, and the trees evidently don't mind feeding the rest of the planet, or they wouldn't be so edible," Trigger agreed. "Just the same, those parasites must become pretty boring company. I think the trees would like to have more interesting guests around for a change--that's why they try to let us know we're welcome."

"Well, those are fancies, Trigger," Mantelish said deprecatingly.

"You think so? I don't. And I think we should accept their invitation. I think the Federation should declare that whole world a vacation land! They could put big fast ships on the run and bring in people by the tens of thousands for a month or so ... families with children, anyone who wants a change, especially people who feel run-down or tensed up. It would be wonderful for everybody! Everything would be free--and the trees would love it--"

Trigger broke off, looked over at the entrance, smiled. "Hi, Commissioner!" she said. "We were discussing--anyway, I was--what could be done with the tree world."

"That's a rather good question," said Commissioner Tate.

Trigger got to her feet, and half walked, half slid, back down along the tree's thick serpent trunk to the ground as Commissioner Tate came across the laboratory toward them. He'd been in charge of the Federation expedition which discovered and investigated the planet of the trees, and had returned to the Hub with Mantelish and Trigger in another specimen boat crammed with assorted organisms for biological study.

"Got several bits of news for you two," he said.

"About what?" Mantelish asked.

The Commissioner glanced up at the tree. "In a way, about our little friend here. A transmitter call from Expedition Headquarters reached my boat while we were coming in on Maccadon around six hours ago. One thing they reported was that three members of the paleontological team we left digging around down there have walked off the job."

"Walked off the job?" Trigger repeated.

"Yes," said the Commissioner. "This was a few days ago. They left a note which said in effect not to bother them. They'd found the world of their dreams, and they weren't coming back."

Trigger said after a moment, "Well, one can hardly blame them for that."

"No. I wouldn't blame them. However, I've notified Patrol Command. They've got a few ships cruising about the area they can get to the planet in under a week, with instructions to round up our three strays and bring them back to the Hub. They won't have gone far, of course." He smiled briefly. "All they want is to prow around among the trees and be happy. They'll be found somewhere within a mile of the camp."

"I suppose so," Trigger said hesitantly. She paused, frowning. "But

"We really have any right, legal or otherwise, to interfere with them if that's their decision? It's not an off-limits world. Why shouldn't they just be considered the first settlers there? After all, the trees would give human beings everything they need to live as well as they could live anywhere else."

"So they would," said the Commissioner. "Well, there's the second part of the report I had. The paleontological team hadn't been looking for anything of the sort, of course, but they've come across a couple of ruins and begun to uncover them."

"Ruins?" said Mantelish, surprised.

"Yes," the Commissioner said. "Those three wouldn't be the first human settlers on that world, Trigger. The ruins are about eight hundred years old, and there's enough to show quite definitely that they were once occupied by human beings."

Trigger looked startled. "Human beings--where would they have come from?"

"Presumably it was one of the groups that were pushing out from the Old Territory during the period the Hub was being settled. Interstellar drives and transmitters weren't too efficient at the time. I got in contact with the Charting Bureau and had them run a check on an area around the trees' world representing a current week's cruising range. An early colonial group which wanted to settle a number of worlds without losing contact among themselves shouldn't have scattered farther than that. The Bureau ran the check and called me back. They had the information I wanted. Charting records show that two other terratype planets within the area I inquired about are also covered with a blanket of apparently homogenous forest vegetation."

Trigger asked, "You mean those early colonists transplanted the trees to those two other worlds?"

"Evidently they did."

Mantelish nodded. "A reasonable supposition. If no restrictions were placed on it, the tree should cover the land areas of a terratype world to which it was introduced rather rapidly."

"Well, I can understand that," said Trigger. "But why the ruins?" There was uneasiness in her voice. "Even eight hundred years ago, they must have had methods enough to keep the trees out of places they didn't want them to be."

"No doubt they had the methods," the Commissioner agreed.

Trigger looked at him, her face troubled. "You're thinking of the three men who walked off the job back there?"

"What else? They'd never be settlers in the ordinary sense, Trigger. They simply turned their backs on civilization. The colonists did the same thing. They deserted their settlements, went to live among the trees."

"But not all of them!" Trigger protested. "Some people might want to spend their lives like that, and if that's what they like, why not? But a whole group of colonists doesn't simply leave everything they've built up and go away."

"Not under normal circumstances," the Commissioner agreed. "But the circumstances were far from normal. You've talked about a feeling you have that the trees want us around. The evidence we've been getting indicates you're right ... they do want us around, and they do something about it. It hadn't occurred to me before to look for the symptoms, but I'd say now that in the short period we were there, all of us who were in regular contact with the trees became somewhat addicted to them."

"Addicted?" Trigger looked up at the tree, back at the Commissioner, expression startled, then reflective.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I've become addicted to them, anyway! Not too seriously. It's mainly liking to be near them, feeling that they like you to be there ... that they're beautiful friendly things that want to take care of you..."

He nodded. "I know. And in the case of our wandering paleontologists, those feelings simply become strong enough to override their ordinary good sense. The colonists, who were constantly surrounded by the trees, had no chance of escaping the effect indefinitely. We have to assume they all succumbed to it."

Trigger said after a moment, "But what happened to them afterwards? You'd think with the trees to look after them, their descendants should still have been there when we arrived."

"I wondered about that, too," said the Commissioner. "And there was another matter. If the tree is covering three terratype worlds in that section of space, the odds are two to one that the world on which we found it is one of those to which it was carried by the human colonists."

Mantelish shook his head emphatically.

"No!" he said. "It's quite obvious that the tree did originate on that world. You overlook the fact that the fauna there is so completely adapted to it that--" He paused, eyes narrowing abruptly. He scowled absently at the Commissioner for a moment. "Unless--" he began.

The Commissioner nodded. "*Unless!* That was my thought. In so short a time—a mere eight hundred years—the wide assortment of creatures we found there couldn't possibly have changed from an independent existence to one in which they had become parasites on the trees, physically modified to the extent that they could no longer have survived away from their hosts ... unless the life-form which likes to have other life-forms around has methods which go beyond simple addiction to keep guests permanently with it.

"I took three of the specimens in my boat apart on a hunch. The third of them was the thing which looks a good deal like a limp, gangly hundred-pound frog. It's practically blind, and it has about the same amount of brains as a frog. Of course, it doesn't need much intelligence to crawl from leaf to leaf and along the tree's branches. But most of its internal arrangements are still essentially human."

There was silence for some seconds. Then Trigger said faintly, "But that's horrible!"

The Commissioner shrugged. "From our point of view, it may appear

rather horrible. From that of the creature, if it had a point of view, it probably would seem to be leading a very comfortable and satisfactory life. The trees are generous and dependable hosts."

Trigger's gaze shifted to the tree, followed the flow of the curving trunk up to the great white flower cup nodding benignly above them. "It's not their fault," she said suddenly. "They don't understand what they're doing. Will they all have to be killed?"

The Commissioner looked at her. "I find myself hoping some other solution will be found, Trigger. Possibly one will be. For the present, those worlds will be quarantined; but they can't be kept quarantined indefinitely. The danger is too great--the trees literally could destroy any civilization into which they were introduced. So we don't know what the outcome of this will be. But the situation will be studied carefully before any definite decision is made."

"And whoever studies the trees," remarked Mantelish, "will become addicted to them."

"No doubt. But now that we're aware of the factor, we should be safe from undue effects."

The three of them stood silently watching the tree. And the tree stood there and loved them.

The Commissioner drew a long, sighing breath.

"Reasonably safe, that is," he concluded.

# "Where the Time Went"

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No wonder Belk had troubles.  
His time particles were not synchronal!

[»](#)

This began in the office of John D. Carew, of the John D. Carew Literary Agency, New York City. Present in the room were John D. Carew and George Belk, one of his authors.

"George," Carew was saying, "please don't misunderstand me. When--rather long ago--I saw the first samples of your work, I was delighted. I told myself you might grow in time to be one of our most valuable properties. I still believe you retain that potential. But having represented you for over eight years, I begin to feel concerned. Your overall output remains regrettably slight."

George Belk sighed. "I know it."

"I can place almost anything you write," Carew went on, "for relatively good money. But over the years checks have been few and far between. You must be feeling the financial pinch from time to time."

"I get by," George said, looking despondent. "But barely."

Carew clucked in a sympathetic way. "If you'd like to confide in me, George--what seems to be your problem?"

George sighed again. "I wish I could define the problem! I can't. The effect is simply that I don't seem to have time to get more writing done."



Carew's eyebrows lifted for a moment "You are engaged in other work? Perhaps in intensive social activities?"

"No! Neither. I write full time. Of course I have chores to take care of around the house. I go shopping. And I try to reserve half an hour a day for physical exercise."

Carew nodded. "The last is commendable! One should keep fit. But is that all you do? Besides writing? "

"Yes," George said. "That's all."

"Then you must, in fact, be putting in a great deal of worktime during an average day... ."

"No, I don't," George said. "Let me try to explain it to you--though, as I said, I can't explain it myself. You may not believe this, but I'm a methodical and orderly man. I keep files and records. So I can't help noticing that I manage to waste an incredible amount of time."

"In what way?"

George scowled. "That's what I'd like to know! Take my half-hour of exercise in the morning. Nine to nine-thirty is the period I set aside for it. I shave at eight, right after breakfast. Then I drag some mats out into the living room and pull back the furniture. By then it's nine o'clock."

Carew looked very thoughtful., "Shaving and dragging out some mats and pulling back a few pieces of furniture consumes a full hour?"

"It doesn't seem reasonable, does it?" George said. "Well, that's part of what I mean. A small part... . So then it's nine o'clock and I exercise. I time that--thirty minutes exactly."

"But before I've got dressed again and straightened out the living room and am ready to go shopping, it's usually close to eleven."

Carew grunted and stroked his chin. "When do you actually get to work?"

George looked embarrassed. "Well, around one-fifteen."

"You shop for two hours?"

"Yes, somehow it comes to that. I have to go to several stores. No one store ever seems to carry everything you want."

"I see. Then you work through the afternoon?"

"In principle. I may put in a short break now and then."

"Doing what?" Carew asked.

"Oh, I might have a snack and then of course I have to wash the dishes again. Or I'll tidy up a room that's beginning to look too messy. That kind of thing."

"Umm. And in the evening?"

"Ordinarily I'm working. I take in an occasional tv show."

Carew leaned back in his chair. "And what is your average daily output under those circumstances?"

George hung his head. "Roughly--five hundred words."

Carew just blinked at him in silence.

. . .

"That's the incredible part of it!" George said explosively. "Because I've timed myself on occasion. When I have, I've found I can turn out a page of perfectly usable material in around twenty minutes." He leaned forward, slammed his fist on the desk. "I tell you, sometimes I think this is going to drive me crazy! *Where does the rest of my time go?*"

"I'm not sure," said Carew, pulling open a desk drawer. "But it's possible that there is a solution to your problem. Yes, quite possible!"

"What kind of solution?" George asked hopefully.

Carew fished about in the drawer, took out a business card and slid it across the desk to George. "When you get home," he said, "call this number and get yourself an appointment. I'll have talked with their office meanwhile."

George read the card. The name on it was William W. Gordon, m.d.

"Now wait a minute!" he said suspiciously. "This Dr. Gordon doesn't happen to be a psychiatrist, does he?"

"No," said Carew. "Dr. Gordon is not a psychiatrist. He has medical and psychological degrees, but he isn't in general practice. He does research work."

"And just how is he supposed to research me?" George asked in a somewhat belligerent tone.

"He isn't going to research you George. He's going to research your problem."

"Well, I don't know," George muttered. He stared uneasily at the card, turning it around in his fingers.

"George," said Carew, "you exhibit the not uncommon fear of your ilk that if a headshrinker ever got his hooks on you, you'd be in for a fast trip to the funny farm. Let me assure you that you run no risk of that in doing as I suggest. Let me assure you further that I know of several cases in which a problem quite similar to yours was solved by Dr. Gordon to the applicants' great satisfaction."

"Could you give me a few names?" George said warily.

"I could, but I don't intend to," Carew told him.

. . .

Dr. Gordon was a big warm fuzzy man who seemed reluctant to voice even the most general sort of opinion about George's problem. "First, Mr. Belk," he said, "we must establish precisely what the nature of the trouble is. Only then can we begin to think in terms of corrective procedures."

George had to be satisfied with that. He sat rigid in a chair while Dr. Gordon fitted a mesh of metal bands about his skull and tightened them down gently with large stubby fingers.

"What's that for?" George asked

"It should give me some information about this and that going on inside your head."

George cleared his throat. "Carew told me you weren't a psychiatrist."

"I'm not," Dr. Gordon said, "though I started out in that direction. Think of me as an electronics specialist and don't worry about your mittful of neuroses and compulsions. I couldn't care less about them. Now, let's see how well you can let yourself relax for the next five minutes.

The five minutes passed eventually, and George was told he could stop relaxing. He twisted around in the chair and saw Dr. Gordon place some instruments into a drawer in his desk. He was frowning pensively.

"What did you find out, Doctor?" George asked.

Dr. Gordon looked up and stopped frowning. "Oh, about what I expected." He came over and began to remove the metal mesh from around George's head.

"Is it ... serious?" asked George.

"Well, definitely it's something we must follow up. Now, Mr. Belk, I need your cooperation for the next step. It will hardly inconvenience you at all."

Dr. Gordon then turned to a wall closet and took from it a device which looked like one of the more expensive kinds of camera except that it had no lens and nothing visibly on it which would be twisted or pressed. "We'll put this in a case," Dr. Gordon said, placing the instrument in a case as he spoke, "and you'll set it up in your house for the next two days. You say you're not married. Do you have many visitors?"

"Very few nowadays," said George.

"You live alone?"

"Yes. Except for some cats."

"Cats don't count," said Dr. Gordon. "Very well. Set up this instrument--you can leave it in the case--somewhere near the center of your house. This is Tuesday. Between now and ten a.m. Friday, I'd like you to note down the occasions when somebody besides yourself is in the house or even comes to the door. The mailman, as an example. If you happen to forget, it won't matter too much. But try

remember. Note the time anybody arrives and the length of time he stays around. I'll see you again Friday at ten. Bring the instrument back with you."

Hesitantly George took the instrument case. "This is all rather mystifying!" he remarked uncomfortably.

"I'm sure it must seem that way to you," said Dr. Gordon. "But remember, Mr. Belk, that we live in a rapidly evolving scientific age!" He gave George a brief smile and a reassuring clap on the shoulder. "Put your trust in advanced electronics!"

. . .

During the next two days George forgot half the time that he had Dr. Gordon's device in the house. When he first got home with it, he'd taken it out of the case and looked it over carefully. That told him nothing. There were no settings, no concealed switches in it. He put it back in the case on a small table which stood approximately in the center of the house. He called John Carew, told him what Dr. Gordon had said and described the mysterious instrument. "Is that his usual procedure?"

Carew said he had no idea what Dr. Gordon's usual procedure was. However they could assume he knew what he was doing, and George should go along with instructions.

That part was easy. Only the mailman came to the house on Wednesday and Thursday, and George dutifully noted the time of day. Otherwise he went about his normal activities, still wondering now and then at the way time seemed to be slipping through his grasp. In spite of Carew's assurances, he found himself unable to develop much faith in the effectiveness of Dr. Gordon's approach.

At quarter to eleven on Friday morning his telephone rang. He picked up the receiver,

"Hello, Mr. Belk," Dr. Gordon's voice said. "It appears we've forgotten our appointment, eh?"

Abashed, George admitted that he had indeed forgotten it. "And I don't know how it happened," he said. "I definitely planned to be at your office by ten o'clock. It seems to me I was looking at my watch just a moment ago, and it was then barely past nine."

"I'm not surprised," Dr. Gordon said cryptically. "I'll see you as soon as you can make it here. Bring along the drainometer."

"The what?" asked George.

"The gadget," said Dr. Gordon, and hung up.

On reflection George decided that knowing the device was called a drainometer didn't really tell him much. He took it from its place on the table and set off, feeling unhappy and badly confused. At the office Dr. Gordon ushered him into a side room, provided him with some magazines to leaf around in, and disappeared with the drainometer. Some fifteen minutes later he came back into the room, closed the door, and stood staring at George.

"This is as bad a case as I've come across," he observed, shaking his head. "Worse even than I'd suspected."

"As bad a case of what?" George asked, alarmed.

"Of time drainage!" Dr. Gordon pulled a chair out from behind a table and sat down. "I'll explain the situation to you as well as I can, Mr. Belk, and I believe you'll see why it was necessary for me to remain silent until now."

\* \* \*

He steepled his fingers. "I won't attempt to go into the math of this," he said. "For one reason, because I suspect that scientific math is not your forte."

"No, it isn't," George agreed.

"Then let me tell you in a more general way about time. There are two distinct kinds of time. There is time—time in capitals, so to speak—which is the time through which the world about all of us progresses. And then there is subjective, or individual, lower case time."

George nodded interestedly. "Einstein's theories have to do with that, don't they?"

"Not really. The science of time units is a different development. Picture to yourself that everybody generates and has available for his use a personal supply of time units or particles. Say, roughly, that for every fifty years of real time, or time, everybody generates and uses up fifty million time particles.

"When this process is operating normally, the individual is synchronal in time. He feeds out his time particles in a steady uniform stream which keeps him comfortably abreast of the passage of time in the world. However, problems may arise. You, for example, Mr. Belk, do not have as solid a contact with the flow of your time particles as you might have—we can assume that something in you withdraws to some extent from the outside world and time. As a result you're a natural time particle waster. At present there isn't much we can do about that condition. On the other hand, it's hardly a serious matter. I'd estimate that you normally lose about one time particle in twenty—not a significant percentage."

"I'm not sure I'm following all this," George admitted.

"It's not necessary for you to grasp it all," Dr. Gordon assured him. "I simply want you to have the general picture. Now look at another aspect of the matter. People, as you know, have widely varying feelings about the value of time. Some never get enough of it. They have many things to do and many more things they'd like to do and simply can't get around to doing. If they could squeeze forty-eight full hours into a single workday, they'd be delighted.

"And then there are people who have, as we say, time on their hands. Often very heavily on their hands. It is a commodity for which they can find no real use. If it were possible, they would be glad to be relieved of a large part of it.

"And nowadays it is possible. That's the point here. There are methods whereby a portion of the flow of one individual's time particles can be diverted from him and integrated into the flow of another person's time particles. The second person now has subjectively more time available to him than he had before, and the first person has subjectively less. It is an insidious process: the loser in this transaction has no way of grasping what has happened. If he is a man who places no value on time and has time to spare in that sense, he may not even notice that anything has happened. He may feel quite comfortable--and less bored--within the time particle flow left at his disposal.

"But when the victim is a busy man, a man who needs his time, it is a different matter. Again, of course, he doesn't understand the situation. He simply is aware that it seems to take him forever to get anything done. He feels that the minutes and hours are slipping through his fingers, as in fact they are."

• • •

George stared at the doctor in shocked dismay. "That's what's been happening to me?" he asked.

"That's what's been happening to you, Mr. Belk."

"But," George cried, outraged, "this has been going on for years!"

"Evidently."

"What can I do to stop it? You said--"

"I indicated that your problem could be solved, Mr. Belk," said, Dr. Gordon. "And indeed it will be. You see, this situation is so fraught with unethical possibilities that an organization exists which is dedicated to policing the transfer of subjective time among individuals. Such transactions may be quite legitimate. As I explained, a good many people have more time than they know what to do with, they have surplus time which is a nuisance to them. People who need additional time are allowed to draw it from such individuals, providing suitable compensation is made. Since our organization operates with as much secrecy as possible, the donor frequently doesn't know there has been a transaction. But always he must be compensated. An unexpected stroke of good fortune comes his way; he may find a better job, more suitable to his unenergetic nature, suddenly open to him, and so forth. Both parties have benefitted."

"But why the secrecy?" George asked. "If everybody knew--"

"If everybody were aware of this, Mr. Belk, the situation might get completely out of hand. As I said, the process of extracting time particles from somebody else is very simple, once it is understood. We want no more people to know about it than we can help."

"I see." George hesitated. "Then you--this organization--will keep whoever has been stealing my time from doing it again?"

. . .

Dr. Gordon smiled. "We can do better than that. Much better. The drainometer recordings indicate that at various periods during the past two days as much as nine out of ten of your time particles have been surreptitiously diverted. This is a blatant crime. The fact that you are, as I previously indicated, inherently somewhat careless with your time has made you an easy victim. But now compensation must be made by those who took advantage of this. When you leave here, you will carry another instrument with you. The next attempt to tap the flow of your time particles will give us a direct line to the perpetrator. In all likelihood, we shall find then that you have been preyed upon not by one individual but by a criminal gang."

"A gang?" George repeated.

"Exactly. As I pointed out, Mr. Belk, time is a commodity. It has value. For some it has great value. Among such people there always will be a number who do not care whether the commodity they want can be obtained legally or ethically, provided only they get it. And there always will be criminal elements willing to supply the commodity for a price. We're constantly on the lookout for indications of such a situation."

"And you can make them compensate for what they've done?"

"Yes, we can," said Dr. Gordon. "The organization has very effective means of dealing with such criminals and those who benefit unethically by their crimes. We shall establish exactly how much time was diverted from you and by whom during the past years, and to the last particle this time will be drained from the guilty parties involved and restored. Not in a lump sum, so to speak. But you will have established a time credit with the organization, on which you can draw as your requirements or wishes dictate. In other words, if you should like to operate for a while on the basis of a fully usable forty-eight-hour working day, or even a hundred-hour day, you will be able to do it."

George was silent a moment. "I hardly know how to thank the organization—and you, sir!" he said then. "There must be some way I can repay you."

Dr. Gordon cleared his throat. "Well, as a matter of fact, it is customary to charge a fee. The fee goes not to me but to the organization. As I say, time is a commodity. We all can use it. Would a fee of say ten per cent of the time you will regain seem fair to you?"

"Eminently fair!" George declared.

. . .

He called John Carew next day to tell him of the outcome of the matter.

"Exactly as I thought!" Carew said with evident satisfaction.

"So you knew all about this time drain stuff, eh?" said George.

"I should," Carew's voice told him. "Quite a long while ago I found myself in a pickle not unlike yours. Somebody steered me to the organization, and they adjusted the matter very satisfactorily. In fact, I'll still put in an occasional fifty hours day, though I found, as I believe you will, that a fully available ordinary workday is quite enough in the long run."

"I expect you're right," George agreed. "For a few months though I intend to really live it up on my time account!"

"Fine," said John Carew. "In that case, I'll look forward to getting a new novel from you within ... oh, let's say the next two weeks."

And he got it.

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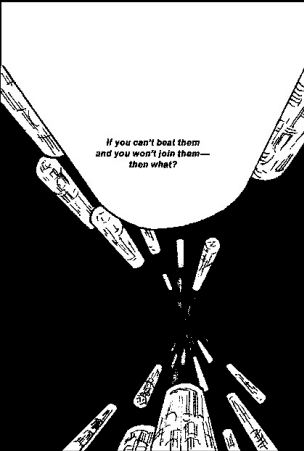


# "One Step Ahead"

Published in *If*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (#171, March/April 1974), though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



Even the mighty, protean warriors of Scand knew they could not stand before the programmed onslaught of the Terrestrial League. They didn't give up, though...



»

## Programmed Corps Leaving Ridzin!

So the newscast machines roared that morning. Many added grimly: Skander War Imminent!

To well-informed citizens of Ridzin it came as no surprise. For fifteen years, the Programmed Corps, the mightiest war-machine ever known, had been developing on their world, lending Ridzin a significance unique in the Terrestrial League. Second-rate in most respects, Ridzin had been a logical base for the formation of the Corps. No one doubted that the League Central Government on Great Xal would have preferred the Corps to be assembled under its immediate supervision. But the jealousy of other powerful League worlds made it impossible—the Corps simply would not have come into being as a joint effort of the League if Great Xal had insisted on the point. On the other hand, the central government wouldn't have permitted its establishment on worlds like Hannaret or Lorcia, for example, worlds not too inferior to Great Xal in military strength and perennially on the verge of open rebellion. The Programmed Corps—its awesome manpower and appalling technical equipment drawn from all fourteen League worlds—must bring about, it was agreed by those in the know, in one direction or another a decisive shift in the balance of power in the League.

As it would also bring about a decisive shift in the balance of power between the Terrestrial League and that despised, remote, alien race called the Skanders. That, as all League citizens understood--having been told it regularly during the past fifteen years--was the basic and vital reason for the Programmed Corps' existence. And because its personnel were conditioned to absolute unquestioning obedience to whomever knew the commands by which to direct them, the Corps could be brought into being only on a world like Ridzin, a world which by no stretch of the imagination could be regarded as a menace to anyone else.

And now the Programmed Corps--completed only after fifteen years of sustained effort, armed, trained, single-minded, irresistible--was shipping out!

. . .

"The fellow," visiting Inspector General Mark Treffry of Great Xal remarked in a tone of absorbed interest, as he peered through a window into the compound several stories below, "is magnificent!"

Dexter Monte, Treffry's Technical Advisor, standing a prudent dozen steps farther back in the room, cleared his throat.

"You really," the Inspector General went on, "should come over here and watch him! What incredible reaction speed!"

"I prefer," Dexter Monte said firmly, "not to expose myself at a window while a Programmed assassin is in the area. If I might suggest--"

Treffry chuckled.

"Don't you trust your own precautions?" he inquired. "The shields, the fields, the what-not? They've functioned perfectly so far."

"So far!" Monte repeated meaningfully.

Treffry grunted.

"Thinking of poor Ulbrand, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Ah, well," said Treffry. "Ulbrand was no doubt a rather better than average Technical Advisor. But let's face it, Monte ... he simply was not in your class! I'm not surprised they got him--whoever it is doesn't want us on Ridzin." He paused, added smugly, "And we have a pretty fair idea of who that is, don't we?"

"Yes," Monte said.

"Now as for you," Treffry went on, "I have complete confidence in your devices. That fellow down there is in a trap. But he's certainly handling himself well while we close it! On the average how many do we lose in these attacks?"

"Seventeen-point-two men."

"Well, our present would-be assassin seems to have accounted for at least two dozen by now. And--good heavens!" Treffry went silent a moment, staring down through the window.

"What's going on?" Dexter Monte inquired in an uneasy tone.

"I'm sure I don't know!" Treffry told him. "There were some odd glitters of extremely bright light. Almost like the scintillation of a diamond as you turn it."

"Ah!" Monte said. "The assassin was near it?"

"He *was* near it. He's *nowhere* now. What was it?"

Joining Treffry at the window, Monte said in great relief, "An adaptation of the Welban Vortex. I wasn't sure it would work on a Programmed mind."

"It worked," Treffry assured him. He gave the Advisor a sidelong glance full of admiration. "This is the sixteenth or seventeenth such attack we've undergone, isn't it?"

"The twenty-first," Monte said.

"And always by Programmed Soldiery. They're unbelievable! I'll trust your traps while only one of them is involved. But when the entire Programmed Corps goes into action--" The Inspector General shook his head.

"Yes," Dexter Monte said slowly. "A fearful thought."

"Clearly, somebody else--somebody not at all authorized--knows at least a few of the key commands to their minds," Treffry said. "Well, we'll be rid of these problems soon enough. When is the first carrier scheduled to lift?"

Dexter Monte glanced at his watch. "In sixteen hours, thirty-two minutes and ten seconds."

He looked at Treffry, added, "If you want to hear Governor Vinocur's official announcement of the Programmed Corps' departure from the Planet of Ridzin, he's about to go on the air."

"By all means," said Treffry. "I think I'll really enjoy hearing our good and loyal friend Vinocur explain the situation to the public."

Planetary Governor Frank Vinocur was an old-time politician; while his speech, to which most of the adult population of Ridzin was tuned that morning, was a review of facts with which his listeners had been familiar for over a dozen years, he made them sound like news. There were friction points between the Terrestrial League and the alien Skanders. Though widely separated in space, they had overlapping spheres of influence--overlapping only slightly so far; but the situation was bound to become more serious as time went on. Unlike other spacefaring aliens men had encountered, the Skanders did not prudently withdraw when confronted by the mighty race of Terra--had, in fact, been known on occasion to attack first. They were savage and treacherous enemies, and showed, in addition, repulsively amebic physical characteristics.

Space, Governor Vinocur declared, was not large enough for the

terrestrial League and such as the Skanders! An eventual showdown with the creatures was inevitable ... and, as all knew, it was for this showdown that the Programmed Corps had been created. Ridzin could proudly say in this hour of parting that it had earned its place in history as the home of the Corps. By the wise planning of the Central Government on Great Xal, the time to strike at the Skander vermin--strike first, strike hard!--had arrived. The Programmed Corps was prepared ... and victory was certain!

The speech went over well--since Ridzin clearly would be remote from the battle zones. Throughout the day patriotic anti-Skander fervors grew in the population, reaching a high pitch when Governor Vinocur's press attaches let it become known that at the official leave-taking banquet that evening the Governor would be publicly appointed a Programmed Corps General by the Inspector General from Great Xal, Mark Treffry, who had been on Ridzin for the past year to arrange for the Corps' transfer. And when the last of the automatic transspace carriers lifted from the planet during the night hours, General Frank Vinocur would leave with it in the company of the Inspector General, to represent Ridzin and its people at the front in this stirring period of history.

That afternoon cheering crowds lined the routes along which the Programmed Corps convoys rolled toward the planet's three Transspace Stations. They surrounded the stations themselves where giant carriers, all bearing the insignia of Great Xal, lay in dense rows like vast steel sausages. Into them marched the Programmed Corps. Eighteen thousand men with full equipment were assigned to each carrier; the men would lie in rigid, frozen sleep during the long spaceflight to Great Xal. One by one, the carriers were loaded and closed their locks... .

Some of Ridzin's citizens, noting that only the central government appeared to be involved in the operation, speculated that they might be witnessing a dramatic new turn in the Terrestrial League's internal politics. But no public mention was made of such possibilities and by the time the official banquet began the planet was in a festive mood, almost as if the war against the Skanders were already won. Governor Vinocur was duly appointed a General of the Programmed Corps while Ridzin followed the event on their tri-di screens; laudatory speeches were exchanged between him and the Inspector General; toasts and countertoasts were offered... . Dexter Monte, the Inspector General's Technical Advisor, created a minor diplomatic flurry when, in full view of the entire planet, he refused to empty his glass in Ridzin's honor, explaining that he was not a drinking man, that alcohol had deleterious effects on his metabolism. However, he was quickly coaxed into it by Mark Treffry and Governor Vinocur, and thereafter drank dutifully, if sourly, to every toast proposed.

. . .

Then the official rituals were over, except for the final scene on the steel loading dock within the maw of the last giant carrier left on the planet, where Governor Vinocur bade Ridzin farewell. Inspector General Treffry stood smiling at his side, Dexter Monte standing a few feet behind the two, belching every few seconds and generally showing the effects of having been forced into participating in the toasts. Vinocur spoke briefly into the tri-di cameras, concluded with a

mal salute; then camera crews withdrew, glancing with silent awe at the huge bulkheads to either side of the dock behind which eighteen thousand men lay frozen in sleep. As the last of them left the carrier the loading locks slid shut with a heavy steel boom. The three men standing on the dock were alone. There was a dim humming in the air as the ship computers readied the engines for lift-off and the long flight during which there would be no waking human being to guide them. Treffry looked at his watch.

"Still half an hour," he said. "But we might as well get to our tanks at once. Feeling any better, Monte?"

"No," Dexter Monte muttered. "Worse! I'll be more than happy to settle into that tank. I'm beginning to have some difficulty holding myself together, I can tell you!"

Treffry and Vinocur glanced at each other and laughed, more loudly than the remark called for, almost as if each were enjoying a private joke; Monte blinked in brief, bleary surprise at them as he turned to follow them off to the sleep tanks.

Five minutes later, Inspector General Mark Treffry heard the sharp click with which his sleeping tank sealed itself above him. He switched on the intercom connecting the three tanks. With no attendants left awake in the carrier, it was essential that he and his companions monitor one another through the steps required to ensure that they would awaken safely after the trip. Governor Vinocur acknowledged at once, and some seconds later, Dexter Monte also replied. The preparations were carried out, checked, and then Treffry settled back comfortably. He already felt a faint, not unpleasant numbness in legs and arms, which was the anesthetic's first effect. By the time the sleepcold touched him, he would not feel anything at all. But his mind was still awake and active; and the private joke which had made him laugh aloud a short while ago seemed too good now to keep to himself.

"Vinocur?" he said to the intercom.

"Yes, Treffry?" Vinocur's voice responded.

"Before we drop off," Treffry said, "I thought I'd thank you for a highly enjoyable experience." He could hardly refrain from laughing again.

"You're referring to your stay on Ridzin?" Vinocur asked politely. "We tried to make it as pleasant as possible, of course."

"I'm sure you did!" And now Treffry did laugh, huffing and snorting helplessly for almost a minute before he was able to stop. He dabbed at his eyes, and sensed that the sleep-heaviness had begun to edge into his hands.

"Why do you laugh, Treffry?" Vinocur's voice asked.

That almost set Treffry off again. But he choked the laughter down. If he kept giving way to it, he would be asleep before he made sure that whatever dreams came to Frank Vinocur during the long trip would not be pleasant ones. He said, "Let me tell you--"

While the Programmed Corps was being forged into a magnificent, automatically functioning weapon on Ridzin, it became obvious that its completion was awaited with as much anxiety as eagerness by a

number of the worlds of the Terrestrial League. The question, of course, was who in the end would control it.

"We didn't try to stop the plotting and bargaining that went on," Treffry said. "And we didn't become involved in it. We merely took measures to ensure that the central government and Great Xal would remain always one step ahead of the conspirators."

"Conspirators?" Vinocur's voice repeated carefully over the intercom.

"Hannaret and Lorcía from the beginning, naturally!" Treffry told him. "Then, during the past two years, the governing body of Ridzin. We did our intelligence work thoroughly. Great Xal held the margin of power, so nothing else was needed. We could let the thing ripen.

"My dear fellow, that was what has made the final stages of this game so amusing! The ingenuity! The intricate patterns of deception! War fleets from Lorcía and Hannaret combining suddenly for 'joint maneuvers' in an open threat to Great Xal--and on Ridzin, in apparent desperation, ineffectual gestures at sabotage, including a series of attempted assassinations by mysteriously malfunctioning Programmed soldiers! They were not intended to succeed, of course; murdering me could not have held up the transfer of the Corps by a day. I imagine poor Ulbrand got killed by accident--or, more correctly, by the ineptness of his defenses.

"And to what end? Why, to divert our attention. Nothing more. To draw us away from the one plan which did, in fact, have a chance to succeed. But that plan has failed, too, Vinocur!"

Treffry paused a moment. When the intercom remained silent, he went on complacently. "The Hannaret warships which were to intercept and halt our carriers on their way to Great Xal have been allowed to take up position midway on our course. But they will be joined a few days from now by twice their number of central government ships. There will be no interception, Vinocur!

"And now, with the Programmed Corps to enforce its orders, Great Xal deals once and for all with the malcontent worlds! The Terrestrial League will be hammered into a unit. That is the corps' only urgent and immediate task. Time enough later to turn to settling our score with the Skanders. Why, we owe those obscene aliens some gratitude, as a matter of fact--if they hadn't been such a visible threat to the League it would have been impossible to bring the Corps into existence. So now, as I bid you good-night, 'General' Vinocur, I shall leave it to you to picture for yourself the warm reception awaiting you on Great Xal!"

There was silence again for a moment. Then Vinocur said, "Treffry?"

"Yes?" Treffry said, pleased. He had not really expected Vinocur to reply,

"You omitted mentioning one of our diversion attempts," the intercom told him.

"I did?" Treffry said. "What was that?"

"The interception of the carriers, of course. Too many people knew of that plan. It was almost inevitable that your intelligence would get

wind of it"

Treffry started to speak, checked himself, suddenly chilled.

"To stay one step ahead in this game," Vinocur's voice told him blandly, "that, as you've indicated, was the great necessity here. To bedazzle, mislead, confuse with a variety of elaborate schemes and dodges--when, all the time, only some very simple plan, one known to the fewest possible planners, could be successful. And that plan has succeeded, Treffry! To this moment only four men have known about it. You will now be the fifth.

"The Programmed Corps is not on its way to Great Xal, you see. Instead, the course of the carriers will take them to transspace stations on Hannaret."

Impossible, Treffry thought in instant, scornful relief. What was the fellow attempting to accomplish with such a lie? Only Ulbrand and Monte--

"Ulbrand's death," Vinocur's voice was continuing, "was no accident. He and Dexter Monte controlled the master programs of the carrier fleet's computers. We had to get Ulbrand out of the way."

"Ridiculous!" Treffry realized he had shouted, his voice thick and distorted, wondered briefly whether it was the anesthetic which made his mouth feel numb and stiffened now--or fear. "Monte!" he shouted again at the intercom.

Some seconds passed silently--as Vinocur, too, waited for Dexter Monte to respond.

. . .

"Monte!" Treffry bellowed once more. Slurred, mumbling noises issued from the speaker then, followed by a heavy belch.

"I couldn't answer at once," Dexter Monte explained in a weak, complaining voice. "I had to pull myself together. I don't feel at all well! If you two hadn't made me swallow those atrocious alcoholic concoctions--" He muttered indistinctly, added, "What is it?"

"You heard what that fool was saying?" Treffry demanded.

"You needn't speak so loudly!" Monte protested. "Yes, I heard him."

"Well?"

"Oh, I agreed almost a year ago to program the carriers to go to Hannaret when the time came. Is that what you want to know? It's true enough. They guaranteed me wealth, power, influence. The usual approach. Including direct blackmail, I must say! Ulbrand, incidentally, wasn't so stupid. I had to loosen his defenses to let the assassin get to him." Dexter Monte belched explosively, groaned in polite dismay. "Excuse me, gentlemen! Your infernal alcohol..."

Vinocur was laughing now. Treffry's thoughts seemed to whirl in confusion. Then he remembered something. He snorted.

"Monte, you're a miserable coward and a monstrous liar!" he stated.



I can believe they blackmailed you into agreeing to do what they wanted. But you're safe from them now, so you can give up the pretense! Because of course you didn't go through with it."

Vinocur abruptly stopped laughing. "He went through with it," he growled.

Treffry chuckled. "He couldn't, Vinocur! He simply couldn't! Monte, like every other key man brought to Ridzin, was put through secret security tests once a month--and I supervised that operation--always. So Monte couldn't have harbored any real intentions to betray us: No human mind can deceive the testing machines ... eh, Monte?"

Monte wearily mumbled a sentence or two.

"What did you say, Monte? Speak up!"

"I said I agree with you." Dexter Monte's voice was distinct again but quite faint. He sighed. "No human mind can deceive the testing machines."

Treffry swallowed with difficulty. The anesthetic definitely was affecting his tongue and throat now. "Are you listening, Vinocur?" he demanded. "So the Programmed Corps isn't going to Hannaret, is it, Monte?"

"No," Monte said. He added peevishly, "But you gentlemen *must* excuse me now! I really can't keep myself together any longer."

"Treffry--" Vinocur's voice had thickened, sounded heavily slurred.

"Yes?"

"Ask him--ask him whether the Programmed Corps is ... going to Great Xal."

"What?"

"We ... had him on ... testing machines, too, Treffry!"

A monstrous thought swam up slowly in Treffry's mind.

"Monte!" he cried. "*Monte!*"

Odd watery whistling noises responded for some seconds from the intercom. Nothing else.

Could it be? Could the most awesome weapon ever devised, the irresistible Programmed Corps, be hurtling now, not toward Great Xal but, out of control, toward some immensely distant point in space? From which it presently would return, under new instructions, to wipe out the race which had created it?

"Monte!" This time, only Treffry's mind formed the word. The sound that came from his mouth was a heavy groan--the cold-sleep process was moving along its irreversible course. Moaning noises in the intercom indicated Vinocur was experiencing similar difficulties. Treffry's thoughts began to swirl in slow and awful confusion, revolving about one fact repeatedly mentioned in the speeches that day: the Skanders' repulsive amebic quality, their ability to force themselves out of their basic shape into another of their choosing and to maintain it for an indefinite period....

Perhaps for as long as fifteen or twenty years? Long enough to—

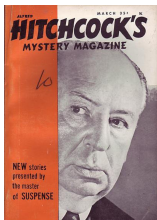
That thought, all thought, faded. The moaning in the intercom went on for almost another minute. Then it, too, stopped. In a silence which would remain unbroken for many months the great carrier fleet rushed toward its destination.

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# "Swift Completion"

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*Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor glooms of night, stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds. What couriers? Read on, and you will know.*



Beginning with Monday of that week, George Redfern—a healthy, athletic, but thwarted and frustrated young man—had been trying to maneuver his wife into a situation which would leave him an unimplicated widower. There was nothing haphazard about George's efforts. His preparations had been thorough; he had worked out not one scheme but several, including alternate steps he might take if, through no fault of his own, something should threaten to go wrong.

Now, around noon on Friday, George stood at the top of the flight of stairs in the Redfern's suburban residence, moodily watching Martha Redfern adjust a silk scarf about her shapely neck before a mirror in the entry hall below. None of his plans, somehow, appeared to be getting anywhere. Was his wife simply enjoying a remarkable run of good luck, or had she actually gained an inkling of what was in his mind?

"George?" Martha said abruptly without turning her gaze from the mirror.

George gave an involuntary start. He hadn't realized she knew he was watching. "Yes?" he replied.

Martha took some envelopes from the mirror stand and held them up.

"I'm afraid I forgot to stamp these," she told him. "The stamps are in the top left-hand corner of my desk in the study, George. I'll need six. Be waiting for you down by the car, dear."

She slipped the letters into her purse and went through the French doors to the terrace. Silently obedient, George started along the upstairs hall to the study. Martha was a member of the State Legislature, now running for her second term; the study resembled an elegantly equipped business office, and Martha used it as her office when she was at home. This morning, her secretary, Joanne Brown, had not been in, and she had taken care of her mail herself. A portable typewriter and a wire basket with carbon copies of the letters she had written, stood on her desk. Catching sight of the letters, George glanced back towards the hall, then picked the letters up to look them over.

The one on top was addressed to a Mr. Donald H. Spurgeon—Martha's Uncle Don—of Spurgeon & Sanders, Attorneys at Law. It was marked personal. George read the first two sentences and felt the blood drain suddenly from his face. He gulped, and sat dizzily down at the desk, clutching the letter in his hand. Then, after inhaling deeply several times to compose himself, he smoothed the letter out, and hastily read through it, his feeling of incredulous shock increasing as he approached the end. It read:

Dear Uncle Don:

This letter is intended only for your confidential information. I am convinced that George has given up hope of getting his hands on any appreciable part of my money while I am alive, so he is now planning to do away with me. He would then be free to devote his attention to Cynthia Haley, of whom he has, I am sure, become

enamored.

With elections coming up in a few weeks, you will readily see how awkward it would be for me to make an open issue of the matter. In this district, George's social background and personal good looks represent important assets. I cannot afford to give them up, particularly not during the present difficult campaign.

I foresee no great difficulty, however, in dealing with the situation on a personal level, and intend to take no other steps at this time. If, on the other hand, George should happen to succeed in his schemes, I want him to be punished. In the event of my death, this letter will open the question of his guilt. No more should be required. His motivations will be easy to establish; and, in any case, as you will agree, George has not the character to face a determined investigator for five minutes without going into a state of panic and convicting himself.

I intend to drive to the beach this evening--leaving George at home--and shall spend the weekend at the Hamilton Hotel to rest up for the final campaign flurries. If you wish, you can reach me at the hotel by telephone in the morning.

Your affectionate niece,  
Martha

George sat staring at the damning missive in complete consternation. It was immediately clear that Martha had sent him back after the stamps with the purpose of having him read it. Once that letter was in the mails to Uncle Donald Spurgeon--a dry-voiced, cold-eyed individual whom George found frightening even under ordinary circumstances--he wouldn't dare to lift a finger against her. And that, of course, was exactly what Martha meant when she wrote of 'handling the situation on a personal level.'

George's mind went racing through the few possibilities left open to him. If he could prevent Martha from mailing the letter ... one of his schemes for her disposal involved that simple but effective instrument, a homemade sap. The sap was in his coat pocket; and the area about the garage was screened by hedges and trees from neighbors and passersby. So, assuming Martha was waiting by the car as she'd said...

George puckered his lips thoughtfully. It was a possibility--nothing he could count on; but if Martha gave him the chance to rap her on the head in the next two or three minutes, he could proceed from there directly to the Alternate Plan 4 or 5. However, he was certain that she would now be very much on her guard against some desperate move on his part until she knew that the letter actually had been mailed, and that George was also aware of that. The confounded little gun she'd started carrying around during the week was almost certainly inside her purse at the moment. And even discounting the gun, a single feminine scream arising from the Redfern garden would be ruinous.... No, if a good opening presented itself, he would be prepared to make instant use of it; but that was all he dared to do.

Then there was something else he might be able to do...

George quickly rolled an envelope into the typewriter, put Martha's return address on it, and addressed it to Donald H. Spurgeon. After

a moment's reflection he added personal in the lower left-hand corner, where Martha would have placed it, brought out a blank piece of letter paper, folded it, shoved it into the envelope and sealed the envelope.

That wasn't too bad, he thought. It would be preferable, of course, if no letter at all arrived in Uncle Don's office. But if, after Martha's death, George reluctantly admitted to having noticed signs of increasing mental and emotional instability in his wife during the past few months, her mailing of a letter with no message on it would provide corroborating evidence. Again, it was questionable whether Martha would give him a chance to switch the letter for the one in her purse. But again, too, if the opportunity came, he would be ready for it.

George scratched his head, hesitating. But he could think of absolutely nothing else which might be done at the moment, and if he delayed here any longer, it would only increase Martha's suspicious alertness.

He pulled open the stamp drawer, reached into it, then paused for a moment. His eyes narrowed briefly.

Right there in the drawer, he realized, was a method of keeping Martha's letter from reaching Uncle Don even after it was mailed. Here was a way of canceling her attempt to insure herself against getting murdered, without letting her know it had happened....

George began to feel a little better.

. . .

He was obliged to discard the first, and simplest, method of circumventing his wife's precautions when he was still thirty feet from the garage.

From beyond a thick hedge, he heard Martha speak animatedly; then there was a burst of laughter. George stopped for an instant, listening intently. He might have expected something like this. At least two other women were there with her. Her secretary, Joanne Brown ... and ... yes! Cynthia. The delectable Cynthia Haley. Martha must have invited both of them to accompany her on an afternoon shopping trip. And--deliberately, of course--she had refrained from telling George about the arrangement.

His suspicions were confirmed by the glance Martha gave him as he came around the hedge. It was bright with malicious amusement.

"Found it?" she asked, the twist of her mouth telling him that she wasn't referring to the stamp drawer.

"Uh-huh," George said blandly. "Six stamps ... wasn't that what you said?" He gave the two other ladies his most boyishly winning grin, received two smiles in return. A timid one, accompanied by a faint blush, from Joanne Brown. A lazy, openly 'my-you're-handsome' sort of smile from the lovely Cynthia. Martha took the half-dozen letters from her purse and held them out to him.

She said, "If you'll put the stamps on like a good boy, we'll mail them

on the way."

Their eyes met for an instant, then George shrugged with a trace of irritation and took the letters.

He heard the women settle themselves into the back of the car while he put a stamp on each of the envelopes. Try the switch with the fake letter? No; Martha probably was watching. The other method was safer anyway. She'd played right into his hand again by trying to show him that he was still under her thumb, that he'd better learn to like it. George finished stamping the letters and walked around to the driver's seat with them.

Martha said from the rear of the car, "I'll hold the letters while you're driving, dear."

He handed them back to her, the envelope addressed to Donald H. Spurgeon on top, then got in and started the motor. There was silence in the rear seat for a few seconds as he backed the car expertly into the turnaround, reversed direction and swung out into the driveway. George realized he was perspiring. Any instant now, he would hear Martha begin, her voice taut, "But, George, dear boy, you've... "

Instead, he heard her purse snap shut, the letters safely inside. George let his breath out carefully. Cynthia Haley inquired whether either of the others had been to Restow's, and wasn't it divinely...

The chatter went on. George took out a cigarette and lit it. So far, so good! It had been a smart move not to attempt to switch the letters. Martha very likely would have noticed it when she took the envelopes back.

Three blocks from the business district, she pointed out a mailbox and handed him the letters through the car window. At the mailbox, George paused and flicked a glance back at the car. Martha was watching him, an openly mocking look on her face. He deposited the letters, walked back to the car, his expression wooden.

He dropped the three women off at Martha's bank, drove around the corner and pulled in to the curb. Martha's car, the one she planned to use tonight, was in a garage a few blocks away; it had been picked up during the morning, for a check-up. Probably, George realized now, Martha had also wanted to prevent him from gimmicking the sedan in some manner before she set out. Of course this had been one of the possible methods of disposal on his agenda.

George scratched it mentally from the list. Martha was to stop by for the car in the evening, after she finished her shopping, and drive it home. There wouldn't be time to do a sufficiently careful job of gimmicking on it. He hadn't liked this idea much, anyway. An accident actually mightn't be difficult to arrange; but he had not been able to work out anything to make sure—or even to make it very probable—that the accident would be fatal to the sedan's occupants.

The sap in his pocket began to look like the best idea again...

George moved the car back out into traffic, and drove home slowly through the warm summer afternoon, chain-smoking and thinking.

. . .

His introductory move, last Monday evening, had been to report a prowler on the grounds. The move had backfired because Martha, normally not easy to alarm, had begun locking her bedroom door each night. Now that George thought of it, she had also seen to it that her husband would have no opportunity to obtain a duplicate key to the bedroom during the days that followed. This afternoon was the first time he'd found himself alone in the house since Monday.

As it happened, that particular precaution of Martha's had made no real difference—except for knocking out the murder-by-prowler scheme which George originally had favored. He'd been in possession of a duplicate key to Martha's bedroom for the past two months. The fact now gave him an advantage which she didn't know about or considered. He let himself into the bedroom and looked around.

The little gun Martha had been keeping at her bedside this week, supposedly as protection against the prowler, wasn't in sight. He'd been right in assuming she had it with her. A partly packed suitcase lay beside the bed; another one, empty, stood against the wall. Martha's little bedroom bar was locked. She'd probably have a few drinks before leaving; that, at any rate, had been Martha's practice at the beginning of any long drive since George had known her. She was an excellent driver, and alcohol didn't affect her reactions perceptibly, but in drawing up his plans George had given the habit some consideration.

He peered into Martha's handsome adjoining bathroom, came back to the bedroom, and went over to the large built-in dress closet. Sliding one of the closet doors back, he glanced towards the vanity on the far side of the room, clicking his tongue reflectively against his teeth.

Martha would be back, she had stated, around six. It was a warm day. One of the first things she'd do would be to have herself some bourbon on the rocks, and then climb into the shower.

George nodded, pulled the closet door shut and left the bedroom, locking the door behind him. He went downstairs, whistling softly, and on into the rumpus room in the basement where he kept a variety of body-building equipment. Only a few minor preparations were required to see Alternate Plan 4 ready to roll.

He heard Martha's car come along the driveway at twenty minutes past six, and opened the door to the terrace for her when she walked up through the garden, carrying an assortment of paper bags. Martha went directly to her bedroom and locked the door behind her with a sharp, decisive click. She was making it plain, George realized, that there would be no more polite pretense about the situation in the Redfern house unless there was somebody around to impress.

. . .

He stood at the far end of the upstairs hall for a minute or two, listening. Then he removed his shoes and came quietly down the hall to his wife's room.



He could hear her moving around, pulling out drawers; then came the click of a suitcase lock. Paper rustled for a while; then there was a short silence followed by the clink of ice cubes into a glass and the brief bubbling of a bottle. The wall closet's door opened next; hangers were slid about inside it. Presently the second suitcase snapped shut, and there was another short period of relative inactivity while Martha started on her second drink and lit a cigarette. Finally George heard her go into the bathroom.

The shower began to roar. When he heard Martha close the stall behind her, George brought out his key, opened the bedroom door and stepped inside. He looked quickly around.

The vanity lights were on, but she'd turned off the overhead light. The two packed suitcases stood at the foot of the bed. The purse Martha had been carrying lay on the bed, and a linen suit was laid out next to it. George pulled the door shut, went over to the purse. The gun was inside.

He slipped the gun into his pocket, and was behind the door of the closet when Martha came out of the bedroom. He heard her move about, fitting herself into her underclothes. Then she poured a third drink and settled down before the vanity mirror, humming to herself.

George gave her a minute or two, then came on stocking feet out of the closet. She was in her slip, putting on lipstick, her eyes intent on the mirror.

Six feet away from her, George said quietly, "You know, I'm afraid those letters I mailed for you will be returned to us."

Martha's whole body had jerked violently at the first sound of his voice. It must have had a shattering effect on her to discover her husband inexplicably inside her locked room, and George couldn't be sure whether she actually grasped what he said. Martha came half out of her chair like a cat, obviously with the idea of grabbing the gun from her purse; then, recognizing that George stood between her and the bed, she reached out quickly for a small pair of scissors on the vanity. In the mirror, George saw her mouth open wide as she sucked her breath in to scream. He stepped forward and brought the sap down with a solid swing.

It wasn't until Martha was lying face down on the carpet and he'd made certain she was dead that George realized just how intensely he had disliked his wife. Breathing a little heavily, he checked his watch ... five minutes to seven, and getting dark enough now to put Alternate Plan 4 into immediate action.

He carried the two suitcases downstairs, placed them against the wall in the dark entry hall, then went on through the door opening into the dining room. He felt steady enough, but he could do with a drink--just one--himself. He brought out brandy, was filling a glass when the terrace doorbell rang.

George, starting almost as wildly as Martha had done, splashed brandy on the table. He set the bottle down with a shaking hand, stood dead still for an instant, staring towards the hall. Then he moved stealthily to a corner window and peered out on the terrace.

Joanne Brown stood under the doorlight; as George looked, the

secretary was putting out her hand to ring the bell again. The ring came, a polite, brief little tinkle. George's glance shifted to the overnight bag and portable typewriter case standing beside her; and suddenly he understood. Martha had intended to take Joanne to the beach with her, and the girl had come over in her own car. If she'd come a few minutes later, and he'd already left with Martha's body when she arrived ... sweat started out on George's face as he realized the narrowness of his escape.

Then he straightened his tie, put on the boyish smile, and went to open the French doors for little Joanne Brown.

\* \* \*

By seven-thirty, George had Martha's sedan rolling up into the hills west of town towards a place he had selected a month before as a possible setting for her untimely end. The road was a winding, two lane affair which both he and Martha used occasionally as a shortcut to the coast highway; it permitted fast driving in some sections, but eventually it turned into a steep, hill-hugging grade which saw little traffic.

George was busy going over the details of his plan in his mind, so his thoughts turned only occasionally to the two bodies under the blankets in the back of the car. Joanne Brown's unexpected appearance, as much as it had startled him, actually had been a break for which he could be thankful. A man who proposes to kill his wife does not deliberately select a time which makes it necessary to kill his wife's secretary as well. Suspicion was even less likely to touch him now. In fact, with proper handling of the concluding steps of Alternate Plan 4, the whole thing looked simply perfect.

Coming around a curve, he saw the lights of traffic flowing along the highway across the valley towards which the hill road presently started turning down. Two miles beyond the top of the grade, a dirt path came winding down the hill from the left. George stopped the car and looked about to make sure no one was approaching; then he switched off his headlights and backed the sedan carefully a hundred feet up the dirt path.

He put on the hand brake, climbed out and went around to the rear of the car where he opened the trunk and brought out the bicycle which ordinarily formed part of an exercise stand in the basement rumpus room of the Redfern home. With tonight's use for it in mind, George had purchased a few accessories for the vehicle.

Strapped across the bicycle's carrier rack was a canvas roll. George quickly opened the roll, took out a pair of soiled tennis shoes and a beaked cap. He put these articles on, slipped out of his suit and shirt, and stood attired in shorts and a worn t-shirt. Wrapping his street clothes and shoes into the roll, he strapped it across the rack and wheeled the bicycle into the bushes where it was out of sight.

A minute or two later, he had moved Martha's body into the right front seat of the car. He trotted down to the point where the dirt path opened into the hill road and glanced about. Still no headlights coming from either direction. George hurried back to the sedan and got in for the final maneuver which he had been rehearsing so

carefully in his mind.

On the opposite side of the road, for around a quarter-mile, the hillside dropped off vertically three or four hundred feet to the woods in the valley. George turned on the headlights, shifted the sedan into third gear and released the hand brake. As the car began to roll forward, he switched on the ignition and pressed the starter button.

The car picked up speed rapidly, coming down the path. George turned it into the road, and let it roll on a hundred feet along the grade. Then, heart hammering with excitement, he opened the door on his left, rose half out of the seat, gave the steering wheel a violent wrench to the right, and dove out through the door as the sedan veered towards the low fence guarding the drop to the valley.

He hit the pavement, arms, head and legs tucked in expertly, in a tumbler's roll. There was a crash behind him, a long screech of metal on rock. For a heart-stopping instant, George thought the car's momentum hadn't been enough to take it through the fence. But then the screeching ended, and after some moments there came other crashing noises, far below him ... two, three, four in rapid succession, and then ominous silence. Shaken but triumphant, George climbed to his feet. The hill road lay dark and quiet, twenty feet of the guard fence torn away. Without waiting to look down at the wreck, he sprinted back to the dirt path, pulled the bicycle out of the bushes and began shoving it up the path towards the top of the hill.

He was trembling violently with excitement, but he knew he was safe. Apparently the wreck hadn't caught fire. But if it had, and attracted attention immediately, it would have taken at least an hour to get to it in the valley. As it was, it might easily be morning before someone reported a shattered guard fence on the hill road, or stopped to investigate.

In any event, in considerably less than an hour an anonymous cyclist would slip quietly through the back garden gate of the Redfern residence. The bicycle, cleaned and freed of such incongruous attachments as a lamp and a carrier rack, would be back in the exercise stand. And George Redfern, in pajamas and dressing gown, would be having a quiet drink before retiring, prepared to express adequate shock and grief if the telephone rang to inform him of a terrible accident in the hills which had snuffed out the lives of his wife and her unfortunate secretary.

Every detail, George thought jubilantly, played safely, just as he had planned it! Nothing, nothing at all, that could even begin to direct the finger of suspicion at Martha Redfern's husband....

In the Redfern residence the telephone remained quiet all night.

. . .

Shortly before nine o'clock in the morning, the mailman came walking up through the garden towards George's front door. George came out on the porch and gave the man a boyishly happy grin.

"Morning," he observed. "Wonderful day!"

The mailman grunted and fished a small pack of letters out of his

bag. "Looks like someone made a mistake here!" he said.

"Eh?" George took the letters, looked at the Returned for Insufficient Postage stamp on the top one, shook his head irritably. "My wife's stupid secretary again! She.... ." He shuffled through the envelopes, said suddenly in a tight voice, "I believe--yes, I'm sure it was six letters Mrs. Redfern asked me to mail for her."

The mailman looked at him blankly.

George cleared his throat. "Only four, however, have come back."

The mailman shrugged, shifting bag on his shoulder. "So she stuck a four-cent stamp on the others like she should've."

"No! L... ."

"Well, then letters just slipped through, then," the mailman explained patiently. "They'll collect the two cents at the other end.... ." He checked himself, staring at George's face. "Why, you look pale!" he said, surprised. "Nothing that important about them two letters, is there?"

"No, no, not at all!" George attempted to smile, felt his mouth twitch into a lopsided grimace. "I was just wondering ... that is, L... ." His voice faded out.

"You ain't sick, are you, Mr. Redfern?" the mailman asked. "Maybe I should get you a glass of water?"

George didn't answer. Across the mailman's shoulder, he watched a police car turn quietly into the driveway. It came rolling on towards the house. The pale, implacable face staring at him out of the car's rear window belonged to Martha's Uncle Don Spurgeon.

A series of brilliantly clear pictures flashed for an instant through George's mind.... . Martha's letter arriving with the morning mail in the offices of Spurgeon & Sanders, with two cents to collect on it. Uncle Don calling the Hamilton Hotel immediately, hearing that Mrs. Redfern had not checked in and, alarmed, notifying the police, who had just finished establishing the identity of the two dead occupants of a savagely smashed automobile in the hills.

Cynthia Haley, who could testify it was George who had put the two-cent stamps on Martha's letters.

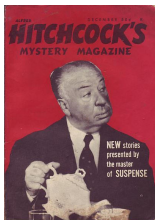
The mailman standing right here, wondering about Mr. Redfern's extraordinary reaction to the fact that two of the letters had not been returned.... .

"Mr. Redfern," the mailman's voice was saying, "why, you're shaking all over now! Mr. Redfern?"

The police came to a stop.

# "Just Curious"

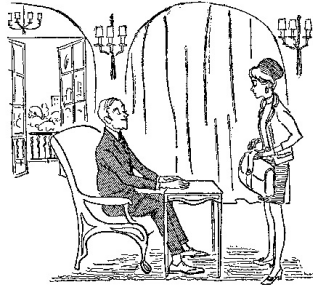
Published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, Vol. 13, No. 12 (December 1968), though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



*Perhaps the avenging hand of Zeus is omnipresent. Remember Pandora?*



Roy Litton's apartment was on the eighteenth floor of the Torrell Arms. It was a pleasant place which cost him thirty-two thousand dollars a year. The living room had a wide veranda which served in season as a sun deck. Far below was a great park. Beyond the park, drawn back to a respectful distance from the Torrell Arms, was the rest of the city.



"May I inquire," Roy Litton said to his visitor, "from whom you learned about me?"

The visitor's name was Jean Merriam. She was a slender, expensive brunette, about twenty-seven. She took a card from her handbag and slid it across the table to Litton. "Will that serve as an introduction?" she asked.

Litton studied the words scribbled on the card and smiled. "Yes," he said, "that's quite satisfactory. I know the lady's handwriting well. In what way can I help you?"

"I represent an organization," Jean said, "which does discreet investigative work."

"You're detectives?"

She shrugged, smiled. "We don't refer to ourselves as detectives, but that's the general idea. Conceivably your talents could be very useful to us. I'm here to find out whether you're willing to put them at our disposal from time to time. If you are, I have a test assignment for you. You don't mind, do you?"

Litton rubbed his chin. "You've been told what my standard fee is?"

Jean Merriam opened the handbag again, took out a check, and gave it to him. Litton read it carefully, nodded. "Yes," he said, and laid the check on the table beside him. "Ten thousand dollars. You're in the habit of paying such sums out of your personal account?"

"The sum was put in my account yesterday for this purpose."

"Then what do you, or your organization, want me to do?"

"I've been given a description of how you operate, Mr. Litton, but we don't know how accurate the description is. Before we retain you, I'd like you to tell me exactly what you do."

Litton smiled. "I'm willing to tell you as much as I know."

She nodded. "Very well. I'll decide on the basis of what you say whether or not your services might be worth ten thousand dollars to the organization. Once I offer you the assignment and you accept it, we're committed. The check will be yours when the assignment is completed."

"Who will judge when it has been completed?"

"You will," said Jean. "Naturally there will be no further assignments if we're not satisfied with the results of this one. As I said, this is a test. We're gambling. If you're as good as I've been assured you are, the gamble should pay off. Fair enough?"

Litton nodded. "Fair enough, Miss Merriam." He leaned back in his chair. "Well, then—I sometimes call myself a 'sensor' because the word describes my experiences better than any other word I can think of. I'm not specifically a mind reader. I can't predict the future. I don't have second sight. But under certain conditions, I turn into a long-range sensing device with a limited application. I have no theoretical explanation for it. I can only say what happens.

"I work through contact objects; that is, material items which have had a direct and extensive physical connection with the persons I investigate. A frequently worn garment is the obvious example. Eyeglasses would be excellent. I once was able to use an automobile which the subject had driven daily for about ten months. Through some such object I seem to become, for a time which varies between approximately three and five minutes, the person in question." Litton smiled. "Naturally I remain here physically, but my awareness is elsewhere.

"Let me emphasize that during this contact period I *am*—or seem to be—the other person. I am not conscious of Roy Litton or of what Roy Litton is doing. I have never heard of him and know nothing of his sensing ability. I am the other person, aware only of what he is aware of, doing what he is doing, thinking what he is thinking. If, meanwhile, you were to speak to the body sitting here, touch it, even cause it severe pain—which has been done experimentally—I wouldn't know it. When the time is up, the contact fades and I am back. Then I know who I am and can recall my experience and report on it. Essentially, that's the process."

Jean Merriam asked, "To what extent do you control the process?"

"I can initiate it or not initiate it. I'm never drawn out of myself unless I intend to be drawn out of myself. That's the extent of my control. Once it begins, the process continues by itself and concludes itself. I have no way of affecting its course."

Jean said reflectively, "I don't wish to alarm you, Mr. Litton. But mightn't you be running the risk of remaining permanently lost in somebody else's personality ... unable to return to your own?"

Litton laughed. "No. I know definitely that can't happen, though I don't know why. The process simply can't maintain itself for much more than five minutes. On the other hand, it's rarely terminated in less than three."

"You say that during the time of contact you think what the other

person thinks and are aware of what he's aware?"

"That's correct."

"Only that? If we employed you to investigate someone in this manner, we usually would need quite specific information. Wouldn't we have to be extremely fortunate if the person happened to think of that particular matter in the short time you shared his mind?"

"No," said Litton. "Conscious thoughts quite normally have thousands of ramifications and shadings the thinker doesn't know about. When the contact dissolves, I retain his impressions and it is primarily these ramifications and shadings I then investigate. It is something like developing a vast number of photographic prints. Usually the information my clients want can be found in those impressions in sufficient detail."

"What if it can't be found?"

"Then I make a second contact. On only one occasion, so far, have I been obliged to make three separate contacts with a subject to satisfy the client's requirements. There is no fee for additional contacts."

Jean Merriam considered a moment. "Very well," she said. She brought a small box from the handbag, opened it, and took out a ring, which she handed to Litton. "The person in whom the organization is interested," she said, "was wearing this ring until four weeks ago. Since then it's been in a safe. The safe was opened yesterday and the ring taken from it and placed in this box. Would you consider it a suitable contact object?"

Litton held the ring in his palm an instant before replying. "Eminently suitable!" he said then.

"You can tell by touching such objects?"

"As a rule. If I get no impression, it's a waste of time to proceed. If I get a negative impression, I refuse to proceed."

"A negative impression?"

Litton shrugged. "A feeling of something that repels me. I can't describe it more definitely."

"Does it mean that the personality connected with the object is a repellent one?"

"Not necessarily. I've merged with some quite definitely repellent personalities in the course of this work. That doesn't disturb me. The feeling I speak of is a different one."

"It frightens you?"

"Perhaps." He smiled. "However, in this case there is no such feeling. Have you decided to offer me the assignment?"

"Yes, I have," Jean Merriam said. "Now then, I've been told nothing about the person connected with the ring. Since very few men could get it on, and very few children would wear a ring of such value, I assume the owner is a woman—but I don't know even that. The reason I've been told nothing is to make sure I'll give you no clues,



inadvertently or otherwise." She smiled. "Even if you were a mind reader, you see, you could get no significant information from me. We want to be certain of the authenticity of your talent."

"I understand," Litton said. "But you must know what kind of information your organization wants to gain from the contact?"

Jean nodded. "Yes, of course. We want you to identify the subject by name and tell us where she can be found. The description of the locality should be specific. We also want to learn as much as we can about the subject's background, her present activities and interests, and any people with whom she is closely involved. The more details you can give us about such people, the better. In general, that's all. Does it seem like too difficult an assignment?"

"Not at all," Litton said. "In fact, I'm surprised you want no more. Is that kind of information really worth ten thousand dollars to you?"

"I've been told," Jean said, "that if we get it within the next twenty-four hours, it will be worth a great deal more than ten thousand dollars."

"I see." Litton settled comfortably in the chair, placed his clasped hands around the ring on the table, enclosing it. "Then, if you like, Miss Merriam, I'll now make the contact."

"No special preparations?" she inquired, watching him.

"Not in this case." Litton nodded toward a heavily curtained alcove in the wall on his left. "That's what I call my withdrawal room. When I feel there's reason to expect difficulties in making a contact, I go in there. Observers can be disturbing under such circumstances. Otherwise, no preparations are necessary."

"What kind of difficulties could you encounter?" Jean asked.

"Mainly, the pull of personalities other than the one I want. A contact object may be valid, but contaminated by associations with other people. Then it's a matter of defining and following the strongest attraction, which is almost always that of the proper owner and our subject. Incidentally, it would be advantageous if you were prepared to record my report."

Jean tapped the handbag. "I'm recording our entire conversation, Mr. Litton."

He didn't seem surprised. "Very many of my clients do," he remarked. "Very well, then, let's begin..."

. . .

"How long did it take him to dream up this stuff?" Nick Garland asked.

"Four minutes and thirty-two seconds," Jean Merriam said.

Garland shook his head incredulously. He took the transcript she'd made of her recorded visit to Roy Litton's apartment from the desk and leafed through it again. Jean watched him, her face expressionless. Garland was a big gray-haired bear of a man, coldly

irritable – potentially dangerous."

He laid the papers down, drummed his fingers on the desk. "I still don't want to believe it," he said, "but I guess I'll have to. He hangs on to Caryl Chase's ring for a few minutes, then he can tell you enough about her to fill five typed, single-spaced pages... That's what happened?"

Jean nodded. "Yes, that's what happened. He kept pouring out details about the woman as if he'd known her intimately half her life. He didn't hesitate about anything. My impression was that he wasn't guessing about anything. He seemed to know."

Garland grunted. "Max thinks he knew." He looked up at the man standing to the left of the desk. "Fill Jean in, Max. How accurate is Litton?"

Max Jewett said, "On every point we can check out, he's completely accurate."

"What are the points you can check out?" Jean asked.

"The ring belongs to Caryl Chase. She's thirty-two. She's Phil Chase's wife, currently estranged. She's registered at the Hotel Arve, Geneva, Switzerland, having an uneasy off-and-on affair with one William Haskell, British ski nut. He's jealous, and they fight a lot. Caryl suspects Phil has detectives looking for her, which he does. Her daughter Ellie is hidden away with friends of Caryl's parents in London. Litton's right about the ring. Caryl got it from her grandmother on her twenty-first birthday and had worn it regularly since. When she ran out on Phil last month, she took it off and left it in her room safe. Litton's statement, that leaving it was a symbolic break with her past life, makes sense." Jewett shrugged. "That's about it. Her psychoanalyst might be able to check out some of the rest of what you got on tape. We don't have that kind of information."

Garland growled, "We don't need it. We got enough for now."

Jean exchanged a glance with Jewett. "You feel Litton's genuine, Mr. Garland?"

"He's genuine. Only Max and I knew we were going to test him on Caryl. If he couldn't do what he says he does, you wouldn't have got the tape. There's no other way he could know those things about her." Garland's face twisted into a sour grimace. "I thought Max had lost his marbles when he told me it looked like Phleger had got his information from some kind of swami. But that's how it happened. Frank Phleger got Litton to tap my mind something like two or three months ago. He'd need that much time to get set to make his first move."

"How much have you lost?" Jean asked.

He grunted. "Four, five million. I can't say definitely yet. That's not what bothers me." His mouth clamped shut, a pinched angry line. His eyes shifted bleakly down to the desk, grew remote, lost focus.

Jean Merriam watched him silently. Inside that big skull was stored information which seemed sometimes equal to the intelligence files of a central bank. Nick Garland's brain was a strategic computer, a legal library. He was a multimillionaire, a brutal genius, a solitary and

thinking king beast in the financial jungle—a jungle he allowed to become barely aware he existed. Behind his secretiveness he remained an unassailable shadow. In the six years Jean had been working for him she'd never before seen him suffer a setback; but if they were right about Litton, this was more than a setback. Garland's mind had been opened, his plans analyzed, his strengths and weaknesses assessed by another solitary king beast—a lesser one, but one who knew exactly how to make the greatest possible use of the information thus gained—and who had begun to do it. So Jean waited and wondered.

"Jean," Garland said at last. His gaze hadn't shifted from the desk.

"Yes?"

"Did Litton buy your story about representing something like a detective agency?"

"He didn't seem to question it," Jean said. "My impression was that he doesn't particularly care who employs him, or for what purpose."

"He'll look into anyone's mind for a price?" It was said like a bitter curse.

"Yes ... his price. What are you going to do?"

Garland's shoulders shifted irritably. "Max is trying to get a line on Phleger."

Jean glanced questioningly at Jewett. Jewett told her, "Nobody seems to have any idea where Frank Phleger's been for the past three weeks. We assume he dropped out of sight to avoid possible repercussions. The indications are that we're getting rather close to him."

"I see," Jean said uncomfortably. The king beasts avoided rough play as a matter of policy, usually avoided conflict among themselves, but when they met in a duel there were no rules.

"Give that part of it three days," Garland's voice said. She looked around, found him watching her with a trace of what might be irony, back at any rate from whatever brooding trance he'd been sunk in. "Jean, call Litton sometime tomorrow."

"All right."

"Tell him the boss of your detective organization wants an appointment with him. Ten o'clock, three days from now."

She nodded, said carefully, "Litton could become extremely valuable to you, Mr. Garland."

"He could," Garland agreed. "Anyway, I want to watch the swami perform. We'll give him another assignment."

"Am I to accompany you?"

"You'll be there, Jean. So will Max."

"I keep having the most curiously definite impression," Roy Litton observed, "that I've met you before."

"You have," Garland said amiably.

Litton frowned, shook his head. "It's odd I should have forgotten the occasion!"

"The name's Nick Garland," Garland told him.

Still frowning, Litton stared at him across the table. Then abruptly his face paled. Jean Merriam, watching from behind her employer, saw Litton's eyes shift to her, from her to Max Jewett, and return at last, hesitantly, to Garland's face. Garland nodded wryly.

"I was what you call one of your subjects, Mr. Litton," he said. "I can't give you the exact date, but it should have been between two and three months ago. You remember now?"

Litton shook his head. "No. After such an interval it would be impossible to be definite about it, in any case. I keep no notes and the details of a contact very quickly grow blurred to me." His voice was guarded; he kept his eyes on Garland's. "Still, you seemed familiar to me at once as a person. And your name seems familiar. It's quite possible that you have been, in fact, a contact subject."

"I was," Garland said. "We know that. That's why we're here."

Litton cleared his throat. "Then the story Miss Merriam told me at her first visit wasn't true."

"Not entirely," Garland admitted. "She wasn't representing a detective outfit. She represented me. Otherwise, she told the truth. She was sent here to find out if you could do what we'd heard you could do. We learned that you could. Mr. Litton, you've cost me a great deal of money. But I'm not too concerned about that now, because, with your assistance, I'll make it back. And I'll make a great deal more besides. You begin to get the picture?"

Relief and wariness mingled for an instant in Litton's expression. "Yes, I believe I do."

"You'll get paid your regular fees, of course," Garland told him. "The fact is, Mr. Litton, you don't charge enough. What you offer is worth more than ten thousand a shot. What you gave Frank Phleger was worth enormously more."

"Frank Phleger?" Litton said.

"The client who paid you to poke around in my mind. No doubt he wouldn't have used his real name. It doesn't matter. Let's get on to your first real assignment for me. Regular terms. This one isn't a test. It's to bring up information I don't have and couldn't get otherwise. All right?"

Litton nodded, smiled. "You have a suitable contact object?"

"We brought something that should do," Garland said. "Max, give Mr. Litton the belt."

Jean Merriam looked back toward Jewett. Garland hadn't told her

that Litton's assignment was to be, had given her no specific instructions, but she'd already turned on the recorder in her handbag. Jewett was taking a large plastic envelope from the briefcase he'd laid beside his chair. He came over to the table, put the envelope before Litton, and returned to his place.

"Can you tell me specifically what you want to know concerning this subject?" Litton asked.

"To start with," Garland said, "just give us whatever you can get. I'm interested in general information."

Litton nodded, opened the plastic envelope, and took out a man's leather belt with a broad silver buckle. Almost immediately an expression of distaste showed in his face. He put the belt on the table, looked over at Garland.

"Mr. Garland," he said, "Miss Merriam may have told you that on occasion I'm offered a contact object I can't use. Unfortunately, this belt is such an object."

"What do you mean?" Garland asked. "Why can't you use it?"

"I don't know. It may be something about the belt itself, and it may be the person connected with it." Litton brushed the belt with his fingers. "I simply have a very unpleasant feeling about this object. It repels me." He smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid I must refuse to work with it."

"Well, now," Garland said, "I don't like to hear that. You've cost me a lot, you know. I'm willing to overlook it, but I do expect you to be cooperative in return."

Litton glanced at him, swallowed uneasily. "I understand--and I assure you you'll find me cooperative. If you'll give me some other assignment, I assure you--"

"No," Garland said. "No, right now I want information about this particular person, not somebody else. It's too bad if you don't much like to work with the belt, but that's your problem. We went to a lot of trouble to get the belt for you. Let me state this quite clearly, Mr. Litton. You owe me the information, and I think you'd better get it now."

His voice remained even, but the menace in the words was undisguised. The king beast was stepping out from cover, and Jean's palms were suddenly wet. She saw Litton's face whiten.

"I suppose I do owe it to you," Litton said after a moment. He hesitated again. "But this isn't going to be easy."

Garland snorted. "You're getting ten thousand dollars for a few minutes' work!"

"That isn't it. I... ." Litton shook his head helplessly, got to his feet. He indicated the curtained alcove at the side of the room. "I'll go in there. At best, this will be a difficult contact to attempt. I can't be additionally distracted by knowing that three people are staring at me."

"You'll get the information?" Garland asked.

litton looked at him, said sullenly, "I always get the information." He picked up the belt, went to the alcove, and disappeared through the curtains.

Garland turned toward Jean Merriam. "Start timing him," he said.

She nodded, checked her watch. The room went silent, and immediately Jean felt a heavy oppression settle on her. It was almost as if the air had begun to darken around them. Frightened, she thought, *Nick hates that freak... Has he decided to kill him?*

She pushed the question away and narrowed her attention to the almost inaudible ticking of the tiny expensive watch. After a while she realized that Garland was looking at her again. She met his eyes, whispered, "Three minutes and ten seconds." He nodded.

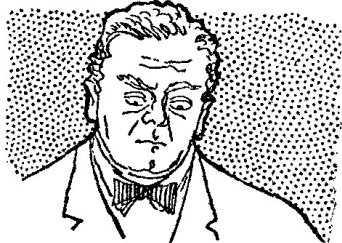
There was a sound from within the alcove. It was not particularly loud, but in the stillness it was startling enough to send a new gush of fright through Jean. She told herself some minor piece of furniture, a chair, a small side table, had fallen over, been knocked over on the carpeting. She was trying to think of some reason why Litton should have knocked over a chair in there when the curtains before the alcove were pushed apart. Litton moved slowly out into the room.

He stopped a few feet from the alcove. He appeared dazed, half-stunned, like a man who'd been slugged hard in the head and wasn't sure what had happened. His mouth worked silently, his lips writhing in slow, stiff contortions as if trying to shape words that couldn't be pronounced. Abruptly he started forward. Jean thought for a moment he was returning to the table, but he went past it, pace quickening, on past Garland and herself without glancing at either of them. By then he was almost running, swaying from side to side in long staggering steps, and she realized he was hurrying toward the French doors which stood open on the wide veranda overlooking the park. Neither Garland nor Jewett moved from their chairs, and Jean, unable to speak, twisted around to look after Litton as they were doing. She saw him run across the veranda, strike the hip-high railing without checking, and go on over.

. . .

The limousine moved away from the Torrell Arms through the sunlit park, Jewett at the wheel, Garland and Jean Merriam in the back seat. There was no siren wail behind them, no indication of disturbance, nothing to suggest that anyone else was aware that a few minutes ago a man had dropped into the neatly trimmed park shrubbery from the eighteenth floor of the great apartment hotel.

"You could have made use of him," Jean said. "He could have been of more value to you than anyone else in the world. But you intended to kill him from the start, didn't you?"



Garland didn't reply for a moment. Then he said, "I could have made use of him, sure. So could anyone else with ten thousand dollars to spare, or some way to put pressure on him. I don't need somebody like Litton to stay on top. And I don't like the rules changed. When Phleger found Litton, he started changing them. It could happen again. Litton had to be taken out."

"Max could have handled that," Jean said. Her hands had begun to tremble again; she twisted them tightly together around the strap of the handbag. "What did you do to get Litton to kill himself?"

Garland shook his head. "I didn't intend him to kill himself. Max was to take care of him afterward."

"You did something to him."

Garland drew a long sighing breath. "I was just curious," he said. "There's something I wonder about now and then. I thought Litton might be able to tell me, so I gave him the assignment."

"What assignment? He became someone else for three minutes. What happened to him?"

Garland's head turned slowly toward her. She noticed for the first time that his face was almost colorless. "That was Frank Phleger's belt," he said. "Max's boys caught up with him last night. Phleger's been dead for the last eight hours."

# "Caretaker"

Published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (July 1953), though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



## caretaker

By JAMES H. SCHMITZ



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GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION

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"Tell him," said Commander Lowndes' voice, speaking from the great exploration ship stationed on the other side of the world, "that we're recording it officially as Hulman's Planet. I think that might please him."

Marder hesitated with his reply. Through the viewport of the parked little scout flier, he looked out at the vast, shadowy valley before him, at green and scarlet swamps, at gleaming dark waters threaded



around them. A huge, blue-wooded wave of mountains rose beyond, the setting sun just touching their crest. In a quarter of an hour, it would be completely dark. His glance turned, almost reluctantly, to the substantial but incongruous reality of Hulman's house nearby, its upper story and roof mirrored in the tiny swamp lake.

"No, it wouldn't please him," he said. "Boyce suggested it during our first visit with Hulman today. He wants us to record it instead as--I'll spell it--C-r-e-s-g-y-t-h. Cresgyth. That's his phonetic interpretation of the name given it by the people here."

"Fair enough," Commander Lowndes agreed, "if that's how he wants it." He inquired whether Marder had anything to add to the present report.

"Not now," Marder said. "I'll call you back after we've met his woman."

"His wife," Lowndes corrected him carefully. "I'm glad it happened to be you and Boyce who found Hulman. You're reliable men; you in particular, Marder. I don't need to emphasize that Hulman's chance discovery of what appears to be the first genuine human race ever encountered outside of Earth is of primary importance... ." He continued to emphasize that obvious fact at some length. "Boyce might be inclined to hurry through the--ah, diplomatic overtures," he concluded. "You'll be careful about that part of it, Marder?"

"Very careful," Marder promised.

"On the two continents we've scanned so far, we've found no traces of human inhabitants, present or past. It's possible that Hulman's acquaintances are the sole survivors of humanity here. If we frighten the tribe into hiding, there may never be another contact--and within a hundred years or less, they may have become extinct."

"I understand."

"Fine. Now, then--what about these other creatures? What did Hulman have to say about them?"

"In the twenty years he's been marooned in this valley, he's had only three or four actual encounters with them--rather violent encounters, on his side. Apparently, they learned to avoid him after that. He seems," Marder added thoughtfully, "to have an almost psychopathic hatred for them."

"Not very surprising!" Lowndes' tone was reproving, reminding Marder that Hulman had been, for the past forty years, one of the great, legendary names of stellar exploration. "Deems' scout reports it bagged a couple of specimens a few hours ago and is bringing them in. The description checks with what Hulman gave you--a wormlike, blue body with a set of arms, legs, and a head. Out of water, they appear to wear some kind of clothes, presumably to conserve body moisture."

Marder agreed that it checked.

"We've found them remarkably elusive otherwise," Lowndes went on. "There seems to have been a widespread rudimentary civilization along the seas and major lake coasts--amphibious cave-builders is what they were originally. But all the caves we examined have been

movement for centuries, at least, which indicates major migratory movements of the species inland. The seas and lakes are almost completely barren of life above the plankton level."

There had been, according to Hulman, some kind of planetary catastrophe, Marder said. Hunger had driven the "snakes," as he called them, out of the great lake chains of their origin, up into the valley swamp lands and along the river courses, forcing the remnants of the mysterious human race ahead of them in their slow migration and gradually reducing the human living area. Hulman had killed six of the bluish, wormlike creatures in this section of the valley, in the first few years after he had crashed on the planet; after that, they had ceased to show up here. But, until now, he had been unable to give the humans more effective help.

After Lowndes cut contact, Marder remained sitting in the scout for a time, gazing out at the vast, darkening valley with troubled, puzzled eyes. For twenty-two years after the destruction of his ship, Hulman had lived here, separated from the humanity of his origin by an enormity of light-years, by the black abyss of space, but in the company of a woman who was of an alien, dying race.

"My wife!" Hulman had said, not defiantly but proudly, in speaking of her. "I called her Celia from the start, and she liked the name."

Hidden somewhere in the shadowed swamps, the woman he'd called Celia was watching Hulman's great log house until she could overcome her timidity of the visitors from space.

"She'll show up some time during the night," Hulman had laughed. "I'm leaving the doors open for her. I'll talk to her a little first, to reassure her, and you can meet her then. Meanwhile, why don't you have a look at her picture."

Years ago, as a boy, Marder had first seen Hulman's early paintings of the outer worlds and, like countless thousands of others before and since, he had felt his imagination swell and grow wide with the cosmic grandeur of Hulman's vision of universal life. In the fifty or so paintings he had seen in the log house that day, the great sweep of space had dwindled to something apparently much more commonplace. Hulman's imagination seemed to have shrunk to correspond to the physical limitations of the valley that confined him. However, he had retained a characteristic and extraordinary precision of lifelike detail, particularly in regard to the human beings he had found here.

They were beautiful creatures; but the paintings aroused a revulsion in Marder, in which he recognized a vague flavouring of terror. In the one painting Hulman showed them of the woman Celia, that effect was particularly pronounced. Marder found it difficult to explain to himself. Boyce seemed insensitive to it, and there was nothing in Hulman's words or attitude to provide additional clues.

Re-entering the house, Marder glanced back with more than a trace of uneasiness at the swamp from the doors Hulman had left open. After twenty years, Hulman should know whether danger threatened him from there; but for a visitor on a strange world, "it" and "they" were always present in the unknown dark outside--fears that usually were imaginary, but sometimes were not.

Marder smiled a little grimly at his own present apprehensions and

went in.

He found Hulman and Boyce in a cavernous cellar level beneath the house itself. It was well lit and showed familiar and reassuring features: power plants, storage rooms, even a hydroponic garden. The two men stood beside the opening of a deep fresh-water well, twenty feet across, which took up the left side of the main cellar hall.

"Sixty feet down, it's ten degrees Celsius," Hulman was stating, with a disarming houseowner's pride. He was a big man, rather heavy now, with a square-cut brown beard that showed only a few traces of grey. "I got the idea from Celia's people. Swamp water's none too healthy here at various seasons, but the well taps an underground river that's as pure as you could wish—" He caught sight of Marder. "Any news?" His face had become suddenly anxious.

"They're going to wait over there with the ship," Marder said, "a week or more, if required. We're to follow your judgment in every way in establishing contact with the Cresgythians."

"Good!" Hulman was obviously relieved. "We can't do anything till Celia comes in—and we'll have to be very tactful then. But I'm sure it won't take a week."

"What makes them so shy of us?" Boyce inquired. A shadow passed over Hulman's face. "It's not you," he said. "It's me... . Or it's an impression I gave them of the Earth kind of human beings."

Back upstairs, with the three of them settled comfortably in the big living-room, he explained. He'd given Boyce and Marder a room together on the top floor of the house, across a small hall from his own room and that of his wife.

"I've never asked Celia much about her people," he said. "There's some kind of very strong taboo that keeps her from talking about them. When I tried to press her for details at first, it was almost as if I were committing some sort of gross indecency. But I do know they hate violence, insanity—anything unbeautiful! And, you see... ."

When his ship crashed into the valley, he was the only man left alive on her out of the original crew of four. "Banning went insane two days before that and killed Nichols and Dawson," he said, his face drawn and taut, remembering it again over a period of twenty-two years. He paused. "And so I killed Banning before he could wreck the ship completely." He looked from one to the other of them. "It was unavoidable. But they never understood that, these people of Celia's."

"How did they find out?" Marder stirred uncomfortably.

Hulman shrugged. "I was unconscious for about a month and completely blind for six months afterward. They got me out of the wreck and nursed me back to life, but as soon as I was out of danger, only Celia would stay with me. She and I were alone for weeks before I regained my sight. How did they find out? They're sensitive in a number of ways. And there were those bodies in the ship. They—withdrew from me," he said with a grimace, "as soon as I no longer needed their help."

"Then in all this time," Marder said slowly, "you never were able to gain their confidence?"

Hulman stared at him a moment, apparently weighing the words. "It's not a question of confidence," he said finally. "It's a question of--well, I'm trying to tell you! I didn't mind being alone with Celia." He grinned suddenly, almost boyishly. "The others stayed in a small lake village they had a couple of miles up the valley, across the swamps. Celia went up there every few days, but she never brought anyone back with her. I suspected it was simply because I was an alien. I thought they'd get over that in time. Celia seemed happy enough, so it wasn't a very acute problem--"

He paused a few seconds, frowning. "One day, when she'd slipped away again, I remembered a pair of field glasses I'd taken off the ship, and I got them and trained them on the village. That was a very curious experience--I never have found a complete explanation for it. For just one instant, I had everything in the clearest possible focus. There were children playing on the platforms above the water; a few adults standing in the doorway of a house. And, suddenly, everything blurred!" Hulman gave a short hacking laugh. "Can you imagine that? They didn't want me to look at them, so they just blurred my vision!"

"Eh?" Boyce was frowning.

Marder sat still, startled, feeling the uneasiness growing up in him again.

Hulman smiled crookedly. "That's all I can tell you. The glasses had a four-mile range and they were functioning perfectly, but the instant I turned them on the village, the field blurred. I'd never felt so wholeheartedly--and successfully--snubbed before."

Boyce laughed uncomfortably and glanced at Marder. He was still more than a little in awe of Hulman, of the shining legend miraculously resurrected from the black tomb of space; but he, too, Marder decided, had the vague sense of something disturbing and out of order here. Well, so much the better. There would be two of them to look out for trouble, if trouble came.

"I'll admit the trick annoyed me," Hulman said, "as soon as I'd got over my first surprise at it. Next day, I announced to Celia that I was going over to the village. She made no objection, but she followed me at a distance--probably to make sure I didn't drown on the way. It's wet going around here. At last I came over a rise and found myself a hundred yards from the village, on the land side. Almost immediately, I realized they had abandoned it. I walked around it a while and found cooking fires still glowing; but nobody had waited to receive me. So I went home, insulted and very sulky--I wouldn't even talk to Celia until the next morning!"

He laughed. "I got over that in a hurry. And then I settled down to building us a house of our own, much bigger and better than anything they had in the village; and that took up all my time for several months. For that whole period, I ignored our neighbours quite as thoroughly as they had ignored me."

He grinned at his guests a little shamefacedly. "But you know, I couldn't keep it up then. There was something so curiously happy and peaceful about them, even if they were giving me the cold shoulder. And the one good look I'd had of them had showed me they were physically the most beautiful people I'd ever seen. One day, when Celia was gone, I made another trip to the village--with

exactly the same results as the first one. So I decided to look around for a less exclusive neighbourhood.

"I'd got the little flier of my ship repaired enough to take it off the ground and set it down again; and I calculated I'd salvaged enough fuel for at least one twenty-four-hour trip. Celia watched me take off. I flew high over the village and could see them down there, ignoring me as usual. Then I flew down the valley for almost fifty miles before I came across the first colony of the other ones--the snakes!"

Marder remembered something Lowndes had said. "Do the snakes live in caves?"

"No," Hulman said distastefully. "That's what fooled me. It was a village of snake houses set into the head of a little lake, almost like the one here. I set down on the lake, coasted up to the village, climbed up a ladder, and saw them!"

He shuddered. "They just stood there, very quietly, watching me from the doors and windows. What made it worse somehow was that they wore clothes--but the clothes didn't cover enough. Those weaving, soft, blue bodies and staring eyes! I backed off down the ladder, with my gun ready, in case they rushed me; but they never moved... "

He had found eight more colonies of the snakes farther down the valley, but no trace of another tribe of his beautiful humanoids. He flew up the valley then, high up into the mountains, almost exhausting his fuel; and beside a glacier-fed mountain lake was a tiny stake village, built into the water. And they were snakes again.

"At the time, I didn't know just what to make of it. There was the possibility that my village represented an advance troop of human beings into a land of snakes. But I suspected--I felt even then, that it was the other way around; that it was the snakes that were encroaching on the humans. So I swore to myself that as long as I lived, at least, human beings were going to hold this section of the valley undisturbed and in safety.

"When I came back, I said to Celia--she was standing at the same spot I'd seen her last, as if she'd never left it--'Celia, I must speak to your people. Go tell them I will come again tomorrow and that they must not run away.' She looked at me silently for a long time, and then she turned and left in the direction of the village. She came back late at night and crept into my arms and said, 'They have promised to wait for you.'

"I set out next morning, full of great plans. The snakes lived in widely scattered settlements, after all. The villagers and I could wipe out those settlements one by one, until we'd cleared the land about us. That was the natural solution, wasn't it? I didn't realize then how different, in some ways, Celia's people were from us!"

Boyce asked uneasily, "What happened?"

"What happened?" Hulman repeated. "Well, I came over that rise, and there the village was. This time I knew they'd stayed at home! Then, not twenty feet off my path, I saw two of the snakes standing in the bushes, one watching me, the other looking at the village. Each had a kind of chunky crossbow over his shoulders; and they couldn't be seen from the village... "

He paused and shook his head. "So I shot them both down, before they got over their surprise. That was all." He looked from one to the other again. "It was the natural thing to do, wasn't it?"

Boyce nodded uncertainly. Marder said nothing.

Hulman leaned forward. "But apparently, from the point of view of the villagers, it wasn't! Because when I was done with the snakes—one of them took three shots before it would lie still—the village was empty again. When I got back home, I was actually sick with disappointment. And then I discovered that Celia was gone."

"That was a bad three days. But she came back then. And on the morning she came back, I discovered they'd broken up the village overnight and moved on. I think they're not more than ten or twenty miles distant from here, but I never tried to look them up again."

Boyce said puzzled, "But I don't see—"

"Neither did I," Hulman interrupted, "until it was too late." He gave his short bark of laughter again; there was, Marder realized, a sort of suppressed fury in it. "They won't kill their enemies—they're too polite for that! So their enemies are gradually squeezing them out of existence."

The three men studied each other in silence for a moment. Then Marder asked slowly, "Captain Hulman, what do you expect us to do in this situation?"

"Kill the snakes!" Hulman said promptly. "As many as we can find. If the human beings of this world won't defend themselves we'll have to defend them. As long as I've been here, no party of snakes has come past this point of the valley. A few of them have tried!" His eyes glittered with open hatred. "But I can't be on guard here forever. It's up to you and the other men on the ship to do the job right!"

. . .

Though Boyce was sleeping uneasily, Marder hadn't yet shut his eyes. The uneasiness was in him, too; and in him it was strong enough to offset the fatigue and excitement of the day. Vague night sounds came into the room they shared, a plaintive, thin calling like the distant cry of a bird. Not too different from the sounds on many other worlds he had known, and, as on all worlds that were new and strange, faintly tinged with the menace that was largely in the imagination.

But it was Hulman himself who was the principal cause of Marder's uneasiness.

The face of the explorer, the rumbling, angry voice, his monomaniacal devotion to the strange humanoids kept recurring in his mind. Nothing Hulman had done previously to stimulate the imagination of Earthmen toward the laborious exploration of space could equal this final accidental achievement: to have encountered the first other human beings Earthmen had yet discovered in the Universe. Men had looked out from their world like children staring into a great, dark, forbidding room. They had found space to be

people sparsely with intelligent life--life that was sometimes horrible, sometimes merely odd, sometimes beautiful in weird, incomprehensible ways. But never enough like Man to be acceptable!

Hulman's fierce insistence on protecting what seemed to be the dying remnants of a human race against its own wishes was something Marder could understand well enough. He did not doubt that Boyce and the others would respond wholeheartedly to that insistence. Here was the proof that human life could rise spontaneously and endlessly throughout all the galaxies, that the Universe was not a darkened room, after all, but one lighted forever by the fires of humanity.

They had to protect that proof... .

Strangely enough, though Boyce was asleep and he awake, it was Boyce who first seemed aware of motion in the house. Marder heard him breathe and stir unquietly, and then come awake and grow still, listening, waiting. He smiled faintly at the familiar signs, the tense alertness, the silent questioning of the strange world about them: "What is it? Who moves?" On many other strange, dark worlds, he had been among Earthmen as they came awake, asking that question. And he with them.... .

He grew aware of it then: there was motion in the house now, beyond the walls. Gradually, it resolved itself into slow, heavy steps on the carpeted flooring; and the picture of Hulman leaving his room to peer down the stairs came so convincingly into his mind that at once he relaxed again. And he was aware that Boyce was relaxing too.

Neither of them spoke. After a time, Hulman went back to his room, walking carefully so as not to disturb his guests; and the house was still. Presently, Boyce was sleeping again. Marder tried to pick up the train of thoughts he had been following before the disturbance; but they eluded him now. Fatigue grew up in him like waves of mental darkness, smothering the remnants of uneasiness; and reluctantly he let himself drift off.

. . .

The blast that roused him seemed to have gone off almost beside his head.

He found himself standing in the centre of the room, gun in one hand, flashbeam in the other. Boyce's wide back was just disappearing through the door into the dark hall beyond; and Boyce's shout was in his ears:

"Hulman! They've got Hulman!"

Marder halted a fraction of a second, checked by the ridiculous hesitation of a man who doesn't want to go out into a strange house undressed; then he was following Boyce. As he plunged down the broad staircase to the lower floor of Hulman's house, a memory flashed into his mind: the guns that Hulman, cut off from standard power sources, had manufactured for himself here and shown them earlier in the evening. It had been the report of a missile gun that had awakened him; one of Hulman's own.

He lost Boyce's light for a moment when he reached the lower floor, and stood in indecision until he heard a muffled shouting to his left and remembered the descent into the cellars. As he reached the door, there was another angry shout from Boyce, and a blaze of pink light from below. Boyce had cut loose with his gun, so he was in contact with the intruders; and things would have to be finished very quickly now—a thermion spray was not designed to be an indoor weapon!

Marder reached the bottom of the cellar stairs seconds later.

A hedge of flame to their right, steady, impenetrable and soundless, slanted from the wall half around the great well. It cut them off from further advance; presumably it had cornered their antagonists.

Boyce, dressed in nightshorts, turned a furiously contorted face to him.

"One of them ducked around the corner over there; it can't get out. It was carrying Hulman!"

"Where is Hulman?"

"Over there—dead!"

Marder squinted against the reflected glare of the fire. Something dark lay hunched against the wall beyond the well; that was all he could make out.

"Sure he's dead?" His voice carefully matter-of-fact.

"Of course!" Boyce said beside him. The hand that held the gun was shaking. "When it dropped him—when I snapped a bolt at it—I saw he'd been shot through the head with his own gun!"

"The natives?" Marder asked, still carefully.

"No. Something—those snakes he was afraid of—some animal. It whipped around the corner before I saw it very clearly--"

His voice had gone dull. Marder glanced at him quickly. Boyce was in a state of semi-shock, and they had only a few minutes before the fire ate far enough into the walls to threaten their retreat upstairs and out of the house. He had no personal qualms about leaving Hulman's body and Hulman's slayers to roast together—the coincidence of murder on that particular night was something one could figure out more conveniently later—but Boyce might present a problem.

A voice addressed them from out of a passage beyond the well.

"You who were his friends," it said, "will you listen to me?"

Marder felt his scalp crawling. "Who are you?" he called back.

"He called me his wife."

Boyce started violently, but Marder waved him to silence. It was a rich, feminine voice, a trifle plaintive; it was not difficult to fit it mentally to the painting of Hulman's wife.

"Why did you kill him?" There was a pause.



"But I thought you understood," the voice said. "Your medical men would say that he had been insane for twenty years, as he counted time. They would have forced him back into sanity. I could not bear the thought that he should suffer that."

Marder swallowed hard. "Suffer what?"

"Are you all fools? He was a fool, though I loved him. He could not see behind the shape of things. So--here among us--he saw shapes he could bear to see. In those moments when sanity came to him and he really saw what was there--then he killed. Are you all like that?"

Boyce stared at Marder, his mouth working. "What is she talking about?" he whispered hoarsely. "Is the snake with her?"

"Go upstairs, Boyce! Wait for me outside!"

"Are you going to kill the snake?"

"Yes, I'll kill the snake."

Boyce disappeared up the stairs.

"The house is burning, but there is some time left," Marder told the voice then. "Is there any way you can save yourself?"

"I can leave by the river that flows under the well," the voice said, "if you do not shoot at me."

"I won't shoot at you."

"May I take his body?"

Marder hesitated. "Yes."

"And you will all leave with your ship? I loved him, though my people thought it strange almost beyond their tolerance. They are foolish, too, yet not as foolish as you are. They saw what was in his mind and not beyond that, and so they were afraid of him. But he is dead now and there is nothing that your people and mine could share. We are too different. Will you leave?"

Marder moistened his lips. "We'll leave," he said, seeing it all now, and glad he had sent Boyce upstairs. "What did you see beyond what was in his mind?"

"A brave spirit, though very frightened," the voice said slowly.

"He ventured far and far and far into the dark of which he was afraid. I loved him for that!" It paused. "I am coming now," it added, "and I think you had better look away."

Marder did not intend to look away, but at the last moment, when there was movement at the corner of the passage, he did. He saw only a swift undulating shadow pass along the wall, pause and stoop quickly, rise again with a bulky burden clasped to it, glide on and vanish.

He stood staring at the blank wall until there was a faint splash in the well far below him.

The great ship was drifting slowly above the night side of the world it was leaving, when Commander Lowndes joined Marder at the observation port.

"Boyce will make out all right," he said moodily. "He only guessed part of the truth, and that bit is being taken from his mind." He studied Marder thoughtfully. "If you'd looked squarely at the thing, we might have had to give you the same treatment. Our pickled specimens are pretty damned hideous."

Marder shrugged. Lowndes sat on the edge of a table.

"Selective hysterical blindness maintained for twenty-two years—with his own type of artistic hallucinations thrown in! I can't help wishing it hadn't happened to Hulman."

"He didn't maintain it throughout," Marder said slowly. "And whenever he saw them clearly, he killed them... ."

"Who wouldn't? I almost feel," Lowndes said, "like getting out of space and staying out, for good!"

Which was giving it the ultimate in emphasis.

"What are you reporting?" Marder asked.

"That Hulman died here, quite peacefully, about a year before we found him—leaving a diary of inspiring courage and devotion to space exploration behind him. We'll have time enough to work up the diary. That should keep everybody happy. Marder," he said suddenly, waving his hand at the observation port, "do you think there actually are—well, people out there. Somewhere?"

Marder looked out at the vast, star-studded, shining black immensity.

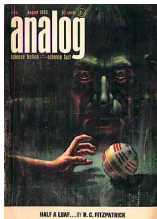
"I hope so," he said.

"Do you think we'll ever find them?"

"I don't know," Marder said thoughtfully. "They've never found us."

# "Sleep No More"

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Three weeks passed before Telzey returned to Robane's house.

Her encounter with the spook created very little stir. She'd asked her companions not to talk about it, on the ground that it would upset her family if they learned she'd been in danger. Some of the group felt it was a shame to keep so thrilling an adventure a secret, but they'd agreed. The park officials wanted no publicity either. The only news mention of the incident was that a spook, which somehow had found its way from one of the northern wildlife preserves into Melna Park, had been killed there by a visitor's guard dog, and that the park was being carefully scanned to make sure no more of the dangerous animals had strayed in. Telzey's story to her friends was that there'd been a malfunction in the Cloudsplitter. The car had settled inertly to the ground, and when she got out to do something about it, the malfunction apparently cut out again, and the Cloudsplitter floated up out of her reach before she could stop it and drifted away. She'd started walking back to Cil Canyon, and presently found the spook on her trail. The Cloudsplitter was located by a police car next day, fifty miles beyond the park borders, and restored to its owner. Before leaving the park, Telzey quietly recovered Dunker's watch and the other articles Robane had made her discard at the house.

The only people who could see a connection between the dead spook and Robane were the smugglers who'd provided him with an animal of that kind, and they'd have no interest in the fact that it was dead. If anyone who might be associated with Robane in his general work with psi machines became aware of his present condition, the mental damage would be attributed to a miscalculated experiment. Psi machines were considered uncertain devices in that respect. In any case, there was nothing to link Telzey to him. Nor was there really any reason why she couldn't go quietly back to Melna Park at any time to conclude her investigation. She wouldn't need to come

within half a mile of the house for that.

She kept putting it off. She wasn't quite sure why. When the weekend came around, she simply found herself unwilling to make the trip. Robane was unfinished business. It wasn't usually her way at all to leave unfinished business lying around. But she told herself she'd take care of it the following week.

One night then she had a dream. It was an uncomfortable, sweaty, nightmarish sort of dream, though nothing much really happened. It seemed to go on for some time. She appeared to be floating in the air near Robane's house, watching it from various angles, aware that Robane watched her in turn, hating her for what she'd done to him and waiting for a chance to destroy her. In the dream, Telzey reminded herself quite reasonably that it wasn't possible--Robane couldn't remember what she'd done or anything about her; he wouldn't recognize her if she were standing before him. Then she realized suddenly that it wasn't Robane but the house itself which watched her with such spiteful malice, and that something was about to happen to her. She woke up with a start of fright.

That settled it. She lay awake a while, considering. A weekend was coming up again. She could fly to Melna Park after her last scheduled lecture in the afternoon, and register at a park hotel. She'd have two full days if necessary to wind up matters at Robane's house. That certainly would be time enough. She'd extract the remaining information she wanted from him, then see to it that somebody among the park authorities discovered a good reason to pay the recluse a visit at his home. When they saw the condition he was in, they'd transfer him to an institution; and Robane shouldn't be disturbing her sleep again.

\* \* \*

He did, however, that night in her room at the park hotel. Or something did. She'd retired soon after dinner, wanting to get off to an early start, found then that she wasn't at all sleepy, tuned in somnomic, switched on the window screen, and went over to it in the darkened room. She stood there a while, looking out. In the cluster light, Melna Park sloped away, dim and vast, toward the northern mountains. Robane's house lay behind a fold of the mountains. At the restricted pace possible in the park, it would take her almost four hours to get to the house from the hotel tomorrow--twice the time she'd spent crossing half a continent from Peharron College in the evening.



The music was producing drowsiness in her, but tensions seemed to fight it. It was almost an hour before she got to bed and fell asleep, and it turned then into an uncomfortable night. There were periods of disagreeable dreaming, of which she could recall only scraps when she woke up. For the most part, she napped fitfully; kept coming awake. Something in her simply didn't want to relax; and as she began to go to sleep and her mental screens loosened normally, it drew them abruptly tight, bringing her back to weary alertness. She was up at daybreak at last, heavy-lidded and irritable. But a cold shower opened her eyes, and after she'd had breakfast, she seemed reasonably refreshed.

Ten minutes later, she was on her way to Robane's house through a breezy late-autumn morning. Melna Park was famed for varied and spectacular color changes in its vegetation as winter approached, and the tourist traffic was much heavier now than three weeks ago. Almost everywhere Telzey looked, aircars floated past, following the rolling contours of the ground. The Cloudsplitter moved along at the steady thirty miles an hour to which it was restricted. She'd slipped the canopy down; sun warmth seeped through her, while a chilled wind intermittently whipped her hair about her cheeks. Nighttime tensions grew vague and unreal. The relaxation which had eluded Telzey at the hotel came to her, and she was tempted to ground the car and settle down for an hour's nap in the sunshine before going on. But she wanted to reach the house early enough to be finished with Robane before evening.

Near noon, she reached the series of mile-wide plateaus dropping from the point where Cil Canyon cut through the mountains to the southern forests where Robane's house stood. She circled in toward the house, brought it presently into the car's viewscreen. It looked precisely as she remembered seeing it in the cluster light, neat, trim, quiet. A maintenance robot moved slowly about in the garden.

She considered relaxing her screens and directing a probing thought

Robane's mind from where she was. But she had most of the day left, and a remnant of uneasiness made her wary. She dropped the car behind a rise which hid Robane's house from her, moved on back of the rise for about a mile and settled to the ground at the edge of a stand of trees. Carrying a pocket telscreen, she walked to the top of the rise and across it, threading her way among the trees until she came to a point from where she could watch the house without being picked up in scanning devices from there.

She kept the house area in the telscreen for about ten minutes. The only sign of life was the tending machine in the garden. That was out of sight in some shrubbery for a while, then emerged and began moving back and forth across one of the lawns while a silvery mist arising from the shrubbery indicated a watering system had been turned on. Finally the robot trundled to the side of the house and paused before it. A wide door slid open in the wall, and the machine rolled inside.

Telzey put the telscreen down. She'd had a look through the door before it closed. A large aircar stood behind it. Robane, as was to be expected in his present state, should be at home.

And now, she decided, a light--a very light--probe. Just enough to make quite sure Robane was, in fact, as she'd left him, that there'd been no unforeseen developments of any kind around here.

Leaning against the sun-warm trunk of a tall tree she closed her eyes and thinned the screens about her mind, let them open out. She felt a sudden tug of anxiety resistance, but the screens stayed open. The blended whispers of life currents about her began to flow into her awareness.

Everything seemed normal... . She flicked a thread of thought down to the forest then, to Robane's house, touched for a moment the patterns she remembered.

Something like a shout flashed through her mind. Not words, nothing even partly verbalized; nevertheless, it was a clear sharp command, accompanied by a gust of hate like a curse. The hate was directed at her. The command--

In the split instant of shock as her screens contracted into a tight hard shield, she'd seemed aware of a blurred dark image rushing toward her. Then the image, the command-and-hate impressions, the touch of Robane's mind, were blocked off together by the shield.

Telzey opened her eyes, glanced about. For long seconds, she remained motionless. The trees stirred above as a breeze rustled past. Here in the world of material reality, nothing seemed changed or different. But what had she run into at Robane's house?

A sound reached her ... the rolling thunder of explosion. It faded away, echoing across the plain.

It seemed to have come from the forest to the south. Telzey listened a moment, moved forward until she could look out from behind the trees.

An ugly rolling cloud of yellow smoke partly concealed the area where the house had stood. But it was clear that house and garden had been violently obliterated.

And that, Telzey thought numbly, was in part her answer.

\* \* \*

By the time she got back to the Cloudsplitter and lifted it from the ground, tourist aircars were gliding in cautiously toward the site of the explosion. A ranger car screamed down out of the sky, passed above her and vanished. Telzey remained behind the rise and continued to move to the west. She was almost certain that whoever had blown up Robane in his house wasn't physically in the area. But there was no need to expose herself any more than she'd already done.

Robane had been used as bait--bait to trap a psi. The fact that he'd been destroyed then indicated that whoever set the trap believed the psi for whom it was intended had been caught. And there must be a reason for that belief. In whatever she did now, she'd better be extremely careful.

She brought the thought impressions she'd recorded back into awareness, examined them closely.

They were brief but strong and vivid. She began to distinguish details she hadn't consciously noted in the instant of sensing them. This psi was human, must be; and yet the flavor of the thought forms suggested almost an alien species. They were heavy with arrogance as if the psi himself felt he was different from and superior to human beings. The thrust of hard power carrying the impressions had been as startling to her as the sudden angry roar of an animal nearby. She recalled feeling that a curse was being pronounced on her.

And blended in was a communication--not intended for her, and not too clear. It was, Telzey thought, the sort of mental shortcode which developed among associated telepaths: a flick of psi which might transmit an involved meaning. She could guess the basic meaning here. Success! The quarry was snared! He'd had one or more companions. His own kind, whatever it was.

Finally, the third part, the least clear section of the thought structure. It had death in it. Her death. It was a command; and she was almost certain it had been directed at the indistinct shape she'd seemed to glimpse rushing toward her. Something that might have been a large animal.

Her death ... how? Telzey swallowed uncomfortably. They might have been involved with the ring which had catered to Robane's criminal inclinations--minds like that would have no objection to delivering one human being to another, to be hunted down and killed for sport. But psis would have recognized a special value in Robane. He was a precision instrument that could provide them with machines to extend and amplify their powers. His inventive genius had been at the disposal of a telepath who'd set him problems and left him to work them out, not knowing why he did it, or for whose benefit, in the solitude of Melna Park.

She'd put an end to Robane's usefulness and might presently have come on clues pointing to them in the unconscious recesses of his mind if they hadn't discovered what had been done. They knew it

was the work of another psi. She'd sealed most of Robane's memories away but left them intact; and that told them she planned to return to look for more information. They could have destroyed Robane at once, but they wanted to dispose of the unidentified meddler. So they'd set up the trap with Robane's mind as the bait. The psi who touched that mind again would spring the trap. And, some twenty minutes ago, cautious and light as her touch had been, she'd sprung it.

Immediately afterwards, she'd locked her screens. In doing it, she might have escaped whatever was planned for her. But she had to accept the probability that she still was in the trap--and she didn't yet know what it was.

The Cloudsplitter went gliding at its thirty miles an hour across the upper plateaus of the plain, a hundred feet above the ground. The southern forest where the house had stood had sunk out of sight. The flanks of the mountains curved away ahead. Telzey turned the car in farther toward them. Another car slipped past at the edge of her vision, half a mile to the left. She had an impulse to follow it, to remain near other people. But she kept the Cloudsplitter on its course. The company of others would bring her no safety, and mingling with them might distract her attention dangerously.

She set the car on automatic control, sat gazing at the mountains through the windshield. The other impression at the moment of touching Robane's mind--the shape like an animal's--it might have been a hallucination, her own mind's symbol of some death energy directed at her. Psi could kill swiftly, could be used as a weapon by minds which understood its use for that purpose and could handle the forces they turned on another. But if that had been the trap, it seemed to her she would have interpreted it differently--not as a moving shadow, a half-glimpsed animal shape, an image darting toward her.

What else could it be? Telzey shook her head. She didn't know, and she couldn't guess. She could find out; eventually she'd have to find out. But not yet.

She glanced at the car clock. Give it another hour. Evidently they hadn't identified her physically; but it could do no harm to place more physical distance between herself and the area of Robane's house before she made any revealing moves. Mentally, she should have seemed to vanish for them as her shield closed. The difficulty was that the shield couldn't stay closed indefinitely.

. . .

An hour later, the effects of having passed a night with very little sleep were becoming noticeable. There were moments of reduced wakefulness and physical lassitude of which she'd grow suddenly aware. The nearest ranger car would have provided her with a stimulant if she'd put out a communicator call for one, but her enemies might have means of monitoring events in the park she didn't know about. It didn't seem at all advisable to draw attention to herself in that way, or in any other way. She'd simply have to remain alert long enough to get this situation worked out.



the test she intended was a simple one. The psi shield would flash open, instantly be closed again. During that moment, her perceptions, fully extended, would be set to receive two impressions: thought patterns of the telepath who'd laid a trap for her, and the animal shape involved with the trap. If either was still in her mental vicinity, some trace would be obtained, however faintly. If neither was there, she could begin to believe she'd eluded them. Not indefinitely; psis could determine who had destroyed Robane's effectiveness if they put in enough work on it. But that would be another problem. Unless they were as intently prepared as she was to detect some sign from her now, the momentary exposure of her mind should pass unnoticed.

The shield flicked open, flicked shut, as her sensitized perceptions made their recording. Telzey sat still for a moment then, feeling the heavy drumming of fear.

Slowly, like an afterimage, she let the recorded picture form again in awareness.

A dark beast shape. What kind of beast she didn't know. Something like a great uncouth baboon—a big heavy head, strong body supported on four huge hand-paws.

As the shield opened, she had the feeling of seeing it near her, three-dimensional, every detail clearly etched though it stood in a vague nothingness. The small red eyes stared in her direction. And short as the moment of exposure was, she was certain she'd seen it start in recognition, begin moving toward her, before it vanished beyond the shield again.

What was it? A projection insinuated into her mind by the other telepath in the instant of contact between them—something she was supposed to develop to her own destruction now?

She didn't think so. It seemed too real, too alertly, menacingly, alive. In some way she'd seen what was there—the vague animal shape she'd glimpsed—nearby and no longer vague. In physical space, it might be hundreds of miles away; or perhaps it was nowhere in that sense at present. In the other reality they shared, she hadn't drawn away from it. After its attention was turned on her, it had waited while she was concealed by her shield, moved closer at the brief new impression it received of her mind... What would happen when, in its manner, it reached her, touched her?

She didn't know the answer to that. She let the image fade, began searching for traces of the telepathic mind associated with it. After long seconds, she knew nothing had been recorded in her perceptions there. The psi was gone. He'd prepared the trap, set the creature on her; then apparently turned away—as if confident he'd done all that needed to be done to dispose of her.

The thought was briefly more chilling than the waiting beast image. But if it was only an animal she had to deal with, Telzey told herself, escape might be an easier matter than it would have been if minds like the one she had encountered had remained on her trail.

The animal still seemed bad enough. She'd never heard of a creature which tracked down prey by sensing mental emanations, as this one evidently did. It might be a native of some unrecorded world, brought to the Hub for the specific purpose of turning it into a hunter

of human psis--psis who could make trouble for its masters. It knew about mind shields. Either it had dealt with such defenses in its natural state, or it had been trained to handle them. At any rate, it seemed quite aware that it need only wait with a predator's alert patience until the quarry's shield relaxed. As hers would eventually. She couldn't stay awake indefinitely; and asleep she didn't have enough control to keep so steady and relentless a watcher from detecting mental activity.

It had been a trap in several ways then. If she'd entered Robane's house, she would have vanished in the explosion with him. Since she'd checked first, they'd turned this thing on her. It was either to destroy her outright or force her into behavior that would identify her to its masters--and she had to get rid of it before the need to sleep brought down her defenses.

She felt the psi bolt begin to assemble itself. No ordinary brief sharp slash of psi was likely to serve here. She'd turn the heaviest torrent of energy she could channel on her uncanny pursuer. Something like a black electric swirling about her was sending ripples over her skin. Not at all a pleasant sensation, but she let it develop. It would be to her disadvantage to wait any longer; and since the psis weren't around themselves, this was as good a place as any for the encounter. The Cloudsplitter was drifting up a wide valley into the higher ranges of the park. There was a chill in the breeze and few tourists about. At the moment she saw only three aircars, far ahead.

The energy pattern grew denser, became a shuddering thunder. She gathered it in, held it aimed like a gun, let it build up until she was trembling almost unbearably with its violence, then abruptly released her shield.

Almost at once, seeing the dark shape plunge at her through the nothing-space of psi, she knew that on this beast it wasn't going to work. Energy smashed about it but found no entry point; it wasn't being touched. She expended the bolt's fury as the shape rushed up, snapped the shield shut before it reached her--immediately found herself slewing the Cloudsplitter around in a sharp turn as if to avoid a physical collision. There was a sound then, a deep bubbling howl, which chilled her through and through.

Glancing around, she saw it for an instant twenty feet behind the car--no mind image, but a thick powerful animal body, plunging head downward, stretched out as if it were diving, through the air of Melna Park. Then it vanished.

It was a psi creature whose natural prey were other psi creatures, she thought; that was why she hadn't been able to touch it. Its species had a developed immunity to such defensive blasts and could ignore them. It had a sense through which it traced out and approached the minds of prospective victims, and it had the psi ability to flick itself across space when it knew by the mind contact where they were to be found. For the kill it needed only physical weapons--the strength of its massive body, its great teeth and the broad flat nails of the reaching beast hands which had seemed only inches from her when the shield shut them from view. If she hadn't swerved aside in that instant, the thing would have crashed down into the car and torn the life out of her moments later.

Her attempt to confront it had made the situation more immediately

dangerous. Handling that flood of deadly energy had drained her strength; and a kind of dullness was settling on her now, composed in part of growing fatigue and in part of a puzzled wonder that she really seemed able to do nothing to get away from the thing. It was some minutes before she could push the feeling aside and get her thoughts again into some kind of order.

The creature's dip through space seemed to have confused it temporarily, at any rate, it had lost too much contact with her to materialize near her again, though she didn't doubt it was still very close mentally. There were moments when she thought she could sense its presence just beyond the shield. She'd had a respite, but no more than that. It probably wasn't even a very intelligent animal; a species with its abilities and strength wouldn't need much mental equipment to get along in its world. But she was caught in a game which was being played by the animal's rules, not hers, and there still seemed no way to get around them.

Some time past the middle of the afternoon, she edged the Cloudsplitter down into a cluster of thickets on sloping ground, brushing through the vegetation until the car was completely concealed. She shut off its engines and climbed out, stood swaying unsteadily for a moment, then turned and pushed her way out of the thickets.

If she'd remained sitting in the car, she would have been asleep in minutes. By staying on her feet, she might gain another period of time to work out the solution. But she wasn't far from the point where she'd have to call the park rangers and ask them to get a fix on her and come to her help. Stimulants could keep her awake for several days.

At that point, she would have invited danger from a new source. A public appeal for help from someone in Melna Park could be a beacon to her enemies; she had to count on the possibility that they waited alertly for just such an indication that their hunter had the quarry pinned down. She might be identified very quickly then.

But to try to stay awake on her own for even another fifteen or twenty minutes could be fatal. The thing was *near*! A dozen times she'd been on the verge of drifting into a half-dreaming level where outside reality and the universe of psi seemed to blend, and had been jolted awake by a suddenly growing sense of the psi beast's presence.

Getting out of the car and on her feet had roused her a little. The cold of the mountain air produced a further stimulating effect. She'd come far up into a region of the park which already seemed touched by winter. It might have been almost half an hour since she'd last seen a tourist car or any other indication of humanity on the planet.

She stood looking around, rubbing her arms with her hands to warm them. She was above a rounded dip in the mountains between two adjoining ridges. Hip-high brown grass and straggling trees filled the dip. A swift narrow stream wound through it. She'd grounded the car three quarters of the way up the western side. The far side was an almost vertical rock wall, festooned with yellow cobwebs of withering vines. That half of the dip was still bathed in sunlight coming over the top of the ridge behind her. Her side was in shadow.

She shivered in the chill, shook her head to drive away another wave

of drowsiness. She seemed unable to concentrate on the problem of the psi beast. Her thoughts shifted to the sun-warmed rocks she'd crossed at the top of the ridge as she turned the Cloudsplitter down into the little valley.

She pictured herself sitting there, warmed by the sun. It was a convincing picture. In imagination she felt the sun on her shoulders and back, the warm rock beneath her, saw the dry thorny fall growth about--

Her eyes flickered, widened thoughtfully. After a moment, she brought the picture back into her mind.

I'm here, she thought. I'm sitting in the sun. I'm half asleep, nodding, feeling the warmth--forgetting I'm in danger. The wind blows over the rocks, and the bushes are rustling all around me... .

She relaxed the shield--"I'm here, Bozo!"--closed it.

She stood in the shadow of the western ridge, shivering and chilled, listening. Far above, for a moment, there'd been noises as if something plunged heavily about in the growth at the top of the ridge. Then the noises ended abruptly.

Telzey's gaze shifted down into the dip between the ridges, followed the course of the little stream up out of the shadows to a point where it ran between flat sandy banks, glittering and sparkling in the afternoon sun--held there.

And now I'm *here*, she thought, and nodded down at the little stream. I'm sitting in warm sand, in the sun again, sheltered from the wind, listening to the friendly water--

The shield opened. For an instant.

"I'm here!"

Looking down from the shaded slope, shield sealed tight, she saw, for the second time that day, Bozo the beast appear in Melna Park, half in the stream, half out. Its heavy head swung this way and that; it leaped forward, wheeled, glared about, plunged suddenly out of sight among the trees. For an instant, she heard its odd howling voice, like amplified drunken human laughter, furious with frustrated eagerness.

Telzey leaned back against the tree behind her and closed her eyes. Drowsiness rolled in immediately in sweet heavy treacherous waves. She shook her head, drove it back.

Darkness, she thought. Darkness, black and cold.

Black, black all around me--because I've fallen asleep, Bozo. Now you can get me--

Blackness closed in on her mind like a rush of wind. The shield slipped open.

"Bozo! I'm here!"

In the blackness, Bozo's image flashed up before her, jaws wide, red eyes blazing, great arms sweeping out to seize her.

The shield snapped shut.

Eyes still closed, Telzey swayed against the tree, listening to the echoes of the second explosion she'd heard today. This one had been short and sharp, monstrously loud, like a thunderbolt slamming into the earth a hundred feet from her.

She shook her head, opened her eyes, and looked across the dip. The cliff face on the eastern side had changed its appearance. A jagged dark fissure showed in it, beginning at the top, extending halfway down to the valley. Puffs of mineral dust still drifted out of the fissure into the open air.

She'd wondered what would happen if something more than five hundred pounds of solid animal materialized, suddenly deep inside solid rock. She'd expected it might be something like this. This time, Bozo hadn't been able to flick back into no-space again.

"Goodbye, Bozo!" she said aloud, across the dip. "I won't miss you at all!"

That had been one part of it, she thought.

And now the other.

The shield thinned again, opened out. And stayed open—one minute, two minutes, three—as her perceptions spread, searching for impressions of the psi mind that had cursed her with Bozo, long, long hours ago, at Robane's house. That mind, or any mind like it.

And there was nothing. Nowhere around here, for many miles at least, was anyone thinking of her at the moment, giving her any attention at all.

Then you've lost me for now, she told them. She turned, stumbling, her balance not too good at the moment on the rocky ground, and pushed back through the bushes to the point where she'd left the Cloudsplitter. A minute later, she'd lifted the car above the ridges, swung it around to the south. Its canopy was closed and she was luxuriously soaking in the warmth of the heaters. She wanted to go to sleep very badly now, but there was one thing still to be done. It was nearly finished.

One section, a tiny section, of her mind was forming itself into an alarm system. It would remain permanently on guard against psis of the kind who'd nearly trapped her, for good. At the slightest, most distant indication that minds like that were about, long before she became consciously aware of them, her screens would lock into a shield and she would know why.

It was necessary. There was no reason to believe she was done with them. They'd relied on their trap; and it had failed. But they could go back now to the night Robane's spook had been killed and try to find out who'd been involved in that. She'd covered herself as well as she could. It would involve a great deal of probing around in the minds of park personnel, a detailed checking of visitors' registers at the entrance stations; but eventually they could work out a line on the psi who'd trespassed on their operation and locate her. If she were doing it herself, it shouldn't take more than two weeks. She had to assume it would take them no longer.

Telzey felt her new alarm system complete itself, reached over and

set the Cloudsplitter on the automatic controls which would guide it back down through the mountains into the warm southern plains of Melna Park to drift along with other tourist cars. Later, she thought, she'd decide what she'd have to be doing about the psis within the next two weeks. Later--

She slumped back gently in the seat and was instantly asleep.

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# "Aura of Immortality"

Published in *Worlds of If*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (#172, May/June 1974), though this version is taken from *Trigger & Friends* (2001) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



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Commissioner Holati Tate had been known to state on occasion that whenever there was a way for Professor Mantelish to get himself into a mess of trouble, Mantelish would find it.

When, therefore, the Commissioner, while flicking through a series of newscasts, caught a momentary view of Mantelish chatting animatedly with a smiling young woman he stopped the instrument instantly, and with a touch of apprehension went back to locate the program in question. The last he had heard of Mantelish, the professor had been on a government-sponsored expedition to a far-off world, from which, the Commissioner had understood, he would not be returning for some time. However, Commissioner Tate had just got back to Maccadon from an assignment himself, for all he knew Mantelish might have changed his plans. Indeed, it would seem he had.

He caught the program again, clicked it in. One good look at the great, bear-like figure and the mane of thick white hair told him it was indeed his old friend Mantelish. The dainty lady sitting across the table from Mantelish was a professional newshen. The background was the Ceyce spaceport on Maccadon. The professor evidently had just come off his ship.

His sense of apprehension deepening, Commissioner Tate began to listen sharply to what was being said.

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Professor Mantelish ordinarily was allergic in the extreme to newscasters and rebuffed their efforts to pump him about his

jects with such heavy sarcasm that even the brashest did not often attempt to interview him on a live show. On the other hand he was highly susceptible to pretty women. When a gorgeous little reporter spotted him among the passengers coming off a spaceliner at Ceyce Port and inquired timidly whether he would answer a few questions for her viewers, the great scientist surprised her no end by settling down for a friendly fifteen-minute chat during which he reported on his visit to the little-known planet of the Tang from which he had just returned.

It was a fine scoop for the newshen. Professor Mantelish's exploits and adventures were a legend in the Hub and he was always good copy--when he could be persuaded to talk. On this occasion, furthermore, he had something to tell which was in itself of more than a little interest. The Tang--who could be called a humanoid species only if one were willing to stretch a number of points--had been contacted by human explorers some decades before. They tended to be ferociously hostile to strangers and had a number of other highly unpleasant characteristics; so far little had become known of them beyond the fact that they were rather primitive creatures living in small, footloose tribes on a cold and savage planet.

Professor Mantelish, however, had spent several months among them, accompanied by a team of specialists with whose help he had cracked the language barrier which previously had prevented free communication with the Tang. He had made copious recordings of their habits and customs, had even been permitted to bring back a dead Tang embalmed by freezing as was their practice. From the scientific viewpoint this was a very valuable specimen, since the Tang appeared to die only as a result of accident, murder, or in encounters with ferocious beasts. They did not suffer from diseases and had developed a means of extending their natural life span almost indefinitely...

The young newshen latched on to that statement like a veteran. Wide-eyed and innocent, she slipped in a few leading questions and Mantelish launched into a detailed explanation.

It had taken some months before he gained the confidence of the Tang sufficiently to induce them to reveal their secret: they distilled the juice of a carefully tended and guarded plant through an involved procedure. The drug they obtained in this way brought about a reversal of the normal aging process so that they retained their youthful health and vigor for a length of time which, though it had not been precisely determined, the Tang regarded as "forever."

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Could this drug, the little reporter asked, perhaps be adapted for human use?

Mantelish said he could not be definite about that, but it seemed quite possible. While the Tang had not let the members of his expedition know what plant they cultivated for the purpose, they had obligingly presented him with several liters of the distilled drug for experimentation which he had brought back with him. Analysis of the drug while still on the Tang planet had revealed the presence of several heretofore unknown forms of protein with rather puzzling



characteristics; the question was whether or not these could be reproduced in the laboratory. To settle the question might well take a number of years—it could not of course be stated at present what the long-term effect of the drug on human beings would be. It was, however, apparently harmless. He and several other members of his group had been injected with significant quantities of the drug while on the planet, and had suffered no ill effects.

Big-eyed again, the newshen inquired whether this meant that he, Professor Mantelish, was now immortal?

No, no, Mantelish said hastily. In humans, as in the Tang, the effects of a single dose wore off in approximately four months. To retain youth, or to bring about the gradual rejuvenation of an older body, it was necessary to repeat the dosage regularly at about this interval. The practice of the Tang was to alternately permit themselves to age naturally for about ten years, then to use the drug for roughly the same length of time or until youthfulness was restored.

To protect both the Tang and their miracle plant from illegal exploitation, the Federation, following his initial report on the matter, was having the space about the planet patrolled. What the final benefits of the discovery to humanity would be was still open to question. It was, however, his personal opinion that the Tang drug eventually would take its place as a very valuable addition to the various rejuvenation processes currently being employed in the Hub... .

"The old idiot!" Commissioner Holati Tate muttered to himself. He swung around, found a redheaded young woman standing behind him, large, gray eyes intently watching the screen. "Did you hear all that, Trigger?" he demanded.

"Enough to get the idea," Trigger said. "I came in as soon as I recognized the prof's voice.... . After those remarks, he'd be safer back among the Tang! He doesn't even seem to have a bodyguard around."

Commissioner Tate was dialing a ComWeb number. "I'll call the spaceport police! They'll give him an escort. Hop on the other ComWeb and see his home and lab are under guard by the time he gets there."

"I just did that," Trigger said.

"Then see if you can make an emergency contact with that newscaster female before Mantelish strays off.... ."

Trigger shook her head. "I tried it. No luck! It's a floating program."

She watched the final minute and a half of the newscast, biting her lip uneasily, while the Commissioner made hasty arrangements with the spaceport police. To hear Professor Mantelish blabbing out the fact that he might have the answer to man's search for immortality in his possession was disconcerting. It was an open invitation to all the criminal elements currently on Maccadon to try to get it from him. The prof simply shouldn't be allowed to wander around without tactful but efficient nursemaiding! Usually, she or Holati or somebody else made sure he got it, but they'd assumed that on a Federation expedition he'd be kept out of jams... .

When the Commissioner had finished, she switched off the newscast, said glumly, "You missed something, Holati. Mantelish just showed everybody watching on umpteen worlds the container he's got that drug in!"

"The Tang stuff?"

"Yes. It's in that round sort of suitcase he had standing beside his chair."

The Commissioner swore.

"Come along!" he said. "We'll take my car and head for the spaceport. The police weren't sure from exactly where that newscast was coming but if they catch up with Mantelish before he leaves they'll wait for us and we'll ride in to his lab with him."

"And if they don't?"

"They'll call the car. Then we'll go to the lab and wait for him to show up."

. . .

Almost as soon as he'd bid the charming little newshen goodbye, Professor Mantelish himself began to feel some qualms about the revelations he'd allowed to escape. He began to realize he might have been a trifle indiscreet. Walking on with the crowds moving towards the spaceport exit hall, he found himself growing acutely conscious of the Tang drug container in the suitcase he carried. Normally preoccupied with a variety of matters of compelling scientific interest, it was almost impossible for him to conceive of himself as being in personal danger. Nevertheless, now that his attention was turned on the situation he had created it became clear that many people who had watched the newscast might feel tempted to bring the drug into their possession, either for selfish reasons or out of perhaps excessive zeal for private research... .

The average citizen at this point might have started looking around for the nearest police officer. Professor Mantelish, however, was of independent nature; such a solution simply did not occur to him. He had advertised the fact that he was headed for his laboratory. That had been a mistake. Therefore he would not go there—which should foil anyone who was presently entertaining illegal notions about the Tang drug. Instead, he would take himself and the drug immediately to a little seaside hideout he maintained which was known only to his closest associates. Once there he could take steps to have the drug safeguarded.

Satisfied with this decision Mantelish lengthened his stride. About a hundred yards ahead was the entry to an automatic aircar rental station. As he came up half a dozen people turned into it in a group, obviously harmless citizens. Mantelish followed them in, moved over to the wall just inside the entry, turned and stood waiting, prepared, if required, to swing the weighted suitcase he held under his flowing robe like an oversized club. But half a minute passed and no one else came in. Satisfied, he hurried after the little group, catching up with them just as they reached the line of waiting cars and climbed into a car together, laughing and joking. Mantelish got into the car

behind them, deposited a five-credit piece. The cars began to move forwards, rose toward the exit. He glanced back to make sure again that no one was following, placed the Tang container on the floorboards beside him, snapped the car's canopy shut and put his hands on the controls.

The aircars emerged from the fifteenth floor of the spaceport exit building, the lights of Ceyce glittering under its night-screen before them. Mantelish turned immediately to the left, directed the car up to one of the main traffic lines, moved along it for a minute, then shifted abruptly to one of the upper high-speed lanes.

• • •

He reached his hideaway a scant fifteen minutes later. It was in a residential shore area, featuring quiet and privacy. The house, overlooking a shallow, sheltered ocean bay, was built on sloping ground thirty feet above tide level. It was a pleasant place, fit for an elderly retired man of remarkable habits. None of Mantelish's neighbors knew him by name or suspected he maintained a laboratory within his walls—an installation in absolute violation of the local zoning regulations.

He locked the entry door behind him, crossed a hall, opened the door to the laboratory. He stood motionless a moment, looking around. Everything was as he had left it months before, kept spotlessly clean by automatic maintenance machinery. He went over to a table on which lay a variety of items, the results of projects he had hastily completed or left incomplete before setting out on the expedition to the Tang world. He put the Tang container on the table between a chemical gun and a packaged device which, according to the instructions attached to it, was a mental accelerator with a ratio of two hundred and eighty to one, instantly lethal if used under conditions other than those specified in the instructions. He looked about once more, went out by another door to the kitchen of the house.

A minute or two later, he heard the laboratory ComWeb buzzing shrilly. Mantelish glanced around from the elaborate open-face sandwiches he was preparing. He frowned. Among the very few people who knew the number of that ComWeb, only two were at all likely to be calling him at this moment. One was Commissioner Tate, the other was Trigger Argee. If either of them—Trigger, in particular—had caught the newscast at the spaceport just now they were going to give him hell.

His frown deepened. Should he ignore the call? No, he decided; however unnecessarily, the caller was no doubt concerned about his safety. He must let them know he was all right.

Mantelish lumbered hurriedly back into the laboratory, came to a sudden stop just beyond the door. There were two men there. One was seated at the table where he had put down the Tang container; the other leaned against the wall beside the hall door. Both held guns, which at the moment were pointed at him.

Mantelish looked from one to the other, lifting his eyebrows. This, he told himself, was a most unfortunate situation. He knew the pair from

previous meeting, the conclusion of which had been marked by a certain amount of physical violence. He didn't like the look of the guns but perhaps he could bluff it out.

"Fiam," he said with stern dignity to the man at the table, "I am not at all pleased by your intrusion. I thought I had made it clear to you last year when I threw you out of my laboratory that there was no possibility of our doing business. If I failed, I shall make the point very clear indeed immediately after I have answered this call!"

He turned toward the clamoring ComWeb. Suddenly he felt an excruciating pain in his left leg, centered on the kneecap. He grunted, stopped.

"That's enough for now, Welk," Paes Fiam said lazily from the table. "He's got the idea... "

The pain faded away. The man standing by the door grinned and lowered his gun. Fiam went on, "Sit down over there, professor--across from me. Forget the ComWeb. This shouldn't take long. These guns of ours, as you've noticed, can be very painful. They can also kill very quickly. So let's not have any unpleasantness."

Mantelish scowled at him but sat down. "Why have you come here?" he demanded.

Fiam smiled. "To ask you for a small favor. And a little information." He picked up the chemical gun lying on the table beside the Tang container, looked at it a moment. "This device," he said, "appears to be something you've developed."

"It is," Mantelish said.

"What is so remarkable about it?"

Mantelish snorted. "It kills the intended victim immediately on spray contact while placing the user in no danger whatsoever, even when carelessly handled."

"So the label says," Paes Fiam agreed. "A one to four foot range. Very interesting!" He laid the gun back on the table. "I find it a little strange, professor, that a man holding the high ethical principles you outlined to me in our previous conversation should devote his time to creating such a murderous little weapon!"

Mantelish snorted again. "What I am willing to create depends on the clients with whom I am dealing. I would not place such weapons in the hands of common crooks like yourselves."

The ComWeb's noise stopped. Fiam smiled briefly, said, "Not common crooks, Professor Mantelish. We happen to be exceptionally talented and efficient crooks. As the present situation demonstrates."

"What do you mean?" Mantelish asked coldly.

"I happened to be at the Ceyce spaceport," Fiam said, "while you were bragging about your Tang immortality drug on the newscast. I took steps immediately to make sure I knew where you went. Welk and I followed you here without very much trouble. We made sure in the process that nobody else was tailing you." He patted the Tang

container. "This is what we after, professor! And we've got it."

"You are being very foolish," Mantelish said. "As I indicated during the newscast, it remains questionable whether the Tang drug can be produced under laboratory conditions. If it is possible, it will involve years of research at the highest level. I--"

"Hold it, professor!" Fiam raised his hand, nodded at Welk. "Your statements are very interesting, but let's make sure you're not attempting to mislead us."

"Mislead you?" Mantelish rumbled indignantly.

"You might, you know. But Welk will now place the pickup of a lie detector at your feet. Sit very still while he's doing it--you know I can't miss at this range." Fiam brought a small instrument out of his pocket, placed it on the table before him. "This is the detector's indicator," he went on. "A very dependable device, every time it shows me you're being less than truthful you'll get an admonishing jolt from Welk's gun. Welk's never really forgiven you for not opening the lab door before you ejected him last year. Better stick to the truth, professor!"

"I have no intention of lying," Mantelish said with dignity.

Paes Fiam waited until Welk had positioned the pickup and stepped back, went on. "Now, professor, you were suggesting that at present the Tang drug has no commercial value... "

Mantelish nodded. "Exactly! The quantity on the table here--and it's every drop of the drug to be found off the Tang world now--is not nearly enough to be worth the risk you'd be taking in stealing and trying to market it. It might extend the life of one human being by a very considerable extent, and that is all. And what potential client would take your word for it that it would do that--or that it wouldn't, for that matter, harm him instead, perhaps kill him within a few months?"

"A large number of potential clients would, if they were desperate enough for life," Fiam said, watching the detector indicator. "You were skirting the fringes of deception with that question, professor. But that's not the point. Does the drug have harmful physical or mental effects?"

Mantelish said, "A calculated quantity was given to six members of our expedition, including myself. During the past four months, no harmful physical or mental effects have been observed, and the overall effect has worn off again. That's all I can say."

"And the Tang drug did have a rejuvenating effect on these human subjects?"

Mantelish hesitated, admitted, "A slight but measurable one. That was in accordance with our expectations."

Fiam smiled. "I see. What other expectations did you have in connection with the use of the drug on human beings?"

Mantelish said reluctantly, "That the dosage given human subjects would wear out of the system in about four months--as it did. And that if the rejuvenation effect were to continue the treatment would therefore have to be repeated regularly at four-month intervals."

"What do you believe will happen if that is done?"

"Within a ten-year period," Mantelish said, "the subject should find that his biological age has not advanced but has been reduced by about five years. The Tang rejuvenation process is a slow, steady one. The Tang themselves select the biological age they prefer, and remain within a few years of it by a judicious use of the drug. It is, of course, impossible to reduce the biological age beyond late adolescence."

"I understand," Fiam said. "And how is the drug administered?"

"The Tang drink the extract," Mantelish said. "On human beings it has a violently nauseating effect when administered in that form. We found it more practical to administer a subcutaneous injection."

"There's nothing essentially different between that and any other subcutaneous injection?"

"No, none at all."

Paes Fiam patted the container again, smiled, said, "The drug extract in here is ready to be used exactly as it is?"

"Yes."

"Are there any special measures required to preserve its usefulness and harmlessness indefinitely?"

"It's self-preserving," Mantelish said. "There should be no significant difference in its properties whether it's used today or after a century. But as I have pointed out, I cannot and will not say that it is harmless. A test on six subjects is by no means definitive. The seventh one might show very undesirable physical reactions. Or undesirable reactions might develop in the six who have been tested five, or ten, or fifteen years from now... "

"No doubt," Fiam said. He smacked his lips lightly. "Be careful how you answer my next question. You said the drug in this container should extend the life of one human being very considerably. What does that mean in standard years?"

Mantelish hesitated, said grudgingly, "My estimate would be about three hundred years. That is an approximation."

Fiam grinned happily at Welk. "Three hundred years, eh? That's good enough for us, professor! As you may have begun to surmise, we're the clients for whom the drug is intended. We have no intention of trying to sell it. And we'll take a chance on undesirable reactions showing up in five or ten years against the probability of another hundred and fifty years of interesting and profitable living!"

He stood up, moved back from the table. "Now then, you've got the equipment to administer a subcutaneous injection somewhere around the lab. You'll get it out while I keep this gun on you. You'll show Welk exactly what you're doing, describe the exact amount of drug that is required for each injection. And you'll do all that while you're within range of the lie detector. So don't make any mistakes at this stage or, believe me, you'll get hurt abominably!

"Finally, you'll give me the initial four-month injection. I shall then give

Welk an identical injection under your supervision. After that, we'll just wrap up the container with the rest of the drug and be on our way...."

. . .

Ten minutes later Mantelish sat at the table, gloomily watching Fiam store the container, along with several other of the finished products on the table which had caught his fancy, into the suitcase. Welk stood behind the professor's chair, gun pointed at Mantelish's neck.

"Now let me give you the rest of the story on this, professor," Fiam said. He picked up Mantelish's chemical gun, looked at it and placed it on top of the suitcase. "You've mentioned several times that I can't expect to get away with this. Let me reassure you on the point.

"For one thing, we set up a temporal scrambler in this room as soon as we came in. It's on one of those shelves over there. It will remain there and continue in action for thirty minutes after we've left, so no one will be able to restructure the events of the past few hours and identify us in that way. We're wearing plastiskin gloves, of course, and we haven't made any foolish mistakes to give investigators other leads to who might have been here.

"Also we enjoy--under other names--an excellent reputation on this planet as legitimate businessmen from Evalee. Should foul play be suspected, we, even if somebody should think of us, certainly will not be suspected of being involved in it. As a matter of fact"--Fiam checked his watch--"twenty minutes from now, we shall be attending a gay social function in Ceyce to which we have been invited. As far as anybody could prove, we'll have spent all evening there."



He smiled at Mantelish. "One more thing; you will be found dead of course; but there will be some question about the exact manner in which you died. We shall leave an interesting little mystery behind us. The Tang container will be missing. But why is it missing? Did you discover, or fancy you had discovered, some gruesome reaction to the drug in yourself, and drop it out over the sea so no one else would be endangered by it? Did you then perhaps commit suicide in preference to waiting around for the inevitable end?"

"Suicide—pfah!" growled Mantelish. "No one is lunatic enough to commit suicide with a pain-stimulant gun!"

"Quite right," Fiam agreed. He took up the professor's chemical gun from the suitcase again. "I've been studying this little device of yours. It functions in a quite simple and obvious manner. This sets the triggering mechanism—correct? It is now ready to fire." He pointed the gun at Mantelish, added, "Stand aside, Welk."

Welk moved swiftly four feet to one side. Mantelish's eyes widened. "You wouldn't—"

"But I would," Fiam said. And as the professor started up with a furious bellow, he pulled the trigger.

Mantelish's body went rigid, his face contorting into a grisly grin. He thumped sideways down on the table, rolled off it on the side away from Fiam, went crashing down to the floor.

"Ugh!" Welk said, staring down in fascinating incredulity. "His whole



face has turned blue!"

"Is he dead?" Fiam inquired, peering over the table.

"I never saw anyone look deader! Or bluer!" Welk reported shakenly.

"Well, don't touch him! The stuff might hit you even through the gloves." Fiam came around the table, laid the gun gingerly on the floor, said, "Shove it over by his hand with something. Then we'll get ourselves lost... ."

The ComWeb was shrilling again as they went out into the hall, closed the door behind them. After it stopped the laboratory and the rest of Mantelish's house was quiet as a tomb.

. . .

"It's a miracle," Trigger said, "that you're still alive!" She looked pale under her tan. The professor had lost the bright cerulean tint Welk had commented on by the time she and Commissioner Tate came rushing into the house a minute or two ago. The skin of his face was now a nasty green through which patches of his normal weathered-brick complexion were just beginning to show.

"No miracle at all, my dear," Mantelish said coolly. "Paes Fiam has encountered the kind of misfortune the uninformed layman may expect when he ventures to challenge the scientist on his own ground. He had lost the game, literally, at the moment he stepped into this laboratory! I had half a dozen means at my disposal here to foil his criminal plans. Since I was also in the laboratory at the time, most of them might have been harmful—or at least extremely disagreeable—to me. So as soon as I saw he intended to use the chemical gun, I decided to employ that method to rid myself of his presence."

Commissioner Tate had been studying the gun's label.

"This says the gun kills instantly," he observed.

"It does kill instantly," Mantelish said, "if aimed at an attacking Rumlian fire roach. I designed it to aid in the eradication of that noisome species. On the human organism it has only a brief paralyzing effect."

"It makes you look revolting, too!" Trigger said, studying him fascinatedly.

"A minor matter, my dear. Within an hour or two I shall have regained my normal appearance."

Holati Tate sighed, placed the gun back on the table. "Well, we should be able to pick up your friends since we know who they are," he said. "I'll alert the spaceports immediately and get Scout Intelligence on the job. We're lucky though that they didn't get more of a head start."

Mantelish held up his hand. "Please don't concern yourself about the Tang drug, Holati," he said. "I've notified the police and Fiam and Welk will be arrested very shortly."

The Commissioner said doubtfully, "Well, our Maccadon police--"

"The matter will require no brilliance on their part, Holati. Fiam informed me he and Welk intended to be enjoying themselves innocently at a social function within twenty minutes after leaving this laboratory. That was approximately half an hour ago.... ." Professor Mantelish nodded at the ComWeb. "I expect the police to call at any moment, to advise me they have been picked up."

"Better not take a chance on that, Professor," Trigger warned. "They might change their plans now they have the stuff, and decide to get off the planet immediately."

"It would make very little difference, Trigger. If Paes Fiam had waited until the official report on the Tang planet was out he would have known better than to force me to inject him with the immortality drug. Aside from their savage ways the Tang are literally an unapproachable people while under its influence. I and the various members of our expedition who experimented with it on ourselves had to wait several months for its effect to wear off again before we were able to return to civilization. We would not have been able to live among the Tang at all if we had not had our olfactory centers temporarily shut off."

"Olfactory centers?" said Trigger.

"Yes. It was absolutely necessary. Within half an hour after being administered to an animal organism, the Tang drug produces the most offensive and hideously penetrating stench I have ever encountered. Wherever Paes Fiam and Welk may be on the planet, they have by now been prostrated by it and are unmistakably advertising their presence to anyone within half a mile of them. I have advised the police that space helmets will be needed by the men sent to arrest them, and--"

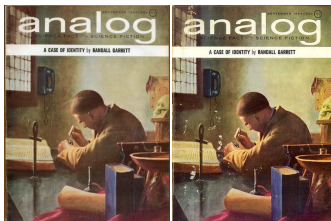
He broke off as the ComWeb began shrilling its summons, added, "Ah, there is the call I have been expecting! Perhaps you'll take it, Trigger? Say I'm indisposed; I'm afraid the authorities may be feeling rather irritable with me at the moment."

Better by far to enter  
a den of serpents  
than a scientist's laboratory  
uninvited!



# "The Machmen"

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Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.

»

The fauna traps set up the previous day in the grasslands east of the Planetary Survey Station on Lederet had made a number of catches; but all of them represented species with which the two biologists of the survey team already were sufficiently familiar. Jeslin removed the traps, revived the captured animals from a safe distance with a stimulant gun, and shifted to a point a hundred and eighty miles northwest of the station, where he set the traps up again, half a mile apart. Here a tall forest spread over rolling hills, with stretches of dense undergrowth below; and the animal population could be expected to be of a somewhat different type.

Around midday, Jeslin had completed his preparations. He checked the new location of the traps on his charts, and turned the Pointer back toward the station. He was a stocky, well-muscled man, the youngest member of the team, who combined the duties of wildlife collector with those of the team's psychologist. Privately, he preferred the former work, enjoying his frequent encounters with curious and beautiful beasts on his way to and from the trap areas. And if the beasts were of a new variety, there would be a quick, stimulating chase in the Pointer, a versatile vehicle equally capable of hunting down game through thickest growth and of flying up to five times its own weight in captured specimens back to the station in undamaged condition.

Today was uneventful in that respect. There was game afoot but Jeslin was in a reflective mood, inclined to observe rather than pursue it. The station's cages were well supplied, and the traps, in their new location, would fill them up again before the biologists had

completed their studies of the present occupants. He covered much of the stretch skimming over the forest at treetop level, emerged from it finally at a point twelve miles north of the station.

This was arid bush country, the ground below dotted with thorny growth. The Pointer flew across it, small things darting away from its shadow, vanishing with a flick into the thickets. Presently, Jeslin turned on the communicator, tapped the station's call button. Lederet was nearly a month's travel away from the nearest, civilized world; and small groups working on such remote out-worlds observed certain precautions as a matter of course. One of them was having every incoming vehicle identify itself before it arrived.

The screen lit up and the round-cheeked, freckled face of a middle-aged woman appeared in it. It was Ald, the team's dietician. She smiled pleasantly, said in an even voice, "Hello, Jeslin," went on in the same quiet, unemphasized tone, "Crash, machmen--"

The screen went blank.

Jeslin instantly reached out, grasped the Pointer's chase controls, spun the machine about and sent it racing back toward the forest. Flicking on the full set of ground and air-search screens, he studied them briefly in turn. His heart was pounding.

There was nothing in sight at the moment to justify Ald's warning. But the word "crash," used under such circumstances, had only one meaning. The station had been taken ... he was to keep away from it, avoid capture and do whatever he could to help.

Machmen--Ald had been able to bring in that one additional word before they shut her off. Jeslin knew the term. Human beings surgically modified, equipped with a variety of devices to permit them to function freely in environments which otherwise would be instantly deadly to a man lacking the protection of a spacesuit or ship. They were instrumented men: machine men--machmen. Jeslin had not heard of recent experiments of the kind, but there were fairly numerous records of transitions to the machman condition, carried out with varying degrees of success.

. . .

His mind shifted back for an instant to a report received several days before from the Navy patrol boat assigned to Lederet for the protection of the survey station and its personnel. The boat had been contacted by a small I-Fleet vessel, requesting permission to carry out limited mining operations on the planet. After checking with the station, permission had been given. The I-Fleets were space vagrants, ordinarily harmless; and the mining party might be able to provide valuable information about the planet, with which they were evidently quite familiar.

The mining ship had begun its operations in a dry lakebed approximately a thousand miles from the station. Presumably, if machmen had captured the station, they had come over from the ship. With a heavily armed patrol boat circling the planet, it seemed an incredibly bold thing to do. Unless--

At that moment, Jeslin saw the figure in the search screen. It was

man, appeared naked at first glance. Stretched out horizontally in the air about a hundred feet above the ground, arms laid back along its sides like a diver, it was approaching from the right, evidently with the intention of heading off the Pointer before the machine reached the forest.

And it was moving fast enough to do it... .

Jeslin stared at the apparition for an instant, more in amazement than alarm. He saw now that the fellow was wearing trunks and boots and held some dark object in his left hand. Possibly the last was a flight device of some kind. Jeslin could make out nothing else to explain this headlong rush through the air. What did seem explained, he thought, was the manner in which the station had been taken. A handful of half-naked I-Fleet miners approaching on foot, apparently not even armed, would have aroused no concern there. The visitors would have been invited inside.

Jeslin glanced at the forest ahead, checked the search screens again. In the air far to the left were three tiny dots, which might be similar figures approaching. If so, it would take them several minutes to get here, and the Pointer would be lost in the forest by then. The machman moving up on the right apparently intended to attack by himself to prevent the escape--and that, Jeslin thought, was something he might turn to his advantage.

He drew a pack of plastic contact fetters out of a compartment, peeled off an eighteen-inch length, thrust it into his pocket. He patted another pocket on the right side of his jacket to make sure the gun he carried for last-ditch protection against overly aggressive Lederet wildlife was inside, then switched on the Pointer's stungun and turned the vehicle in a wide, swift curve toward the approaching machman.

The figure shot up at a steep slant before the gun could straighten out on it. In the screens, Jeslin watched it dart by perhaps two hundred yards overhead, come arcing down again behind the machine. He swung the Pointer's nose back to the forest, not more than a quarter of a mile ahead now, went rushing toward it, watching the machman close the gap between them, coming level with the ground a hundred yards away... then eighty... sixty... .

The machman brought his left hand sweeping forward, the dark object held out in it. Jeslin braked hard. The Pointer, designed to change direction instantly to match the tactics of elusive game, pivoted end for end within its own length. As the stungun came around to the left of the pursuing figure, Jeslin pulled the trigger.

Caught by the outer fringe of the stunfield, the machman swerved sideways. The dark object--not a flight mechanism, after all, but some weapon--dropped from his hand. He went rolling limply on through the air, settling toward the ground.

The Pointer picked him up before he got there.

. . .

"My name," the machman said presently, "is Hulida. I'm aware of yours. It's quite possible, incidentally, that we've met before."

Jeslin glanced over at him. He'd fastened the fellow in the seat next to his own, wrists locked behind his back by a contact fetter, another fetter clamping a cloth blindfold over his eyes, seat belt drawn tight. For the past minute or two, he had been giving indications of recovering from stunshock, and it was no surprise to hear him speak. But a casually polite introduction, Jeslin thought, was hardly what he'd expected to hear.

"If we have," he said dryly, "I don't remember the occasion."

The blindfolded head of the man who called himself Hulida turned briefly toward him. He was not large; beside Jeslin, he seemed almost slight. But the olive-skinned body was firmly muscled, gave an impression of disciplined strength.

"It's only a possibility," Hulida said. "We happen to have been graduated from the University of Rangier in the same year. My degree was in medicine."

"It seems regrettable that you didn't continue your professional career," Jeslin told him.

"Oh, but I did. I'm one of the results of a machman experiment, but I also had a considerable part in bringing that experiment to its remarkably successful conclusion."

Jeslin grunted, returned his attention to the search screens. Successful the experiment certainly seemed to have been. When he went out to free Hulida from the Pointer's snaring tentacles, he had expected to find at least some indications of the profound changes worked on a human body to enable it to pursue him through the air. But whatever the changes might be, they weren't outwardly visible. A hasty search of the man's few articles of clothing had revealed no instrument to explain such an ability either; but until Hulida acknowledged the fact, Jeslin hadn't been certain that Ald's description of the nature of the station's attackers was correct. Earlier work of that kind had produced shapes in which functional plastic and metal was obviously united with the necessary proportion of living flesh.

He looked at the clock in the instrument panel, checked the screens once more, swung the Pointer around toward a chart section due west of his present location, some three hundred miles away. Not once during the past twenty minutes while he was pursuing a constantly changing, randomly erratic course through the forest had one of the flying men appeared in the search screens. He could assume that for the present he had lost them. Meanwhile he had a prisoner who seemed willing to give him at least part of the information he wanted.

He said, "How many machmen are there on Lederet?"

"At the moment, about forty," Hulida said promptly. "The rest of our group--there are a hundred and ninety-five of us in all--are on a spaceship which is approaching the planet and will reach it shortly."

"That hundred and ninety-five," Jeslin asked, "is the total number of those who were transformed into machmen in your experiment?"

"Not entirely. There were a number of deaths at first, before we learned to perfect our methods."

"What will the spaceship do when it runs into our patrol boat?"

Hulida laughed. "It will simply take the crew on board, Jeslin. What else? Naturally, we captured the boat before we attempted to capture the station."

. . .

Jeslin already had been almost sure of it. Three times during his flight through the forest he had attempted to signal the patrol boat, had received no response.

"How was it done?"

"We took the mining ship up and sent them a distress message," Hulida said. "There had been an accident—we had injured men on board. Obliging, they came to our help at once. When they set up a looktube, we released gas bombs in both ships. We don't breathe normally, of course. It was very simple."

He added, "But you need feel no concern for either the crew or your colleagues at the station. None of them has been harmed. That was not our intention."

"Glad to hear it," Jeslin said. "Now what's the purpose of this business? Apparently, your experiment resulted in an important scientific achievement. If it had been conducted openly, I would have heard of it. Why the secrecy? And why—" He checked himself. "How many deaths were there in the first stage of the experiment, while you were still perfecting your methods?"

The machman hesitated, said, "Fifty-two."

"I see. You weren't working strictly with volunteers."

"Of course not," Hulida said. "We were—and are still—a small group. The work was obviously dangerous, and none of us could be spared as subjects until the element of danger had been removed. But that was not the reason we worked secretly, published nothing after results were assured, and eventually left civilization together. After all, we need not have recorded those early failures."

"Then what was the reason?" Jeslin asked.

"Our realization that the machmen we were creating and presently would become is a higher order of being than the merely human one. At one stroke, he is rid of four-fifths of the body's distresses and infirmities. He can expect a vastly lengthened life span. He thinks more clearly, is less subject to emotional disturbances. He is tremendously more efficient on the physical level ... independent of environmental circumstances as no ordinary human ever could be. And we are only at the beginning of this, the pioneers... .

"Jeslin, we did not become machmen in order to be better able to toil on airless worlds or in space for our benefit or that of others. We made the choice because it is the greater manner of living. We are Homo Superior, the mankind of the future. And the ranks of Homo Superior are not to be opened to any low-grade fool who can pay to

have the transformation carried out on him. Neither do we intend to subject our plans to the manipulations of government. We are a select group and shall remain it. That is why we detached ourselves from the Federation."

"And that," Jeslin asked, "adds up to a justification of piracy? One would think a couple of hundred of machmen geniuses might find it no more difficult to make a living in space than an ordinary I-Fleet composed of ordinarily competent human beings."

Hulida said, "Our purpose goes beyond looting the survey station, Jeslin. Its equipment and personnel, of course, are valuable prizes in themselves, and so, to a lesser extent, are the patrol boat and its crew."

Jeslin looked over at him. "The personnel--"

"The personnel," Hulida explained, "and the crew will be transformed into machmen, naturally. They have highly trained minds, experience and skills which we can use to good advantage. Their consent isn't required. Not all of those who are machmen now underwent the transformation willingly, but their objections vanished as their experiences made its advantages fully apparent to them. They are as loyal to the group and its goals now as any of the others. And so will you be."

. . .

Jeslin felt a surge of cold anger. Mind-conditioning, of course. And it could be done....

"But our plan goes much farther than that," the machman was continuing. "This is a matter which has been very carefully investigated and prepared, Jeslin. The immediate consequence of your transformation will be that you will resume your work here as if nothing had happened--and, in fact, nothing else will have happened. You will continue to return favorable reports on Lederet to your department in the Hub. Within a year, the decision will be made to open precolonial operations on the planet."

"That is what we want. Equipment and supplies will be moved out here on a scale otherwise unobtainable by a small group such as ours. And with it will come technicians and scientists from whom we can select further recruits to round out our ranks. We will work carefully and quietly, but when we leave the planet, it will be to go forever beyond the Federation's reach with everything we need to found our own machman colony."

Jeslin was silent a moment, asked, "Why are you telling me all this?"

"To make it clear," the machman said, "that we simply cannot allow someone who knows about us to remain at large here. The possibility that you would still be alive and in a position to interfere with our plans when the Hub shipments begin to arrive may be slight, but we aren't ignoring it. Every other member of the survey team was accounted for during the morning. If necessary, we could turn all our resources now for months on end to the single purpose of hunting you down."



"You're inviting me to surrender?"

Hulida said, "I'm appealing to your reason. You have the opportunity of participating voluntarily in one of mankind's greatest adventures. If you reject it, it may not be possible to avoid killing you."

"At the moment," Jeslin said mildly, "it seems that I have one of the group's more important members as my hostage."

Hulida shook his blindfolded head. "No one of us is important enough to stand in the way of the group's goals. The fact that I'm your prisoner will be given every consideration, of course. But if it becomes necessary, we will both die."

Jeslin's gaze shifted to the course chart above the panel. He studied it a moment.

"I won't argue," he remarked, "with your claim that being transformed into a machman is a better way to live or the coming way to live. Possibly it's both. It's your methods I object to."

"They are our methods out of necessity," Hulida said.

"Perhaps. I'll think about it. And since you seem to have presented your case completely now, I'll appreciate it if you keep quiet for a while."

The machman smiled, shrugged, remained silent. After some minutes, Jeslin slowed the Pointer's advance. There was a valley ahead, a wide, sandy riverbed winding along it. His route led across the river. At this point, there was forest again on the other side, but there was no way he could avoid coming out from under the shelter of the trees for a distance of at least half a mile.

He had been watching the search screens constantly and did not think he was being followed. It would have been almost impossible for even a single machman to keep the fleeing Pointer in sight in the forest without coming into view occasionally in the screens. The sky was a different matter. Jeslin could not check for them there without showing himself above the forest. For all he knew, there were machmen directly overhead at the moment.

But he had to get over the river before the hunt for him became organized, and this was his best opportunity to do it. Now he could see sunlit patches of the valley ahead, between the trunks and undergrowth and he slowed the Pointer again. Prowl up to the edge of the open ground, he thought; then if there were no pursuers immediately in sight, make a quick dash across. It would be too bad if he was seen, but once he reached the forest on the other side of the valley, he should be able to lose them again...

He heard a sound from Hulida, an abrupt, soft intake of breath, looked over at him and saw the knotted jaw muscles, the tight, fixed grin of the machman's mouth. Immediately, almost before he could form a conscious thought of why he should do it, Jeslin was spinning the Pointer away from the valley, back into the forest, and slamming on speed.

Behind him, the forest crashed. In the rear search screen, he saw the thing sweep after him ... a vertical torrent, fifteen feet across, composed of earth, brush, uprooted and shattered trees rushing into

air, sucked up by a tractor beam. Beyond it, a group of flying figures darted into the forest, fanned out.

In thick growth, Jeslin turned the Pointer left again, raced on, hugging the ground, for a hundred yards, swung sharply to the right. For perhaps a minute, he saw nothing in the screens except the thickets the machine was slashing through. Then there was a glimpse of two machmen weaving around tree trunks above the undergrowth. The roar of the tractor beam had lessened, now grew stronger again. The Pointer flashed into another thicket.

"Useless, Jeslin!" Hulida was shouting. "They've found you and you can't shake them off!"

. . .

For a while, it seemed Hulida was right. The fliers couldn't match the Pointer's speed in the forest. They would be there for instants, coming down through the crowns, fall behind as Jeslin swerved off, and vanish again. But they could rise back up through the trees and overtake him in the open air, and were doing it. He didn't know how many they were in all, but half the time he seemed to be in momentary view of one or the other of them.

And the tractors followed the fliers. There must be at least two of the machines moving across the forest after him, guided by the flying scouts. Suddenly the roar of the beam would arise, shredding the growth as it rushed in towards him; sometimes a second one appeared almost simultaneously from the other side. Once he nearly ran the Pointer directly into one of the dark, hurtling columns of forest debris; as he slewed away from it, the vehicle shuddered as if it were being shaken apart, and Hulida uttered a short, hoarse cry.

And then everything was quiet again. The Pointer rushed on—a minute, two minutes, three, four; and no pursuer appeared in the screens. Jeslin saw a gully ahead, a narrow, dry water bed, dropped into it, moved along it a quarter of a mile until it turned into a deep, rocky ravine almost enclosed by dense undergrowth above. There he stopped the machine.

The time display in the instrument panel told him twelve minutes had passed since he reached the edge of the valley. He would have said he had been running from the tractors for nearly an hour.

He rubbed his sweating palms along his thighs, looked over at Hulida's slumped form. There was no particular satisfaction in knowing that the chase had unnerved the machman more than it had him.

"Now talk," he said unsteadily, "if you care to go on living. What happened?"

Hulida straightened slowly but did not answer at once. Then he said, speaking carefully and obviously struggling to recover his self-possession, "Several of the survey team members were given truth drugs and questioned as soon as we secured the station. They told us of the long-range transmitter which was to be used to call for help if the station was disabled or overwhelmed by a hostile force. When you were warned off and escaped, it was assumed that that was

here you would try to go. The transmitter has been located and is, of course, being guarded. We ran into the group which was watching the route you were most likely to take."

Jeslin had a sense of heavy, incredulous dismay. He hadn't expected that particular piece of information to get to the machmen so quickly. It had been the one way left open now to defeat their plans.

After a moment, he asked, "Where did those tractors come from?"

"They are part of our ship's equipment. The machines were sent ahead to help in your capture."

Jeslin grunted. "If one of the beams had touched us," he said, "there's a good chance we would have been torn apart before they made a capture! You're right about your group not caring who stands in the way when they're out to do something." He saw Hulida's cheeks go gray below the blindfold, added, "Just before they jumped us, you knew it was coming. You machmen have a built-in communication system of some kind--"

Hulida hesitated, said, "Yes, we do."

"How does it operate?"

"I could attempt to describe it to you," Hulida said, "but the description would have meaning only to another machman. The use of the system cannot be taught until it can be experienced."

"At any rate," Jeslin said, "your friends know we have stopped running and have settled down somewhere."

Hulida shook his head.

"I have not told them that." He managed a brief, shaky grin. "After all, Jeslin, I prefer to go on living ... and there is no reason why either of us should die. You can do nothing more, and you've had a demonstration of what your life as a fugitive would be like. The group won't give up the hunt until they have you. You can calculate your final odds for yourself. But surrender to me--now--and all will still be well."

There had been a growing urgency in his voice. Jeslin watched him, not answering. The machman's mouth worked. Fear, Jeslin thought. More fear than Hulida should be feeling at the moment. His own skin began to crawl. Here at the bottom of the ravine, the search screens showed him nothing.

He reached out quietly, switched on the Pointer's stungun.

"Jeslin... "

Jeslin remained silent.

"Jeslin, there is no time to lose!" Hulida's voice was harsh with desperation. "I did not tell you the truth just now. I can conceal nothing from the group. There are multiple direct connections between the brains, the nervous systems, of all of us. Our communication is not wholly a mechanical process--we function almost as units of a group mind. They know you are hiding in the area and have been searching for you. At any instant--"



Illustrated by Jack Schwartz

Jeslin turned the Pointer's nose upward, triggered the gun. The stunfield smashed up out of the ravine, the machine following it. Man-shapes swirled about limply among the trees like drifting leaves, and something came thundering along the floor of the gully toward the place where the Pointer had been hiding.

Then the nightmare chase began again...

An endless period later, Jeslin realized he was clear of the pursuit for a second time. He kept the Pointer hurtling forward on a straight line, staying below the trees where he could, but flicking through open stretches and over streambeds without pausing. Once the screen showed him two figures wheeling high against the sky, he thought they were machmen but was under cover again before he could be sure.

Then something smashed against the Pointer's engine section in the rear. Jeslin swung the machine about, saw a figure gliding away behind a massive tree trunk, sent it spinning with the stungun, turned again and rushed on. A minute later, there was a distant crashing in the forest; then silence.

The Pointer began to vibrate heavily, and presently the speed indicator dropped. Jeslin looked at the location chart, chewing his lip. His arm muscles ached; he was trembling with tension and fatigue. He found himself trying to urge the machine onward mentally, made a snorting sound of self-derision.

Then there was warm, golden sunlight ahead among the trees. Jeslin brought a folded black hood out from under the instrument panel, laid

beside him. He reached over and unfastened Hulida's seat belt. The machman sagged sideways on the seat. His mouth moved as if he were speaking, but he seemed dazed.

Jeslin brought the Pointer to the ground, turned off the laboring engine. He picked up the black hood, dropped it over his head, its lower folds resting on his shoulders. From within, it seemed transparent, showing a glassy glitter around the edges of objects.

He took his gun from his pocket, hauled open the side door and stepped out. Ahead something slid quickly through a sunlit opening in the treetops. Jeslin sent two bolts ripping through the foliage behind it, reached back into the Pointer and hauled Hulida out by the arm. He swung the staggering machman around, started at a half-run toward the area of open ground fifty yards away, thrusting Hulida ahead of him.

"Jeslin—" It was a hoarse gasp.

"Keep moving! They'll have a tractor on our machine in a moment." He felt the figure lighten suddenly, warned, "Don't try to leave me! I'll blow your head off before you're ten feet away."

"You're insane! You can't escape now!"

Tractor beams roared suddenly among the trees behind them, and Hulida screamed. They stumbled through a thicket, out into the sunlight of a wide glade. Machman figures darted above the treetops of the far side, two hundred yards away. Jeslin ripped the blindfold from Hulida's face, seized his arm again, ran forward with him into the glade.

From the center of the open area came a single deep bell note, a curiously attention-binding sound. Jeslin stopped, hurled Hulida forward, away from him. The machman rolled over, came swaying almost weightlessly to his feet. The bell note sounded again. Hulida's head turned toward it. He went motionless.

Here it comes, Jeslin thought... .

And it came. Under the shielding hood, he was experiencing it, as he had many times before, as a pulsing, dizzying, visual blur. Outside, wave after wave of radiation was rushing out from the animal trap concealed in the center of the clearing, a pounding, numbing pattern of confusion to any mind within its range, increasing moment by moment in intensity.

After ten seconds, it stopped.

Hulida slumped sideways, settled slowly to the ground.

A man-shape streaked down out of the sky, turning over and over, crashed into the treetops beyond the glade.

Something else passed through the thickets behind Jeslin, sucking noisily at the earth, and moved off into the distance, dirt and other debris cascading back down into the trees behind it. A similar din was receding through the forest to the south. The tractors were continuing on their course, uncontrolled.

Overhead, Jeslin saw other machman fliers drifting gradually down

through the air.

He moved forward, picked up Hulida and drew back with him out of the trap's range. It would reset itself automatically now for any moving thing of sufficient size to trigger its mechanisms.

He wasn't sure he would find anything left of the Pointer, but the beams hadn't come within fifty feet of it. As he came up, he heard the communicator signal inside. He put Hulida down hastily, climbed in and switched on the instrument.

. . .

The face of Govant, the team's geophysicist, appeared in the screen.

"Jeslin, what the devil's happened?" he demanded. "The machmen who took over the station all collapsed at the same instant just now! Ald says she's sure you caused it in some manner. They're alive but unconscious."

"I know," Jeslin said. "I suggest you disarm them and dump them into one of the cages."

"That's being done, of course!" Govant said irritably. "We're not exactly stupid. But--"

"You're yelling for help from any navy units around?"

"Naturally." Govant looked aside, away from the screen, added, "Apparently, we've just had a response! But it may be weeks before help arrives, and the machmen said they had a spaceship which--"

"Their ship won't be a problem," Jeslin said. "Get a few airtrucks over here, will you? I'll give you my location. In a rather short time, I'm going to have a great many machmen around to transport back to the station's cages."

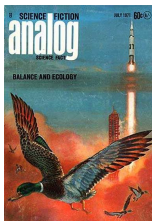
Govant stared at him. "What did you do to them?"

"Well," Jeslin said, "for all practical purposes, I've blown out their cortical fuses. I walked one of them into a hypnoshock trap here, and it hit the others through him. I'll give you the details when I get back. At present, they're simply paralyzed. In a few hours, they'll be able to move again; but for days after that, they won't make any move that somebody hasn't specifically told them to make. By that time, we should have the last of them locked up."

He stepped out of the Pointer after Govant had switched off and went back to Hulida, mentally shaping the compulsive suggestions which presently would shut off the wandering tractors, round up the tranced fliers, and bring the captured patrol boat and the machman spaceship gliding obediently down to the planet.

# "Poltergeist"

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Any power--any talent--  
anything can be used for good or evil.  
Sometimes only destruction can be good.

>>

Late summer had faded into fall in that region of Orado, and though the afternoon sun was still warm, the season was over at the mountain resort lake. No more than a dozen boats could be seen drifting slowly about its placid surface.

The solitude suited Telzey fine. The last three weeks at college had been packed; the weeks to come were going to be at least as demanding. For this one weekend she was cutting out of the pressure. They were to be two totally unambitious days, dedicated to mental and physical loafing, separated by relaxed night-long sleep. Then, some time tomorrow evening, refreshed and renewed, she'd head south to Pehanron College and dive back into her study schedule.

The little kayak she'd rented went gliding across the green-blue lake toward the distant banks opposite the quiet resort village. Great cliffs rose there, broken by numerous narrow bays where trees crowded down to the edge of the water. If she came across some interesting looking spot, she might get out and do a little leisurely exploring.

She pressed a fingertip against the acceleration button on the console before her. A paddle was fastened along the side of the kayak, but it hadn't touched water this afternoon, and wouldn't. Exercise definitely wasn't on the program. Telzey clasped her hands behind her head, settled against the cushioned back rest, steering

rod held lightly between tanned knees.

Her eyebrows lifted.

What was *that*?

It came again. A faint quivering tingle, not of the nerves, but of mind ... a light momentary touch of psi energy. Interest stirred briefly. She was a psi of some months' standing, a telepath—still a beginner and aware of it. So far, there hadn't been as much opportunity to practice her newly discovered abilities as she'd have liked. The college work load was too heavy at present, and she'd learned quickly that investigating the possibilities of a burgeoning psi talent was no casual undertaking. It was full of surprises, not always pleasant ones. She'd have more leisure for that kind of thing by and by.

As for those ripples of energy, they hadn't necessarily been generated in the vicinity of the lake. Chance could have brought them echoing into her awareness from some other area of the planet. In any case, she didn't intend to break her restful mood now by trying to determine their source.

Eyes half shut, knees occasionally nudging the kayak's steering rod a little to one side or the other, Telzey watched the tall gray cliffs along the lake front drift slowly closer. She sensed no more psi touches and the momentary experience soon sank to the back of her thoughts. There was a government department called the Psychology Service which demonstrated a paternalistically restrictive attitude toward psis who weren't members of its organization and not inclined to join up. Not long after her telepathic ability began to manifest, she'd discovered that the Service had tagged her, put restraints on her use of psi. She'd worked free of the restraints and maneuvered the Service then into accepting the fact that it would be best all around if she were left alone. It wasn't impossible though that they still had an eye on her, that those psi whispers had been bait designed to draw some reaction from her the Service could study.

Telzey decided not to worry about it. If it had been bait, she hadn't accepted it. Some other day she might, just to see what would happen.

\* \* \*

Nobody seemed to be living along the water inlets among the cliffs. Campers might be there in summer. Tall trees stood gathered above the shelving rocks, and there were indications of animal life. They were pleasant, peaceful nooks. The kayak circled through each in turn, emerged, glided on along the cliffs to the next. So far, Telzey hadn't seen one that evoked the urge to explore.

But this she thought might be it.

Cup-shaped and considerably larger than most, the bay was enclosed by great steep rock walls on both sides. Trees rose above a sandy shore ahead, their ranks stretching far back into a cleft in the mountain. It would be easy to beach the kayak here and get out.

She saw someone lying on the sand then, not far above the water. A motionless figure, face down, feet turned toward her. There was no



oat in sight, but an aircar might be parked back among the trees. What seemed immediately wrong was that the man wasn't dressed for a sprawl on the sand. He was wearing city clothes, an orange and white business suit. She had the impression he might be sick or dead—or stoned and sleeping it off.



She sent the kayak gliding closer to shore. Thirty feet away, she stopped, called out to the figure, "Hello there! Are you all right?"

He wasn't dead, at any rate. At the sound of her voice, his body jerked; then he was up on hands and knees, staring around at the trees clustered along the bank above him.

"I'm out here!" Telzey called.

He turned his head, saw her, got to his feet. Brushing sand from his coat, he started down toward the water's edge. Telzey saw his mouth working silently. Something certainly was wrong with that man!

"Are you sick?" she asked him. "You were lying there so quietly."

He looked distressed. But he shook his head, tried to smile.

"No," he said. "I'm quite all right. Thank you very much for your concern. It's good of you. But ... well, I'd rather be by myself." He tried to smile again.

Telzey hesitated. His voice indicated he was neither drunk nor doped. "You're sure you're all right?" she said. "You don't look well."

"No, I'm perfectly all right. Please do go now! This isn't ... well, it simply isn't a good place for a young girl to be."

Scared, she decided suddenly. Badly scared. Of what? She glanced over toward the silent trees, said, "Why don't you come with me then? The kayak will carry two."

"No, I can't. I--"

Great electric surges all about and through her--a violent burst of psi. And a rushing, grinding noise overhead. Something struck the water with a heavy splash ten feet away. Telzey jammed the acceleration button full down, swung the steering rod far over. The kayak darted forward, curving to the left. Another splash beside the boat. This time Telzey was drenched with water, momentarily blinded by it.

The bulk of the rock slide hit the surface of the bay instants later. She was clear of it by then, rushing along parallel to the shore. She shook water from her eyes, stabbed the brake button.

The kayak slammed against something just beneath the surface, spun sideways with a rending sound, over-turned, pitching her into the water.

\* \* \*

The kayak was a total loss. Face submerged, she could see it from the shifting surface, twenty feet down in the clear dark depth of the bay where it had slid after tearing itself open almost from bow to stern along a projecting ledge of rock. Feeling weak with shock, she lifted her head, stroked through angrily tossing water toward the shore where the man stood watching her. Presently she found a sloping sand bar underfoot, waded out.

"I'm so sorry!" he said, white-faced. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

Telzey's legs were trembling. She said, not too steadily, "Just scared to death!"

"I would have come to your help--but I can't swim!" He looked haggard enough but must be considerably younger than he'd seemed from the kayak, probably not much over thirty.

"Well, I can," Telzey said. "So that was all right!" She gave him a brief reassuring smile, wondering a good deal about him now, looked up at the cliff on her right, saw the fresh scar there in the overhanging wall a hundred and fifty feet up.

"That was a mess of rock that came down!" she remarked, pushing her hands back over her hair, squeezing water out of it.

"It was terrible! Terrible!" The man sighed heavily. "I ... well, I have towels and clothing articles back there. Perhaps you could find something you could use if you'd like to dry and change."

"No, thanks," Telzey said. "My clothes are waterproofed. I'll be dry again in no time. You don't happen to have a boat around, do you? Or an aircar?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Neither."

She considered it, and him. "You live here?"

He said hesitantly, "No. Not exactly. But I'd planned to stay here a while." He paused. "The truth is, I did use a boat to come across the lake from the village this morning. But after I'd unloaded my supplies and equipment, I destroyed the boat. I didn't want to be tempted to leave too quickly again--"

He cleared his throat, looking as if he badly wanted to go on but couldn't quite bring himself to it.

"Well," Telzey said blandly, "it doesn't really matter. If I'm not back with the kayak by dark, the resort people will figure I'm having a problem and start looking for me."

The man seemed to reach a decision. "I don't want to alarm you, Miss--"

"I'm Telzey Amberdon."

He said his name was Dal Axwen. "There's something I must tell you. While you're here, we'll have to be very careful. Or something may happen to you."

She said cautiously, "What might happen to me?"

He grimaced. "I haven't the faintest idea--that's what makes it so difficult! I do know you're in danger." He cleared his throat again. "I'm sure this will sound as if I'm out of my mind. But the fact is--I'm being haunted!"

Something shivered over Telzey's skin. "Haunted by what?" she asked.

Dal Axwen shook his head. "I can't say. I don't know who he is. Or what he is."

Telzey said after a moment, "You don't think that rock fall was an accident?"

"No," he said. "It wasn't an accident. I didn't think he would go that far, but you can see why I wanted you to go away immediately.

Telzey said after a moment, "He wasn't trying to get at you with the rocks?"

Axwen shook his head. "He intends to destroy me. Everything indicates it. But not directly--not physically. If he wanted that, he'd have done it by now. There's nothing I could have done to prevent it."

. . .

Telzey was silent. At the instant she'd felt that eruption of energy, a tight protective screen of psi force had closed about her mind. While Axwen was talking she'd lightened it carefully, gradually. And now that she was looking for indications of that kind, she could tell there was something around on the psi level. A mentality. She had the impression it was aware of her, though it wasn't reacting in any way

the thinning of her screen. Otherwise, she couldn't make out much about it as yet.

She looked at Axwen. He was watching her with a kind of anxious intentness.

"You say you don't know what he is?" she asked. "Haven't you seen him?"

Axwen hesitated, then said wonderingly, "Why, I think you believe me!"

"Oh, I believe you, all right," Telzey said. "Those rocks were up there, part of the mountain, a long, long time! It really seems more likely something started them down on purpose at the moment I was under them than that it just happened."

"Perhaps it's because you're still almost a child," Axwen said nodding. "But it's a relief in itself to find someone who accepts my explanation for these occurrences." He looked up at the cliff and shivered. "He's never done anything so completely terrifying before! But it's been bad enough."

"You've no idea at all who's doing it?" Telzey asked.

"He's something that can't be seen," Axwen said earnestly. "An evil spirit! I don't know what drew him to me, but he's selected me as his victim. I've given up all hope of ever being free of him again."

An electric tingling began about Telzey's screen. The psi mentality was active again, though on a relatively minor level. Her gaze shifted past Axwen's shoulder. Thirty feet farther along the shore, sand swirled up and about silently as if more and more of it were being flung high into the air by shifting violent blasts of wind in this wind-still bay. Then the sand cloud collapsed. Falling, it seemed to outline for a moment a squat ugly figure moving toward them. Then it was gone.

*All right, I'm already scared,* Telzey told the psi awareness mentally. *You don't have to work at it.*

She sensed no response, no reaction whatever.

Couldn't it hear her?

She moistened her lips, puzzled, looked up at Dal Axwen's worried, sad face.

"Let's walk around in the open a bit while I dry off," she suggested. "How did all this get started?"

\* \* \*

Axwen couldn't say precisely when his troubles had begun. There'd been scattered occurrences in the past few years which in retrospect indicated it was developing during that period. He was an attorney; and sometimes at his office, sometimes at home, he'd discover small articles had been displaced, were lying where he hadn't left them. It seemed inexplicable, particularly when they happened to be objects he'd been handling perhaps only moments before. Once he

found a stack of papers strewn about the carpet as if by a sudden gust of wind, in a room into which no wind could have penetrated.

"It was mystifying, of course," he said. "But those events were quite infrequent, and I didn't really think too much about them. They didn't seem important enough. Then one night a door started slamming in my home. That was half a year ago."

That was the first of a series of events. There were periods in which nothing happened, but he never knew when a previously solid chair might collapse under somebody whose goodwill was essential to him, or other even more disconcerting things would occur. At home, he was no happier. He began to wake up at night to hear somebody walking heavily about the room. When he turned on the light, the footsteps stopped and no one was there. He took to sleeping with every part of the house well illuminated, but assorted manifestations continued. His office staff presently came in for its share of mystifying and alarming experiences and deserted him. Replacements didn't last long. It didn't really seem to matter. By then his business was almost nonexistent.

"Last night at my home there was a continuing series of disturbances—enough to make it impossible for me to get to sleep. It was as if he'd decided to drive me out of my mind. Finally I drugged myself heavily and fell asleep almost at once. I slept for a full twelve hours and woke up more refreshed than I'd been in weeks. There were no indications that my persecutor was around. That's when it occurred to me that if I went far away and hid for a while, I might be able to rid myself of him permanently. I acted on the thought at once, picked out this resort at random from a listing, flew up here, bought a boat in the village, loaded it up with camping equipment and supplies, and set out across the lake. This bay seemed ideal for my purpose. Then, when I was beginning to feel almost certain that I was free of him at last, he let me know he'd found me again."

"How did he do that?" Telzey asked.

"I had set up my shelter and was reaching for one of the food containers. It exploded just as I touched it. I wasn't hurt in the least. But I knew what it meant. I could almost hear him laughing at me."

Axwen added, looking dolefully at Telzey, "I don't remember very well what happened most of the rest of the day. I was in a state of total despair and fear. I remember lying here on the sand, thinking I might never get up again. Finally I heard you call me."

. . .

Some time passed—

Axwen stirred suddenly, lifted his head, and observed in a startled voice, "It seems to be getting dark very quickly!"

Telzey glanced over at him. They were sitting on the sand now, a few feet apart, looking toward the lake beyond the bay. She felt tired and tense. Her face was filmed with sweat. She'd been working around inside Axwen's mind for some while, investigating, probing. Naturally she hadn't let him become aware of what she did.

had been instructive. She knew by now what manner of entity haunted Axwen, and why he was being haunted. She knew how to end the haunting. The question was whether she could get Axwen to believe her—more specifically whether she could get him to believe her in time to do any good. The haunter wasn't far away, and eager, terribly eager, to destroy her, the psi who seemed to stand between itself and its prey. It had appalling power; she couldn't match it on that direct level. So far, she'd been holding it off with a variety of stratagems. But it was beginning to understand what she did and to discover how to undo the stratagems. It couldn't be too long before she'd find she'd run out of workable defenses.

She didn't know just when the moment would come. So she'd decided to bring Dal Axwen awake again. She had to try to get his help while it was still possible.

Axwen then had come awake and made his puzzled comment on the apparent shortness of the day.

Telzey said, "I guess it's just turning evening at the normal time for this latitude and season."

Axwen looked at his watch. "You're right," he admitted. "Strange—the last two hours seem to have passed like a dream! I recall almost nothing of what we said and did." He shook his head. "So I seem to be losing my memory, too! Well, at least there've been no further manifestations." He glanced at Telzey in sudden question. "Or have there been?"

"No," Telzey said.

Axwen yawned comfortably, gazing over at her.

"It's curious!" he remarked. "I feel very calm now, quite undisturbed. I'm aware of my predicament and really see no way out. And I'm concerned that you may come to harm before you're away from here. At the same time, I seem almost completely detached from those problems."

. . .

Telzey nodded. "You try to never get angry at anyone, don't you?"

Axwen shook his head. "No, I don't approve of anger. When I feel such an impulse, which isn't often, I'm almost always able to overcome it. If I can't overcome it, then at least I won't express it or act on it."

Telzey nodded again. "You're someone who has about the average amount of human meanness in him. He knows it's not good, and he's trained himself, much more carefully than the average man, not to let it show in what he says or does. In fact, he's trained himself to the point where he usually doesn't even feel it."

Axwen said uncertainly, "This discussion is beginning to be rather confusing."

"A couple of things happened when you were ten years old," Telzey said. She went on talking a minute or two. Axwen's face grew

ained as he listened. She said then, "I might have hypnotized you a while ago, or given you a spray of dope and asked you questions and told you to forget them again. But you'd better believe I know what I just told you because I read your mind. It isn't all I've done either. You've felt calm and detached till now because that's how I arranged it. I've been keeping you calm and detached. I don't want you to get any more upset than we can help." She added, "I'm afraid you're going to be pretty upset anyway!"

Axwen stared at her. "About what?"

"The fact that you have the kind of second personality I was talking about," Telzey said.

His eyelids flickered for a moment, and his jaw muscles went tight. He said nothing.

. . .

"Let me tell you about him," Telzey went on. "He's the things you haven't wanted to be consciously. That's about it. The way most people would look at it, it didn't make him very evil. But he's known what he is for quite a time, and he knows about you. You're the controlling personality. He's been locked away, unable to do anything except watch what you do. And he wasn't even always able to do that. He hasn't liked it, and he doesn't like you. You're his jailer. He's wanted to be the controlling personality and have it the other way around."

Axwen sighed. "Please don't talk like that!"

He considered, added, "However, if I did have such a secondary personality as a result of having purged myself of characteristics of which I couldn't approve, I agree that I'd keep it locked away! The baser side of our nature, whatever form it takes, shouldn't be permitted to emerge while we can prevent it."

"Well, things have been changing there," Telzey said. "You see, Mr. Axwen, you're a psi, too."

He was silent a moment, eyes fixed on her. Then he shook his head slowly.

"You don't believe you're a psi?" Telzey said.

"I'm afraid I don't." Axwen half smiled. "I'll admit that for a moment you almost had me believing you were one!"

Telzey nodded. "That's how the real trouble started," she said. "You didn't want to believe it. You should have realized a few years ago that you were beginning to develop psi abilities and could control them. But it frightened you. So that was something else you pushed out of awareness." She added, "These last few months I've noticed other people doing the same thing. Usually it doesn't matter--there isn't enough ability there anyway to make much difference."

"Then why should it make any difference to me?" Axwen said gently.

Telzey didn't reply immediately. That gentleness overlay a mental

rigidity strained to the breaking point. Axwen could hardly have avoided having uneasy intimations by now of what she was leading him to. But he still wouldn't let himself see it; and if the barriers against understanding he'd developed over the years were to be broken down, he'd have to do it himself—immediately. His personality was too brittle, too near collapse under pressure as it was, to be tampered with at this point by a psi—certainly by a psi whose experience was no more extensive than her own.

Just now, in any case, she'd have no time at all for doubtful experiments.

She thought Axwen should be able to meet the demands that would be made on him. She'd prepared him as well as she could. What was left was to show him the unalterable and compelling factors at work here, exactly as they were.

"I never heard of a psi with anything like your potential in some areas, Mr. Axwen," she told him. "I didn't know it was possible. You've shoved control of all that power over to your other personality. He's been learning how to use it."

Axwen made a sudden ragged breathing noise.

"So he's who has been haunting you this past half year," she went on. "Really, of course, you've been haunting yourself"

. . .

If it hadn't been for the careful preliminary work she'd done on him, Axwen's reaction, when it finally came, might have been shattering. As it was, she was able to handle it well enough. Some five minutes later, he said dully, "Why would he do such a thing to me?"

It was progress. He'd accepted one part of the situation. He might now be willing to accept the remaining, all-important part. "You said you thought he was trying to drive you out of your mind," Telzey said. "He is, in a way. After he's reduced you down to where you can barely think, *he'll* be the controlling personality."

Axwen said, in desperation, "Then he'll succeed! I can't hope to stand up against his persecution much longer!"

"You won't have to," Telzey told him.

He looked at her. "What do you mean?"

Telzey said, "I've checked this very carefully. You can take psi control away from him if you'll do it at once. I can show you how to do it and help you do it. I know people I could send you to who could help you better than I, but we haven't nearly enough time left for that. And we can do it. Then--"

Axwen's jaw had begun to tremble; his eyes rolled like those of a frightened animal. "I will not associate myself with whatever that creature has become," he said hoarsely. "I deny that he's still part of me!"

"Mr. Axwen," she said, "let me tell you some more about him, about



the situation. I'll talk about him as if he weren't really you. He's one kind of psi; I'm another. In a way, he's much stronger than I am. I couldn't begin to tap the kind of energies he's been handling here, and if I could, they'd kill me."

Telzey pushed her palm across her forehead, wiped away sweat.

"There's a lot he doesn't understand. I'm the first psi he met—he didn't know there were others. He thought I was dangerous to him, so he tried to kill me, his way.

"I can't do any of the things he does. What I've done mainly when I had the time was study minds. What they're like, what you can do with them. Like I studied you today—and him. He didn't know I was doing it for a while, and when he knew that he didn't know how to stop me. He's been trying to do things that will kill me. But each time I confuse him, or make him forget what he wants to do, or how to do it. Sometimes he even forgets for a while that we're here, or what he is. I'm holding him down in a lot of different ways.

"But he keeps on trying to get away—and he is tremendously strong. If I lose control of him completely, he'll kill me at once. He's drawn in much more energy to use against me than he can handle safely—he still doesn't know enough about things like that. He's trying to find out how I'm holding him, and he's catching on. I can't talk to him because he can't hear me. If I had the time, I think I could get him to understand, but I won't have the time. I simply can't hold him that long. Mr. Axwen, don't you see that you must take control? I'll help you, and you can do it—I promise you that!"

"No." There was the flat finality of despair in the word. "But there is something I can do...."

. . .

Axwen started climbing to his feet, dropped awkwardly back again.

"That would be stupid," Telzey said.

He stared at her. "You stopped me!"

"I'm not letting you dive into the bay and drown yourself!"

"What else is left?" He was still staring at her, face chalk-white. His eyes widened then, slowly and enormously. "You—"

Telzey clamped down on the new horror exploding in him.

"No, I'm *not* some supernatural thing!" she said quickly. "I haven't come here to trick you into spiritual destruction. I'm *not* what's been haunting you!"

Something else slipped partly from her control then. Far back in the forested cleft behind them, high up between the cliffs, there was a sound like an echoing crash of thunder. Electric currents whirled about her.

"What's that?" Axwen gasped.

"He's got away," Telzey drew a long unsteady breath. "He doesn't know exactly where we are, but he's looking for us."

She blotted consciousness from Axwen's mind. He slumped over, lay on his side, knees drawn up toward his chest.

She couldn't blot consciousness so easily from the other personality. Nor could she restore the controls it had broken. The crashing sounds moved down through the cleft toward them. There was one thing left she could do, if she still had time for it.

She drew a blur of forgetfulness across its awareness of her, across its purpose. The noise stopped. For the moment, the personality was checked. Not for long—it knew what was being done to it in that respect now and would start forcing its way out of the mental fog.

Psi slashed delicately at its structure. It was an attack it could have blocked with a fraction of the power available to it. But it didn't know how to block it, or, as yet, that it was being attacked. Something separated. A small part of the personality vanished. A small part of its swollen stores of psi vanished with it.

She went on deconstructing Dal Axwen's other personality. It wasn't pleasant work. Sometimes it didn't know what was happening. Sometimes it knew and struggled with horrid tenacity against further disintegration. She worked very quickly because, for a while, it still could have killed her easily if it had discovered in this emergency one of the ways to do it. Then, presently, she was past that point. Its remnants went unwillingly, still clinging to shreds of awareness, but no longer trying to resist otherwise. That seemed to make it worse.

It took perhaps half an hour in all. The last of Axwen's buried personality was gone then, and the last of the psi energy it had drawn into itself had drained harmlessly away. Telzey checked carefully to make sure of it. Then she swallowed twice, and was sick. Afterwards, she rinsed her mouth at the water's edge, came back and brought Axwen awake.

. . .

A search boat from the resort village picked them up an hour later. The resort had considerable experience in locating guests who went off on the lake by themselves and got into difficulties. Shortly before midnight, Telzey was in her aircar, on the way back to Pehannon College. All inclination to spend the rest of the weekend at the lake had left her.

The past hours had brought her an abrupt new understanding of the people of the Psychology Service and their ways. Dal Axwen was a psi who should have been kept under observation and restraint while specialists dissolved the rigid blocks which prevented him from giving sane consideration to his emerging talent. If the Service people had discovered him in time, they could have saved him intact, as she'd been unable to do. And there might be many more psi personalities than she'd assumed who could be serious problems to themselves and others unless given guidance—with or without their consent.

It seemed then that in a society in which psis were a factor,

Something like the Psychology Service was necessary. Their procedures weren't as arbitrary as they'd appeared to her. She'd keep her independence of them; she'd earned that by establishing she could maintain it. But it would be foolish to turn her back completely on the vast stores of knowledge and experience represented by the Service....

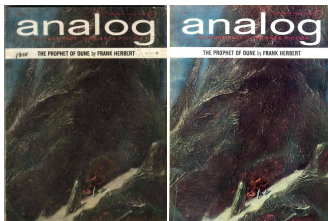
Her reflections kept returning unwillingly to Dal Axwen's reactions. He'd been enormously, incredulously grateful after she restored him to consciousness. He'd laughed and cried. He'd kept trying to explain how free, relaxed and light he felt after the months of growing nightmare oppression, how safe he knew he was now from further uncanny problems of the kind. Forgetting she still was able to read his mind, knew exactly how he felt—

Telzey shook her head. She'd killed half a unique human being, destroyed a human psi potential greater than she'd suspected existed.

And Axwen—foolish, emptied Axwen—had thanked her with happy tears streaming from his eyes for doing it to him!

# "A Nice Day for Screaming"

Published in *Analog Science Fiction* → *Science Fact*, Vol. 74, No. 5 (January 1965), illustrated by Kelly Freas.



Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.

»

As soon as the Marsar Shift began, Adacee newscaster Keth Debol had the feeling that he wasn't going to like this assignment. In part, it might be simply a reaction to the pitch-blackness which closed down instantly on the pseudospace ship. He knew the lights in the personnel section around him were on. Yet not the faintest glow was visible anywhere—not even from Furnay's control console directly before him. It was the deadest, emptiest black he had ever experienced ... the kind of black that might be left after the Universe ended. The thought came suddenly that, if he had to stay in it for any length of time, it would drain everything out of him and leave him sitting here, an empty, black shell, as dead as the rest of it.

However, the shift wouldn't last long. The Navy men with whom Keth Debol had talked during his briefing the day before had emphasized the eerie aspects of Space Three, no doubt deliberately. Keth knew he wasn't welcome on board, and he couldn't have cared less. It had taken a great deal of maneuvering and string-pulling by the Adacee News Viewer System to get him the assignment on one of the fourteen pseudospace ships presently in operation. The Navy wanted more money for its enormously expensive Space Three projects; and in the end the argument had prevailed that the best way to get popular support for their wishes was to have a popular newscaster provide an enthusiastic, first-hand projected report on one of the sorties into pseudospace. And there were simply no more popular newscasters in the Federation that year than Keth Debol.

But the men he would actually be on shipboard with hadn't liked the arrangement much, especially the provision that Keth was to have the run of the ship insofar as he didn't interfere with operations. And like many other people who dealt with him in person, they might not

have cared much for Keth. He was undersized and thin, still on the young side but already--since he lived well--sporting a small, round paunch. A point which seemed to irk the Navy scientists in particular was that he hadn't bothered to take notes on the information they had given him for the telecast. Keth never did take notes, of course; he had nearly perfect recall. But they didn't know that.

There was a brief, sharp tingling in the palm of his right hand--a signal from Furnay, his technician, that the telecast, which would be transmitted to normspace by special Navy communicators, was beginning; and Keth automatically began to talk....

As usual, he didn't pay much attention to what he was saying. It wasn't necessary. The relevant material was stored in his mind, already arranged into a number of variant patterns. Depending on the circumstances, it would emerge in one sequence or another, always coherently, smoothly, effectively. He discovered he had started now with the statement that this was another milestone in newscasting history--the first direct report from pseudospace or Space Three. They were shifting at the moment into the field of an entirely new class of energies, a region where space appeared to exist only as a useful symbol, or as an illusionary medium in the recording instruments. The discovery of pseudospace five years ago had been a triumph of human ingenuity; its existence had been established by the calculations of Navy mathematicians, and the means of contacting it derived from those same calculations. Since then two new mathematical systems already had been developed to provide even a theoretical understanding of the problems encountered in the further exploration of this weird new stratum of the Universe.

He turned briefly to technicalities. They would remain in pseudospace for the period of one hour less a few minutes, in a Navy ship especially designed and constructed to permit even temporary existence there. Aside from the standard drives, it was equipped with an engine which made the shift possible. This engine would be shut off as soon as the shift was accomplished, would be turned on again ten minutes before the scheduled return because it took five minutes to build up the required power for the shift. One hour was at present the maximum period a ship could remain safely in Space Three.

The shift engine would be shut off for the curious reason that although motion *in* Space Three was impossible, motion relative to normal space and subspace *while* in Space Three was not only possible but greatly augmented. What produced it was any use of energy by the intruding vessel. The result was that a pseudospace ship always emerged into normspace again at a point removed from its point of entry--and at a distance far greater than it could otherwise have covered by the full use of standard drive engines in the same period of time. The potential value of this phenomenon for space travel was obvious; but at present there was no fixed ratio between the energy expended by a ship and the distance it moved, and the direction in which it would move was equally unpredictable. Many of the multiple studies programmed for today's one-hour shift were designed to yield additional information on precisely those points.

Their shift had been initiated in the vicinity of Orado. They would release an exceptional amount of energy because of a demonstration graciously prepared by the Navy to illustrate certain

interesting qualities of pseudospace to Adacee's billions of viewers. So all they knew definitely was that when they emerged again, they would find themselves somewhere within the space boundaries of the Federation. The exact location would be determined after they had arrived.

Keth Deboll came to that point at the instant the Marsar Shift ended and the ship lights reappeared. He hadn't consciously planned it that way, but he'd been told how long the shift would take, and the material stored in his mind had re-sorted itself so that he'd have the preliminary explanations cleared up when the moment came.

He went on without a break into the next part. In a moment the vision screens would go on. He and Furnay had been provided with a smaller duplicate of the main screen at the far end of the personnel section; and Adacee's viewers would get the first live look afforded the general public of the instruments' rendition of a nonspatial energy field. They would be seeing something no eyes had seen, or could have seen, before Man's supreme intelligence, determination and courage found a way to begin to map Space Three--perhaps eventually to make use of it.

The illusionary medium of Space Three appeared abruptly. Keth's stomach seemed to turn over twice. He had the feeling that he was being pulled painlessly but inexorably apart. His mouth went on talking but he hadn't the faintest idea now of what he said. The medium was a bright pink and white, gave the impression of vast but unstable depth. The colors shifted in slowly changing patterns. Something like a transparent vapor streamed by from right to left--Keth had the impression it was a considerable distance away--like clouds moving across a summer sky. Of course, "distance" had no actual meaning here.

And neither, his voice reminded the viewers, did the word "cold" retain its familiar meaning in Space Three. It was cold beyond any previous understanding of the term, not merely in the sense of an utter absence of heat, but cold on the ascending scale, so to speak--cold above cold above cold.

This was the great hazard of Space Three, the factor which would have made it impenetrable, if its existence had been known, to life before Man. For the reason Man could penetrate it was the great discovery of the Marsar Field....

This whole universe-of-the-moment, Keth decided, was being twisted slowly in two directions at once! Not only Space Three in the screen, but the pseudospace ship itself, and he and Furnay in the seat beside him. He couldn't actually see anything to tell him why he knew that, but he knew it, and it was an extraordinarily unpleasant thing to know. He heard Furnay swallowing noisily--no harm done, the filters would catch it--and began to wish he had eaten a less healthy breakfast an hour ago...

The Marsar Energy Field, his voice was continuing smoothly, coated the outer boxlike hull of the pseudospace ship. The personnel section in the center of the ship, where they now were, was another box, separated from the other compartments of the ship by gravity pressors. In other words, the personnel section was suspended, floating free within the ship; and it also was coated with the Field.

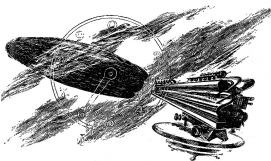
This was a very necessary precaution because the Marsar Field was the only thing which stood now between them and the ultimate cold of Space Three--and it would be demonstrated immediately what that ultracold did to objects from normal space which lacked the Field's protection...

. . .

Keth had come to his feet, still speaking, and was moving along an open aisle toward an adjoining part of the personnel section. He wasn't concerned about getting beyond the range of the instruments; it was Furnay's department to cover him wherever he was in the ship, and Furnay would do it. He stopped at another screen where two Navy technicians were sitting. The expectancy in their faces as he approached had told him they were hoping for signs that Space Three was churning the unwelcome guest's brain along with assorted other innards; so he flashed them the famous Keth Debolli grin without interrupting his easy flow of talk. They swung back disappointedly to their switches and buttons.

"And these are the two gentlemen selected to carry out the demonstration... ." Keth gave their full names, which shook them a little, went on explaining each move they made as they made it, never at a loss, never hesitant, enjoying his control of the situation and of the continuing awful feeling of internal and external distortion...

The pseudospace ship had brought another vessel into Space Three with it--a chunky, old-fashioned siege boat, of no greater length than a destroyer but covered with armor of the densest, toughest workable material known, designed to move in against the fire of heavy planet-based guns and remain operational. Unmanned because it was to be sacrificed now for the benefit of Adacee's viewers, it hung in the screen, gradually increasing in size. The two ships were in motion relative both to normal space and to each other, Keth explained--the siege boat only because its Marsar Field and the shift engine with which it had been equipped were giving off energy while the pseudospace ship was additionally using its standard drives to maneuver closer to the intended victim ... but not too close because any contact with another solid object would collapse its Marsar Field--



Two devices had appeared in the screen about midway between the two ships, and Keth's description slid over to them, quickening.

telecontrolled projectile guns, each balancing a detached four-inch steel sphere in its launching field, spheres and guns both shielded by the Marsar effect, of course ... and now one had veered about, his voice announced, rising in excitement, had aimed at the doomed siege boat, and the sphere was launched.

Close-up of a steel ball seemingly motionless against the frozen pink and white of pseudospace, then the armored flank of the siege boat swinging into view, swinging in toward it. The four-inch missile struck and adhered.

The close-up flowed out, became the previous picture, now including the projected image of a huge transparent time dial, a second hand sweeping around through its ten marked sections. As the hand touched the tenth mark, the dial vanished, the other projectile gun swerved, and the second steel ball was launched. Keth abruptly stopped speaking.

This time, there was no close-up. A moment passed; and then the siege boat shattered.

It was not a violent process but an awesomely quiet one. Cracks flicked about the massively armored hull, joined and deepened. The boat began to drift apart in sections, each section splitting again and again as it came separate. For an instant, the shift engine showed, protected by its own Marsar and pressor fields from the debacle around it, then vanished, on its way back to normspace. Keth felt a stab of annoyance. The Navy had insisted on salvaging the engine, and its intact appearance meant a fractional loss in overall effect.

But otherwise the picture of absolute destruction was complete. Chunks of battle-armor capable of resisting the pounding of ultrabeams continued to crack into fragments, fragments splintered into dust, Keth's voice quietly accompanying the siege boat's destruction. For a moment, a glittering fog, which still retained a suggestion of the vessel's outlines, was visible; then Space Three was clear again. Probably not one in a million of Adacee's viewers had noticed the simultaneous dissolution of the projectile guns, triggered off from the pseudospace ship.

And this was the explanation for the dual protection given the personnel section, Keth continued. If, for any reason, their ship's outer Marsar Field should fail ... and Marsar Fields had been known to fail for reasons never explained ... the rest of the ship would, within seconds, become a homogenous, brittle-frozen mass. But the personnel section would remain intact within its own field, and since it contained the shift engine, it could be brought back by itself to normal space to await the arrival of rescue ships.

In spite of such precautions, one pseudospace ship not too long ago had simply stopped communicating and disappeared during a shift. Space Three remained a medium of both unfathomed opportunities and unfathomed dangers, and until...

. . .

Keth again stopped listening to what he was saying. It was familiar ground: a pitch for money. The Navy was getting what it had paid for by providing the stage for a Deboll newscast while Keth moved



toward the instrument room at the far end of the section. There he would introduce several scientists, question them individually about their specialties, then switch back to a few minor demonstrations ... and, blessedly, the gruesome hour would be over.

A sharp whisper suddenly beside his left ear. "Keth! Get back here!"

What did Furnay want? Keth turned, started back toward the technician, not too hurriedly, mind racing. His commentary veered off from the interviews toward which it had been leading, took a new tack which would provide an opening for whatever had caught Furnay's attention. Whatever had caused that interruption could be no minor matter.

As he slid into his seat before the screen, Furnay's filtered voice said hurriedly on his left, "That dot in the upper right corner! It appeared just a moment ago and it's getting larger fast--"

Keth's eyes flicked over the screen, found the dot. More than a dot ... an irregular little dark blotch against the blazing white of Space Three, changing shape constantly and expanding visibly as he stared at it. For an instant, he felt cold fury. They hadn't mentioned anything like this in yesterday's briefing, and in seconds he'd have to be talking about it, explaining it glibly! His hand already had pressed a button on the little intercom rod in his pocket which would connect him with one of the observers at the big screen, the man who was standing by to fill in if Keth felt unable to interpret what the screens showed.

He hadn't expected to use that button ... and now the fool didn't respond! He pressed again, repeatedly, ragingly.

A loud voice announced:

"Emergency stations! Repeat--emergency stations! Unidentified object approaching... ."

Keth drew a sharp breath. *They* didn't know what it was! A new Space Three phenomenon in the middle of the newscast--what a break! What a break! He swung into the situation instantly, opening the pickup filters, which had been blurring out irrelevant sounds, and every intercom, catching commands and responses crossing the personnel section his voice running along with them, expanding, improvising... . The drive engines came on with a muted roar; the pseudospace ship moved away, out of the course of the unknown object which had been headed directly towards them--and which, thirty seconds later, *again* was headed directly towards them. The ship suddenly picked up speed in dead earnest.

They had turned on the shift engine, Keth announced to Adacee's viewers, voice shaking with excitement; but of course, it would take five minutes for the engine to develop enough power to permit their return to normal space. Meanwhile the blob, the blotch--the unidentified object--now four or five inches across in the screen--was sliding sideways out of sight as the ship turned away from it. It was still vague ... objects more than two miles apart in normspace terms could not be clearly defined in pseudospace; but there was a suggestion, more than a suggestion, of bunched tentacles trailing from that shifting shape. It definitely, almost definitely, was following them--

Furnay was stabbing buttons desperately, as the object vanished from the screen, to get them switched over to another one where it would be visible again. The Adacee feedback tinkle sounded in Keth's left ear; a jubilant voice whispered, "Terrific, Debol! Terrific! None of us can imagine how you did it, but keep the thing running! The interest indicator jumped to absolute top in less than thirty seconds and is staying right there. You sound scared to death!"

He was scared to death, Keth discovered. His knees rattled together whenever they came within four inches of each other... . And now the screen blinked twice and shifted to a slightly different view of pseudospace.

"Awk!" Furnay said hoarsely.

The pursuing object couldn't be much more than two *miles* behind them now because its details were trembling on the verge of becoming discernible. Only two miles, Keth repeated, stunned, to himself--with the ship roaring along on its space drive!

And with that, the personnel section went black.

. . .

Keth heard a thump beside him, put out his hand and found Furnay collapsed forward on the control console. He wasn't sure whether the technician had fainted or not, and he started shaking him by the shoulder. The intercom was still full of voices and his own voice was continuing automatically. "We have begun the Marsar Shift! Apparently, we escaped with only seconds to spare! What this... ."

"Mr. Debol," the intercom told him sharply, "the newscast was cut off twenty seconds ago! Communications is pre-empting all channels until we have completed the shift to normspace and established our new location there."

Twenty seconds ago would have been the instant they entered the shift. Oh, not bad, Keth thought giddily. Not bad at all! The last impression Adacee's viewers had been given was of that horrific unknown pursuer closing in. And now minutes of silence before the ship's escape was confirmed--it would be the sensation of the month!

"Shift ending," the intercom said. "Remain at your stations... ."

The lights came on. The screen before Keth remained black for an instant. Then something flickered in it, and he was looking out at clouds and rivers of blazing stars.

Somebody cheered. After that, there was a dead stillness for perhaps half a second...

Somebody else yelled hoarsely. Keth shot up half out of his seat, stayed crouched, bent forward, staring at the screen.

The stars on the right were being obscured by a darkness which came flowing out over them ... a darkness which extended broad, whipping tendrils and grew, covering half the screen, two thirds of it. Voices were shouting, and at the last moment, before the screen

was completely blanked out, Keth glimpsed something like a section of a huge, rubbery tube swinging down toward him through space.

The personnel section seemed to slue around. The deck came up under Keth, threw him stumbling half across Furnay. He grasped the technician's shoulders to right himself.

"Main drive dead!" the intercom bellowed incredulously.

There was the sluing motion again, this time in reversed direction. For a moment, stars reappeared in one corner of the screen, racing through it—as if, Keth thought, the ship were spinning wildly through space. The deck heaved. He staggered, pitched forward, then back, tripped and went down. Something hard slammed the side of his head, and his mind went blank.

. . .

"He's coming around now," Furnay's voice was saying. "Hey, Keth, wake up!"

Keth opened his eyes. He was lying in the seat before the screen, tilted backward. Furnay was on one side of him, somebody else stood on the other side. He jerked his head up to look at the screen. It was full of stars.

"What's happened?" he gasped.

"We're no longer in danger, Mr. Deboll," the other man said reassuringly. He was in his shirt sleeves and closing a flat container full of medical instruments. "Exactly what did happen isn't at all clear, but we should know shortly."

"Captain Roan," the intercom said, "please come to Station Three at once!"

The man smiled at Keth, said to Furnay: "He'll be all right now," and hurried off with his container.

"That's the doctor," Furnay said. "You cut your head pretty bad, but he sealed it." Furnay looked pale and shaken. "That thing, whatever it was, went back to Space Three. Or at least, it's gone. I came to in the middle of it all, while it was coming aboard... "

"Coming aboard?" Keth repeated blankly. "You were hallucinating, Furnay. That thing was a hundred times bigger than this ship! I saw part of it close up."

"Well, something came on board," Furnay said doggedly. "Ask anybody. First there was an awful banging over the intercom from somewhere else on the ship. Then somebody yelled that all three ship locks were being opened."

"From outside?"

Furnay looked at him. "Keth, nobody here was opening them, believe me! Then there was more banging here and there for a while. They were trying to find out what was going on out there, of course, but the intership screens were too blurred to make out anything. That went

for a while." Furnay wet his lips. "Then the lock to the personnel section began to open...."

"Huh?"

"That's right," Furnay said. "It came right in here."

"What came right in here?" Keth demanded savagely.

The technician spread his hands. "Nobody really got a look at it, Keth! The air sort of got thick--not to breathe; it was more like you were trying to look through syrup. Same thing that had been blurring the intership screens apparently. It only lasted about a minute. Then the air turned clear and the lock here closed. Maybe a minute later, the ship screens cleared, and the three big locks all closed together. Nobody had seen anything. Right after that, everything went black again."

"Marsar Shift black, you mean?"

Furnay nodded. "We were shifting to Space Three. That seems to be why it came in here--to start the shift engine. But somebody reversed the field right away and we came back to normspace. The thing was gone, and the main problem now seems to be that our space drive is almost out. We're barely able to move. But the transmitters started working again...."

"They were out?" Keth asked.

"They went blank about the time the drive engines stopped," Furnay said. "Then, as soon as the thing left, they started up again. The communication boys called for help, and there's a Space Scout squadron four days away headed toward us now...."

"Four days away?"

"Well, we're way outside of the Hub. That five-minute run on full drive, while the shift engine was warming up, brought on the biggest Space Three jump ever recorded.... Where are you going?"

Keth was climbing to his feet. "Where do you think? We still have a newscast running. I'm going to get hold of the brass, find out exactly what they know, and get Communication to release a channel so we can start beaming it back. This is the biggest...."

"Wait a minute, Keth!" Furnay looked worried. "This is a Navy ship and we're operating under emergency regulations at the moment." He nodded at the open personnel section lock fifty feet away. "The brass is outside in the ship, checking things over. Everyone else has been ordered to remain at their stations. And they figure this is our station."

Keth grunted irritably, looked around. A gold-braided jacket and cap lay across a chair a few feet away. He went over, glanced around again, put them on.

"They're the doctor's," Furnay said.

"He won't miss them. Sit tight here."

. . .

Keth walked down the aisle toward a food dispenser fifteen feet from the open lock. The borrowed jacket and cap were decidedly too big for him, and from moment to moment he was in partial view of various groups in the section; but everyone was too involved in discussing recent events to pay him much attention. He paused at the dispenser, punched a button at random and received a tube of liquid vitamins. Half turning, he flicked a glance from under the cap brim about the part of the section he could see, moved on to the lock and stepped quietly through it.

There was no one in sight on the other side. He turned to the right along the passage through which he and Furnay had been conducted to the personnel section a little over an hour ago. The main entrance lock was just beyond its far end, out of sight. He might find something there to tell him how to get to the engine room. Since they were having trouble with the drives, that was presumably where the investigating senior officers would be.

At the end of the passage, he stopped, startled. The lock room was almost entirely filled with an assortment of items he found himself unable to identify. One wall was lined to the ceiling with luminous hexagonal boxes arranged like a honeycomb. Against them leaned bundled extrusions which looked like steel with bubbles of light trickling slowly through it. Completely blocking the lock was a great mass of rainbow-colored globes two feet in diameter, which appeared to be stuck together. The weirdest item was stacked by the hundreds along the left wall ... transparent plastic blocks, each containing something which looked partly like a long-haired gloomy monkey and partly like a caterpillar.

Keth blinked at the arrangement, mouth open, for a moment, went over and touched a finger gingerly against one of the globes. It felt warm--around a hundred and ten degrees, he decided. Scowling and muttering to himself, he went off down another passage.

He passed a closed door, hesitated, returned and opened it. The area beyond was filled about equally by transparent sacks, bulging with what looked like white diamonds, and large, dark-red cylinders. The cylinders were groaning softly. Keth closed the door, opened another one thirty feet farther on, glanced in and hurriedly slammed it shut. He walked on, shaking his head, his mouth working nervously.

A minute or two later, he saw a sign which said engine room--maintenance above an opened lock. Keth entered, found himself on the upper level of the engine room with a spider web of catwalks running here and there about the machinery. From below came the sound of voices.

He edged out on one of the catwalks, peered down. Half a dozen men, two of them in uniform, stood about an open hatch from which another uniformed man, the engineering officer, was just emerging. These were the ship's senior officers, and every one of them, Keth reminded himself, was also one of the Federation Navy's top scientists. They were too far off to let him understand what they were talking about, but if he got within hearing range without being discovered, he should gather information they wouldn't volunteer for the purposes of a newscast. He drew back out of sight, located a

ladder along the wall and climbed down to the main level.

Guided by their voices, he threaded his way among the machines toward the group. There was a sudden, loud slam--the hatch being closed again. Then the voices were coming toward him on the other side of the massive steel bole along which he had been moving. Keth flattened himself quickly into a shallow niche of the machine, stayed still.

\* \* \*

They came out into an intersection of passages on Keth's left and stopped there. He held his breath. If they looked over at him now, they couldn't miss seeing him. But the engineering officer was speaking and their attention was on him.

"Up to a point," he was saying, "the matter is now clear. It removed our fuel plates and replaced them with its own... ."

Keth's ears seemed to flick forwards. What was that? His thoughts began to race.

"Those plates," the man went on, "are producing energy. In fact, they have a really monstrous output. But the energy doesn't do much for our drives. In some way, almost all of it is being diverted, dissipated, shunted off somewhere else.

"There's no immediate explanation for that, but it isn't a practical problem. We'll simply shut off the drives, pull out the plates and put our own back again. We'll be docking at the station in a week. If we had to use this stuff, it would take us half a dozen years to crawl back to the Hub under our own power."

"In normspace," another man said.

"Yes, in normspace. In pseudo, naturally, it would be a very different matter."

The ship captain scratched his chin, remarked, "In pseudo, if your figures on the output are correct, those plates might have carried us out of the galaxy in a matter of hours."

"Depending on the course we took," the engineering officer agreed.

There was a pause. Then somebody said, "When we were maneuvering to get the siege boat in range, we may have been moving along, or nearly along, one of the scheduled courses. That and our slow speed would have been the signal... ."

"It seems to explain it," the engineering officer said. He added, "A point I still don't understand is why we didn't lose our atmosphere in the process! We're agreed that the fact we were aboard would have had no meaning for the thing--it was a detail it simply wouldn't register. Yet there has been no drop in pressure."

Another man said dryly, "But it isn't quite the same atmosphere! I've found a substantially higher oxygen reading. I think it will be discovered that some of the objects it left on board--I suspect those in the lock room in particular--contain life in one form or another, and

that it's oxygen-breathing life."

"That may have been a very fortunate circumstance for us," the captain said. "And... ." His eyes had shifted along the passage, stopped now on Keth. He paused. "Well," he said mildly, "it seems we have company! It's the gentleman from the newscast system."

The others looked around in surprise.

"Mr. Deboll," the captain went on thoughtfully, "I take it you overheard our discussion just now."

Keth cleared his throat. "Yes," he said. He took off the medical officer's cap.

"You came down here by way of the main lock passage?"

"Yes."

There was silence for a moment. Then the engineering officer said, "As I see it, no harm has been done." He looked rather pleased.

"Quite the contrary, in my opinion!" said the captain. He smiled at Keth. "Mr. Deboll please join our group. In observing you during yesterday's briefing, I was struck by your quickness in grasping the essentials of a situation. No doubt, you already have realized what the explanation for this extraordinary series of events must be."

"Yes, I have," Keth said hoarsely.

"Excellent. Our instructions are that we must not interfere in any way with your report to the public. Now I have a feeling that what you will have to say may be a definite upset to those who have maintained the exploratory Space Three projects should be limited or abandoned because of their expense, and because no information of practical value could possibly be gained from them."

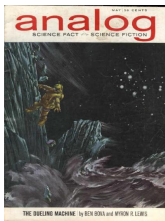
"My guess is you'll get anything you want for them now," Keth told him.

The captain grinned. "Then let's return to the personnel section and get that newscast going!"

They started back to the engine room entrance. Keth mentally phrasing the manner in which he would explain to Adacee's waiting billions of viewers that the pseudospace ship—one of Man's great achievements—had been halted, engulfed, checked, fueled, loaded up and released by somebody else's automatic depot and service station for intergalactic robot cargo carriers.

# "Oneness"

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At that, you know the power to enforce  
the Golden Rule would make a terrible weapon!

[»](#)

Menesee felt excitement surge like a living tide about him as he came with the other directors into the vast Tribunal Hall. Sixty years ago, inexcusable carelessness had deprived Earth of its first chance to obtain a true interstellar drive. Now, within a few hours, Earth, or more specifically, the upper echelons of that great political organization called the Machine which had controlled the affairs of Earth for the past century and a half, should learn enough of the secrets of the drive to insure that it would soon be in their possession.

Menesee entered his box between those of Directors Cornelius and Ojeda, immediately to the right of the Spokesman's Platform and with an excellent view of the prisoner. When Administrator Bradshaw and Spokesman Dorn had taken their places on the platform, Menesee seated himself, drawing the transcript of the day's proceedings towards him. However, instead of glancing over it at once, he spent some seconds in a study of the prisoner.

The fellow appeared to be still young. He was a magnificent physical specimen, tall and strongly muscled, easily surpassing in this respect any of the hard-trained directors present. His face showed alert intelligence, giving no indication of the fact that for two of the three days since his capture he had been drugged and subject to constant hypnotic suggestion. He had given his name as Rainbolt, acknowledged freely that he was a member of the group of malcontent deserters known in the records of the Machine as the



Mars Convicts, but described himself as being a "missionary of Oneness" whose purpose was to bring the benefits of some of the principles of "Oneness" to Earth. He had refused to state whether he had any understanding of the stardrive by the use of which the Mars Convicts had made their mass escape from the penal settlements of the Fourth Planet sixty years before, though the drive obviously had been employed in bringing him out of the depths of interstellar space to the Solar System and Earth. At the moment, while the significance of the bank of torture instruments on his right could hardly have escaped him, his expression was serious but not detectably concerned.

"Here is an interesting point!" Director Ojeda's voice said on Menessee's right.

Menessee glanced over at him. Ojeda was tapping the transcript with a finger.

"This Rainbolt," he said, "hasn't slept since he was captured! He states, furthermore, that he has never slept since he became an adult--"

Menessee frowned slightly, failing to see any great significance in the fact. That the fellow belonged to some curious cult which had developed among the Mars Convicts following their flight from the Solar System was already known. Earth's science had methods of inducing permanent sleeplessness but knew, too, that in most instances the condition eventually gave rise to very serious side effects which more than offset any advantages to be gained from it.

He picked up his transcript, indicating that he did not wish to be drawn into conversation. His eyes scanned quickly over the pages. Most of it was information he already had. Rainbolt's ship had been detected four days earlier, probing the outermost of the multiple globes of force screens which had enclosed Earth for fifty years as a defense both against faster-than-light missiles and Mars Convict spies. The ship was alone. A procedure had been planned for such an event, and it was now followed. The ship was permitted to penetrate the first two screens which were closed again behind it.

Rainbolt's ship, for all its incredible speed, was then a prisoner. Unhurriedly, it was worked closer to Earth until it came within range of giant scanners. For an instant, a large section of its interior was visible to the instruments of the watchers on Earth; then the picture blurred and vanished again. Presumably automatic anti-scanning devices had gone into action.

The photographed view was disappointing in that it revealed no details of the engines or their instruments. It did show, however, that the ship had been designed for the use of one man, and that it was neither armored or armed. Its hull was therefore bathed with paralytics, which in theory should have left the pilot helpless, and ships of the Machine were then sent up to tow the interstellar captive down to Earth.

At that point, the procedure collapsed. The ship was in atmosphere when an escape capsule was suddenly ejected from it, which later was found to contain Rainbolt, alert and obviously not affected by the paralysis beams. A moment later, the ship itself became a cloud of swiftly dissipating hot gas.

The partial failure of the capture might have been unavoidable in any case. But the manner in which it occurred still reflected very poorly, Menesee thought, on the thoroughness with which the plans had been prepared. The directors who had been in charge of the operation would not be dealt with lightly--

He became aware suddenly that the proceedings of the day had begun and hastily put down the transcript.

\* \* \*

Spokesman Dorn, the Machine's executive officer, sitting beside Administrator Bradshaw at a transparent desk on the raised platform to Menesee's left, had enclosed the area about the prisoner with a sound block and was giving a brief verbal resume of the background of the situation. Few of the directors in the Tribunal Hall would have needed such information; but the matter was being carried on the Grand Assembly Circuit, and in hundreds of auditoriums on Earth the first and second echelons of the officials of the Machine had gathered to witness the interrogation of the Mars Convict spy.

The penal settlements on Mars had been established almost a century earlier, for the dual purpose of mining the mineral riches of the Fourth Planet and of utilizing the talents of political dissidents with a scientific background too valuable to be wasted in research and experimental work considered either too dangerous to be conducted on Earth or requiring more space than could easily be made available there. One of these projects had been precisely the development of more efficient spacedrives to do away with the costly and tedious manoeuvrings required for travel even among the inner planets.

Work of such importance, of course, was supposed to be carried out only under close guard and under the direct supervision of reliable upper-echelon scientists of the Machine. Even allowing for criminal negligence, the fact that the Mars Convicts were able to develop and test their stardrive under such circumstances without being detected suggested that it could not be a complicated device. They did, at any rate, develop it, armed themselves and the miners of the other penal settlements and overwhelmed their guards in surprise attack. When the next ship arrived from Earth, two giant ore carriers and a number of smaller guard ships had been outfitted with the drive, and the Mars Convicts had disappeared in them. Their speed was such that only the faintest and briefest of disturbances had been registered on the tracking screens of space stations near Mars, the cause of which remained unsuspected until the news came out.

Anything which could have thrown any light on the nature of the drive naturally had been destroyed by the deserters before they left; and the few Machine scientists who had survived the fighting were unable to provide information though they were questioned intensively for several years before being executed. What it added up to was that some eighteen thousand sworn enemies of the Machine had disappeared into space, equipped with an instrument of unknown type which plainly could be turned into one of the deadliest of all known weapons.

The superb organization of the Machine swung into action instantly to

the threat, though the situation became complicated by the fact that rumors of the manner in which the Mars Convicts had disappeared filtered out to the politically dissatisfied on Earth and set off an unprecedented series of local uprisings which took over a decade to quell. In spite of such difficulties, the planet's economy was geared over to the new task; and presently defenses were devised and being constructed which would stop missiles arriving at speeds greater than that of light. Simultaneously, the greatest research project in history had begun to investigate the possibilities of either duplicating the fantastic drive some scientific minds on Mars had come upon--chiefly, it was concluded, by an improbable stroke of good luck--or of matching its effects through a different approach. Since it had been demonstrated that it could be done, there was no question that in time the trained men of the Machine would achieve their goal. Then the armed might of the Machine would move into space to take control of any colony established by the Mars Convicts and their descendants.

That was the basic plan. The task of developing a stardrive remained a huge one because of the complete lack of information about the direction organized research should take. That difficulty would be overcome easily only by a second unpredictable twist of fortune--unless one of the Mars Convicts' flt ships ventured close enough to Earth to be captured.

The last had now happened. The ship had been destroyed before it could be investigated, so that advantage was again lost. The ship's pilot, however, remained in their hands. The fact that he disclaimed having information pertinent to the drive meant nothing. So far as he knew, he might very well be speaking the truth. But he had piloted a ship that employed the stardrive, was familiar with instruments which controlled it, had been schooled in their use. A detailed investigation of his memories could not fail to provide literally hundreds of meaningful clues. And the Machine's scientists, in their superficially still fruitless search for the nature of the drive, had, in fact, covered basic possibilities with such comprehensive thoroughness that a few indisputably valid clues would show them now what it *must* be.

. . .

The prisoner, still demonstrating an extraordinary degree of obliviousness to what lay in store for him, appeared to welcome the opportunity to be heard by the directors of the Machine. Menesee, leaning back in his chair, studied the man thoughtfully, giving only partial attention to what was said. This was the standard opening stage of a Tribunal interrogation, an underplayed exchange of questions and answers. Innocuous as it seemed, it was part of a procedure which had become refined almost to an unvarying ritual--a ritual of beautiful and terrible precision which never failed to achieve its goals. Every man watching and listening in the Machine's auditoriums across the world was familiar with the swift processes by which a normal human being was transformed into a babbling puppet, his every significant thought becoming available for the upper echelons to regard and evaluate.

They would, of course, use torture. It was part of the interlocking mechanisms of interrogation, no more to be omitted than the preliminary conditioning by drug and hypnosis. Menesee was not

of the crude instruments ranked beside the prisoner which would be used. They were reserved as a rule for offending members of the organization, providing a salutary warning for any others who might be tempted to act against the interests of the Machine or fail culpably in their duties. This prisoner, as an individual, meant nothing to the Machine. He was simply a source of valuable information. Therefore, only direct nerve stimulation would be employed, in the manipulation of which Spokesman Dorn was a master.

So far the Spokesman had restricted himself to asking the prisoner questions, his voice and manner gravely courteous. To Menessee's surprised interest, he had just inquired whether two men of the last Earth ship to visit Mars, who had disappeared there, might not have been captured by Mars Convicts operating secretly within the Solar System.

"Yes, sir," Rainbolt replied readily, "they were. I'm happy to say that they're still alive and well."

Menessee recalled the incident now. After the mass escape of the Mars Convicts, the penal settlements had been closed down and the mining operations abandoned. To guard the desert planet against fitful raiders as Earth was guarded was technically infeasible. But twice each decade a patrol ship went there to look for signs that the Mars Convicts had returned. The last of these patrols had been conducted two years before. The missing men were believed to have been inspecting a deserted settlement in a ground vehicle when they vanished, but no trace of them or the vehicle could be discovered.

Administrator Bradshaw, seated to the spokesman's left, leaned forward as if to speak, but then sat back again. Menessee thought that Rainbolt's blunt admission had angered him. Bradshaw, white-haired and huge in build, had been for many years the nominal head of the Machine; but in practice the powers of the administrator were less than those of the spokesman, and it would have been a breach of protocol for Bradshaw to intervene in the interrogation.

Dorn appeared to have noticed nothing. He went on. "What was the reason for capturing these men?"

"It was necessary," Rainbolt explained, "to find out what the conditions on Earth were like at present. At the time we didn't want to risk discovery by coming too close to Earth itself. And your two men were able to tell us all we needed to know."

"What was that?" the spokesman said.

Rainbolt was silent a moment, then said, "You see, sir, most of the past sixty years have been spent in finding new worlds on which human beings can live without encountering too many difficulties. But then--"

Dorn interrupted quietly, "You found such worlds?"

"Yes, sir, we did," Rainbolt said. "We're established, in about equal numbers, on planets of three star systems. Of course, I'm not allowed to give you more precise information on that at present."

"Quite understandable," the spokesman agreed dryly.

Menesee was conscious of a stir of intense interest among the listening directors in the hall. This was news, indeed! Mingled with the interest was surprised amusement at the prisoner's artless assumption that he had any choice about what he would or would not tell.

"But now that we're established," Rainbolt went on, apparently unaware of the sensation he had created, "our next immediate concern is to resume contact with Earth. Naturally, we can't do that freely while your Machine remains in political control of the planet. We found out from the two captured men that it still is in control. We'd hoped that after sixty years government in such a form would have become obsolete here."

. . .

Menesee heard an astonished murmuring from the director boxes on his right, and felt himself that the fellow's impudent last remark might well have been answered by a pulse of nerve stimulation. Spokesman Dorn, however, replied calmly that the Machine happened to be indispensable to Earth. A planetary economy, and one on the verge of becoming an interplanetary and even interstellar economy, was simply too intricate and precariously balanced a structure to maintain without the assistance of a very tightly organized governing class.

"If the Machine were to vanish today," he explained, "Earth would approach a state of complete chaos before the month was out. In a year, a billion human beings would be starving to death. There would be fighting ... wars--" He shrugged, "You name it. No, my friend, the Machine is here to stay. And the Mars Convicts may as well resign themselves to the fact."

Rainbolt replied earnestly that he was not too well informed in economics, that not being his field. However, he had been told and believed that while the situation described by the spokesman would be true today, it should not take many years to train the populations of Earth to run their affairs quite as efficiently as the Machine had done, and without loss of personal and political liberties.

At any rate, the Mars Convicts and their descendants did not intend to give up the independence they had acquired. On the other hand, they had two vital reasons for wanting to come to an agreement with Earth. One was that they might waste centuries in attempting to accomplish by themselves what they could now do immediately if Earth's vast resources were made available to them. And the other, of course, was the obvious fact that Earth would not remain indefinitely without a stardrive of its own. If an unfriendly government was in control when it obtained one, the Mars Convicts would be forced either to abandon their newly settled planets and retreat farther into the galaxy or submit to Earth's superior strength.

Meanwhile, however, they had developed the principles of Oneness. Oneness was in essence a philosophy, but it had many practical applications; and it was in such practical applications that he, Rainbolt, was a trained specialist. He had, therefore, been dispatched to Earth to introduce the principles, which would in time bring about the orderly disintegration of the system of the Machine,

be followed by the establishment of an Earth government with which the Mars Convicts could deal without detriment to themselves.

Menesee had listened with a sense of growing angry incredulity. The fellow couldn't be as much of a fool as he seemed! Therefore, he had devised this hoax after he realised he would be captured, to cover up his real purpose which could only be that of a spy. Menesee saw that Administrator Bradshaw was saying something in a low voice to the spokesman, his face stony. Dom glanced over at him, then looked back at the prisoner and said impassively, "So the goal of your missionary work here is the disintegration of the Machine?"

Rainbolt nodded, with an air almost of eagerness. "Yes, sir, it is! And if I will now be permitted to--"

"I am afraid you will be permitted to do nothing," Spokesman Dom said dryly, "except, of course, to answer the number of questions we intend to ask you."

Rainbolt checked himself, looking startled. The spokesman's hand had moved very slightly on the desk before him and Rainbolt had just had his first experience with direct nerve stimulation. He stood kneading his right hand with his left, staring up at the spokesman, mouth half open.

Menesee smiled in grim amusement. It would have been a low-level pulse, of course; but even a low-level pulse, arriving unexpectedly, was a very unpleasant surprise. He had foreseen the spokesman's action, had, in fact, felt a sympathetic imaginary twinge in his own right hand as the pulse reached the prisoner.

Rainbolt swallowed, said in a changed voice, "Sir, we heard from the two captured men that the Machine has retained its practice of torture during interrogations. It isn't necessary to convince me that you are serious about this. Do the questions you referred to have to do with the stardrive?"

The spokesman nodded. "Of course."

Rainbolt said stubbornly, "Then, sir, it can do you no good at all to torture me. I simply don't have such information. We do plan to make the stardrive freely available to Earth. But not while Earth is ruled by the organization of the Machine."

This time, Menesee did not observe the motion of the spokesman's hand. Instead he saw Rainbolt jerk violently to the right. At the same moment, a blast of intense, fiery, almost unbearable pain shot up his own arm. As he grasped his arm, sweat spurting out on his face, he heard screams from the box on his left and realized it was Director Cornelius who screamed.

There were answering screams from around the hall.

Then the pain suddenly subsided.



Menesee started about, breathing raggedly. The pain-reaction had been severe enough to affect his vision; the great hall looked momentarily darker than it should have been. And although the actual pain had ended, the muscles of his arm and shoulder were still trying to cramp into knots.

There was no more screaming. From the right came Director Ojeda's gasping voice. "What happened? Did something go wrong with the stimulating devices? We might all have been killed--!"

Menesee didn't reply. Wherever he looked, he saw faces whitened with shock. Apparently everyone in the Tribunal Hall, from the administrator and Spokesman Dorn on down to the directors' attendants and the two guards flanking the prisoner's area, had felt the same thing. Here and there, men who had collapsed were struggling awkwardly back to their feet. He heard a hoarse whisper behind him. "Sir, Director Cornelius appears to have fainted!"

Menesee glanced around, saw Cornelius' attendant behind the box, then Cornelius himself, slumped forward, face down and motionless, sprawling half across his table. "Let him lie there and keep quiet, fool!" Menesee ordered the man sharply. He returned his attention to the center of the hall as Spokesman Dorn announced in a voice which held more of an edge than was normal but had lost none of its strength and steadiness, "Before any moves are suggested, I shall tell you what has been done.

"The Tribunal Hall has been sealed and further events in it will be monitored from without. No one will be able to leave until the matter with which we are now concerned here has been settled to the

satisfaction of the Machine.

"Next, any of you who believe that an instrument failure was involved in the experience we shared can disabuse themselves. The same effect was reported immediately from two other auditoriums on the Great Circuit, and it is quite possible that it was repeated in all of them."

Rainbolt, grimacing and massaging his right arm vigorously, nodded. "It was repeated in all of them, sir!"

The spokesman ignored him, went on. "The Tribunal Hall has, therefore, been cut out of the Grand Assembly Circuit. How circuit energies could have been employed to transmit such physical sensations is not clear. But they will not be used in that manner again."

Menesee felt a flash of admiration. His own thoughts had been turning in the same direction, but he couldn't have approached Spokesman Dorn's decisive speed of action.

Dorn turned his attention now to Rainbolt. "What happened," he said, "apparently was caused by yourself."

Rainbolt nodded. "Yes, sir. It was. It was an application of Oneness. At present, I'm acting as a focal point of Oneness. Until that condition is changed, whatever I experience here will be simultaneously experienced by yourselves."

Menesee thought that the effects of the Machine's discipline became splendidly apparent at that point. No one stirred in the great hall though it must have been obvious to every man present that Rainbolt's words might have doomed them along with himself.

Rainbolt went on, addressing Spokesman Dorn.

"There is only one mistake in your reasoning, sir. The demonstrated effect of Oneness is not carried by the energies of the Grand Assembly Circuit, though I made use of those energies in establishing an initial connection with the other auditoriums and the people in them.

"You see, sir, we learned from the two men captured on Mars about your practice of having the two highest echelons of your organization attend significant hearings in the Tribunal Hall through the Assembly Circuit. Our plan was based on that. We knew that if anything was to be accomplished with the Oneness principles on Earth, it would have to be through a situation in which they could be applied simultaneously to the entire leadership of the Machine. That has now been done, and the fact that you had the Tribunal Hall taken out of the Assembly Circuit did not change the Oneness contact. It remains in full effect."

Spokesman Dorn stared at him for an instant, said, "We can test the truth of that statement immediately, of course; and we shall!" His hand moved on the desk.



Menesee felt pain surge through his left arm. It was not nearly as acute a sensation as the previous pulse had been, but it lasted longer—a good ten seconds. Menesee let his breath out carefully as it again ebbed away.

He heard the spokesman saying, "Rainbolt's claim appears to be verified. I've received a report that the pulse was being experienced in one of the auditoriums ... and, yes ... now in several."

Rainbolt nodded. "It was a valid claim, believe me, sir!" he said earnestly. "The applications of our principles have been very thoroughly explored, and the effects are invariable. Naturally, our strategem would have been useless if I'd been able to maintain contact only long enough to provide you with a demonstration of Oneness. Such a contact can be broken again, of course. But until I act deliberately to break it, it maintains itself automatically.

"To make that clear, I should explain that distance, direction and intervening shielding materials do not change the strength of the contact. Distance at least does not until it is extended to approximately fifty thousand miles."

"And what happens then?" the spokesman asked, watching him.

"At that point," Rainbolt acknowledged, "Oneness contacts do become tenuous and begin to dissolve." He added, almost apologetically, "However, that offers you no practical solution to your problem."

"Why not?" Dorn asked. He smiled faintly. "Why shouldn't we simply lock you into a spaceship and direct the ship through the defense fields and out into the solar system on automatic control?"

"I sincerely hope you don't try it, sir! Experiments in dissolving contacts in that manner have been invariably fatal to all connected individuals."

The spokesman hesitated. "You and every member of the Machine with whom you are now in contact would die together if that were done?"

"Yes, sir. That is certain what the results of those experiments show."

Administrator Bradshaw, who had been staring coldly at Rainbolt, asked in a hard, flat voice, "If you do nothing to break the contact, how long will this situation continue?"

Rainbolt looked at him. "Indefinitely, sir," he said. "There is nothing I need to do about it. It is a static condition."

"In that case," Bradshaw said icily, "*this* should serve to break the contact through you!"

As his hand came up, leveling a gun, Menesee was half out of his chair, hands raised in alarmed protest. "Stop him!" Menesee shouted.

But Administrator Bradshaw already was sagging sideways over the armrest of this chair, head lolling backwards. The gun slid from his hand, dropped to the platform.

Director Menessee," Dorn said coolly from beside Bradshaw, "I thank you for your intended warning! Since the administrator and the spokesman are the only persons permitted to bear arms in the Tribunal Hall, I was naturally prepared to paralyze Administrator Bradshaw if he showed intentions of resorting to thoughtless action." He looked down at Rainbolt. "Are Director Menessee and I correct in assuming that if you died violently the persons with whom you are in contact would again suffer the same experience?"

"Yes, sir," Rainbolt said. "That is implicit in the principles of Oneness." He shrugged. "Under most circumstances, it is a very undesirable effect. But here we have made use of it--"

. . .

"The situation," Spokesman Dorn told the directors in the Tribunal Hall some minutes later, "is then this. There has been nothing haphazard about the Mars Convicts' plan to coerce us into accepting their terms. Considering the probable quality of the type of minds which developed both the stardrive and the extraordinary 'philosophy' we have encountered today, that could be taken for granted from the start. We cannot kill their emissary here, or subject him to serious pain or injury, since we would pay a completely disproportionate penalty in doing it.

"However, that doesn't mean that we should surrender to the Mars Convicts. In fact, for all their cleverness, they appear to be acting out of something very close to desperation. They have gained no essential advantage through their trick, and we must assume they made the mistake of underestimating us. This gentleman they sent to Earth has been given thorough physical examinations. They show him to be in excellent health. He is also younger by many years than most of us.

"So he will be confined to quarters where he will be comfortable and provided with whatever he wishes ... but where he will not be provided with any way of doing harm to himself. And then, I believe, we can simply forget about him. He will receive the best of attention, including medical care. Under such circumstances, we can expect his natural life span to exceed our own.

"Meanwhile, we shall continue our program of developing our own spacedrive. As the Mars Convicts themselves foresee, we'll gain it eventually and will then be more than a match for them. Until then the defense fields around Earth will remain closed. No ship will leave Earth and no ship will be admitted to it. And in the long run we will win."

The spokesman paused, added, "If there are no other suggestions, this man will now be conducted to the hospital of the Machine where he is to be detained for the remainder of his days."

Across the hall from Menessee, a figure arose deliberately in one of the boxes. A heavy voice said, "Spokesman Dorn, I very definitely do have a suggestion."

Dorn looked over, nodded warily. "Go ahead, Director Squires!"

Menessee grimaced in distaste. He had no liking for Squires, a harsh,

notorious man, notorious for his relentless persecution of any director or officer who, in Squires' opinion, had become slack in his duties to the Machine. But he had a large following in the upper echelons, and his words carried weight.

Squires folded his arms, said unhurriedly as if savoring each word, "As you pointed out, Spokesman Dorn, we cannot hurt the person of this prisoner. His immediate accomplices also remain beyond our reach at present. However, our hands are not--as you seem to imply--so completely tied that we cannot strike back at these rascals at once. There are camps on Earth filled with people of the same political stripe--potential supporters of the Mars Convicts who would be in fullest sympathy with their goals if they learned of them.

"I suggest that these people serve now as an object lesson to show the Mars Convicts the full measure of our determination to submit to no threats of force! Let this prisoner and the other convicts who doubtless are lurking in nearby space beyond Earth's defense fields know that for every day their obscene threat against the high officers of the Machine continues hundreds of malcontents who would welcome them on Earth will be painfully executed! Let them--"

Pain doubled Menesee abruptly over the table before him. A savage, compressing pain, very different from the fiery touch of the nerve stimulators, which held him immobile, unable to cry out or draw breath.

It relaxed almost as instantaneously as it had come on. Menesee slumped back in his chair, shaken and choking, fighting down bitter nausea. His eyes refocused painfully on Rainbolt, gray-faced but on his feet, in the prisoner's area.

"You will find," Rainbolt was saying, "that Director Squires is dead. And so, I'm very much afraid, is every other member of the upper echelons whose heart was in no better condition than his. This was a demonstration I had not intended to give you. But since it has been given, it should serve as a reminder that while it is true we could not force you directly to do as we wish, there are things we are resolved not to tolerate."

Ojeda was whispering shakily near Menesee, "He controls his body to the extent that he was able to bring on a heart attack in himself and project it to all of us! He counted on his own superb physical condition to pull him through it unharmed. *That* is why he didn't seem frightened when the administrator threatened him with a gun. Even if the spokesman hadn't acted, that gun never would have been fired.

"Menesee, no precautions we could take will stop that monster from killing us all whenever he finally chooses--simply by committing suicide through an act of will!"

Spokesman Dorn's voice seemed to answer Ojeda.

"Director Squires," Dorn's voice said, still thinned by pain but oddly triumphant, "became a victim of his own pointless vindictiveness. It was a mistake which, I am certain, no member of the Machine will care to repeat.

"Otherwise, this incident has merely served to confirm that the Mars Convicts operate under definite limitations. They *could* kill us but can't afford to do it. If they are to thrive in space, they need Earth, and

Earth's resources. They are aware that if the Machine's leadership dies, Earth will lapse into utter anarchy and turn its tremendous weapons upon itself.

"The Mars Convicts could gain nothing from a ruined and depopulated planet. Therefore, the situation as it stands remains a draw. We shall devote every effort to turn it into a victory for us. The agreement we come to eventually with the Mars Convicts will be on our terms--and there is essentially nothing they or this man, with all his powers, can do to prevent it."

\* \* \*

The Missionary of Oneness swung his bronzed, well-muscled legs over the side of the hammock and sat up. With an expression of great interest, he watched Spokesman Dorn coming across the sun room towards him from the entrance corridor of his hospital suite. It was the first visit he'd had from any member of the organization of the Machine in the two years he had been confined here.

For Spokesman Dorn it had been, to judge by his appearance, a strenuous two years. He had lost weight and there were dark smudges of fatigue under his eyes. At the moment, however, his face appeared relaxed. It might have been the relaxation a man feels who has been emptied out by a hard stint of work, but knows he has accomplished everything that could possibly have been done.

Dorn came to a stop a dozen feet from the hammock. For some seconds, the two men regarded each other without speaking.

"On my way here," Dorn remarked then, "I was wondering whether you mightn't already know what I've come to tell you."

Rainbolt shook his head.

"No," he said. "I think I could guess what it is--I pick up generalized impressions from outside--but I don't really know."

Spokesman Dorn considered that a moment, chewing his lower lip reflectively. Then he shrugged.

"So actual mind-reading doesn't happen to be one of your talents," he said. "I was rather sure of that, though others had a different opinion. Of course, considering what you are able to do, it wouldn't really make much difference."

"Well ... this morning we sent out a general call by space radio to any Mars Convict ships which might be in the Solar System to come in. The call was answered. Earth's defense fields have been shut down, and the first ftl ships will land within an hour."

"For what purpose?" Rainbolt said curiously.

"There's a strong popular feeling," Spokesman Dorn said, "that your colleagues should take part in deciding what pattern Earth's permanent form of government will take. In recent months we've handled things in a rather provisional and haphazard manner, but the situation is straightened out well enough now to permit giving attention to such legalistic details. Incidentally, you will naturally be

ee to leave when I do. Transportation is available for you if you wish to welcome your friends at the spaceport."

"Thank you," said Rainbolt. "I believe I will."

Spokesman Dorn shrugged. "What could we do?" he said, almost disinterestedly. "You never slept. In the beginning you were drugged a number of times, as you probably know, but we soon discovered that drugging you seemed to make no difference at all."

"It doesn't," Rainbolt agreed.

"Day after day," Dorn went on, "we'd find thoughts and inclinations coming into our minds we'd never wanted there. It was an eerie experience—though personally I found it even more disconcerting to awaken in the morning and discover that my attitudes had changed in some particular or other, and as a rule changed irrevocably."

Rainbolt said, "In a sense, those weren't really your attitudes, you know. They were results of the conditioning of the Machine. It was the conditioning I was undermining."

"Perhaps it was that," Dorn said. "It seems to make very little difference now." He paused, frowned. "When the first talk of initiating change began in the councils, there were numerous executions. I know now that we were badly frightened men. Then those of us who had ordered the executions found themselves wanting similar changes. Presently we had a majority, and the changes began to be brought about. Reforms, you would call them—and reforms I suppose they actually were. There was considerable general disturbance, of course, but we retained the organization to keep that within reasonable bounds."

"We expected that you would," Rainbolt said.

"It hasn't really been too bad," Spokesman Dorn said reflectively. "It was simply an extraordinary amount of work to change the structure of things that had been imposed on Earth by the Machine for the past century and a half. And the curious part of it is, you know, that now it's done we don't even feel resentment! We actually wouldn't want to go back to what we had before. You've obtained an incredible hold on our minds—and frankly I expect that when at last you do relinquish your control, we'll commit suicide or go mad."

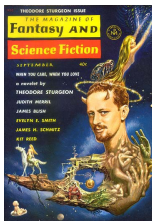
Rainbolt shook his head. "There's been just one mistake in what you've said," he remarked.

Spokesman Dorn looked at him with tired eyes. "What's that?" he asked.

"I said I was undermining the conditioning of the Machine. I did—and after that I did nothing. You people simply have been doing what most of you always would have preferred to do, Spokesman. I relinquished control of the last of you over six months ago."

# "These Are the Arts"

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"Now the Seven Deadly Arts are: Music, Literature, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Dancing, Acting. The Mercy of God has luckily purified these once pagan inventions, and transformed them into saving instruments of grace. Yet it behooves us to examine with the utmost diligence the possible sources of evil latent in each and every one of these arts. Then we shall consider some of the special forms of sin that may develop from them. St. Chrysostom warned the faithful... "

-- the preacher, in Huxley's "Visionaries"

Hugh Grover was sitting in the tv room of an old but spacious and luxuriously equipped bomb shelter located in a forested section of the rambling Grover estate. The shelter had been constructed by Hugh's grandfather sixty years earlier and, while never actually used as a place of refuge, had been kept in good condition by various members of the Grover family, who retained a strong touch of foresight and prudence in their habits even through the easygoing early decades of the Twenty-first Century. The entrance to the shelter was camouflaged, and only the Grover household and their intimates were informed of its existence and whereabouts.

Hugh, now a man of forty and the last living member of the family, looked very thoughtful and puzzled as he switched off the tv set and audiophile attachment and closed up a bull-roarer recording he had placed on the table beside him. He pushed away the tall mirror he had set up so he could watch the screen without looking at it directly,

and climbed out of his chair. He had intended mirror and recording to be precautionary devices, but they had turned out to be superfluous. He had seen and heard nothing of the Galcom Craze.

It was possible that the World Government--wonder of wonders!--had heeded his warnings, or perhaps somebody else's, and banned the stuff completely. In the past few hours, Hugh had dialed every major station on earth. From none of them had the improbably beautiful face of a Galcom Teacher looked out at him; no Galcom symbol appeared suddenly in the screen. Nor had the audiophile programs produced any of those curious little cross-ripples of sound which were not openly connected with Galcom, but which Hugh had considered to be definitely one of its devices.

The absence of these items in itself was, of course, all to the good. But it seemed odd that, in addition, there hadn't been the slightest mention of Galcom during the hours Hugh listened and watched. He was the reverse of a tv addict, but he felt it improbable that what had started as the biggest tv Craze of recent years could simply have dropped from the public's interest again during the two weeks he was living in the bomb shelter. It seemed much more likely that the lack of reference to it was due to an official taboo.

He had predicted that the embittered settlers of Mars Territory would carry out a space attack on Earth after first softening up the population through the Galcom Craze. Did this deliberate lack of mention of the Craze suggest that certain elements of the danger still existed? Hugh Grover could think of no other reason for it.

He frowned, his finger moving toward a button to summon his secretary, Andy Britton, who shared the shelter with him and was at present asleep in another section. Then he checked himself. Andy made a good listener when Hugh felt like airing his thoughts, but it might be better to ponder this curious situation by himself first.

. . .

It had been through Andy Britton that Hugh first learned of the Galcom Craze. They had come in by Atlantic rocket from the Jura Mountains that evening with a box of newly uncovered Bronze Age artifacts to add to Hugh's private museum. The Grover residence was on the fringes of the little village of Antoinette, three miles upriver from the bomb shelter, in the direction of the sizable town of South Valley. Hugh unpacked while Andy drove into Antoinette to buy dinner supplies. He came back laughing.

"A new advertising craze has started up," he said. "This one might interest you, Hugh!"

"Why should it?" Hugh asked.

"Symbols," Andy told him. "Primitive meditation brought up to date on tv! Practically every big station seems to be involved. They have overlapping Symbol Hours around the clock. You can't guess who's doing all this, so I'll tell you. It's the first representatives of the Galactic Community to reach the Solar System. How about that?"

Hugh grunted and asked him what he thought he was talking about. Galcom, it appeared, was short for Galactic Community. The

representatives were inhumanly beautiful women or inhumanly handsome men. They were referred to as The Teachers. Their mission was to facilitate the adoption of Earth into the Community by instructing its inhabitants in a New Method of Thought and Communication, which would enable them to exchange ideas with other Galcom entities, and also one another, with the greatest of ease and speed. The New Method could be acquired by devoting a little study daily to the Galcom Symbols being presented on purchased tv time.

It was, of course, a promotion hoax of some sort. After the World Supreme Court established that to question publicly the truthfulness of statements made through an advertising medium was to act in restriction of trade, and hence illegal, the way had been open for the staging of truly colossal attention-getting tricks. Throughout his life, Hugh Grover had been vaguely aware of a constant succession of tv Crazes of varying magnitude. When he thought of them at all, he concluded that in the comfortable world-wide suburbanity of the period people grew increasingly hungry for sensations of even the most idiotic variety. And since no corner of Earth was without its quota of tv sets, a really big Craze could command virtually universal attention. As a rule, they built up for a month or two, while the more sophisticated speculated on who was behind it this time and what actually was to be promoted, and the less sophisticated--time after time, apparently--took the gag at face value and very seriously. Andy reported that the smart money had begun to settle on Mars Territory as the Galcom sponsor within the first week and that the Craze was expected to resolve itself eventually as a renewed bid for Unlimited Free Water from Earth for the Territory.

"They seem to have hooked an unusual percentage of Believers this time," Andy said--Believers being, of course, the people who again had bought the gag. He had run into five or six persons in Antoinette who assured him with some excitement that the Galactic Community really existed, that this Craze was no Craze at all but a perfectly sincere and earnest attempt to help Earth raise itself to Galcom's lofty standards. Two of Andy's informants by now had achieved moments of direct mental communication with a Galcom Teacher, an experience described as enthralling and spiritually satisfying.

Hugh felt mildly disgusted, as he not infrequently was with the ways of the society in which he found himself. But since the study of symbolism and its use by primitive societies was in fact one of his most intensively cultivated hobbies, he was curious enough to turn on the tv set after dinner.

Immediately, he found himself face to face with one of the Galcom Teachers.

This one was female, and there could be no disputing the flawless and--figuratively, at least--the unearthly quality of her loveliness. Women irritated Hugh Grover as a rule, and he tended to avoid their company; but the Teacher's impact was not lost on him. He had been staring at her for almost twenty seconds before he discovered that the melodious voice was repeating some of the things Andy had told him. The arts the station's viewers were being taught here, she said, were not designed to make them worthy of membership in the Galactic Community, as some appeared to have assumed. No--they were worthy indeed, and the intention was only to dissolve the barriers of linguistic difference, to do away with the awkwardness of



spoken words which led so often and easily to misunderstandings. Words were not necessary when mind could speak to mind. And now, if the viewers would give their relaxed attention to the Galcom symbols they would be shown, they would find their minds begin to open out gently and softly ... like beautiful flowers....

In spite of this sweetly fluted lunacy, Hugh did not turn off the tv. He was still staring in fascination at the exquisite creature in the screen when she suddenly faded from view and he was looking instead at a Galcom symbol.

In almost the same instant, the screen went blank.

It took Hugh some seconds to realize that he himself had shut off the set. He was not in the least tempted to turn it on again. He had been badly startled. At the moment the symbol appeared, there had been a distinct sensation as if something were tugging at his thoughts ... and then something else inside him went tight, closed up; and the sensation ended.

Once before, he'd had a very similar experience. A psychiatrist had attempted to hypnotize him; and while Hugh, consciously, had been completely willing to let it happen, the attempt ended in absolute failure. At that time, too, there had been, as Hugh floated along mentally, his attention only half on the medical man's words, a sudden awareness of shutting off their effect and remaining closed to it, of having become impenetrable now and secure. And there was nothing that Hugh—consciously again—could do about it. He could not be hypnotized.

And what could that mean here? Brief as his glimpse of the Galcom symbol had been, he could recall it distinctly—a pale-blue, glowing, rather intricate design of markings which reminded Hugh of nothing so much as some of the ideographic characters used in the written Chinese language of past centuries. In itself, there was nothing sinister or alarming about its appearance. But Hugh could remember very vividly the feeling of something pulling at his thoughts....

Hugh Grover continued to sit before the dead set for a while, becoming increasingly disturbed. At last, he got up and put a call through to the home of an acquaintance in the East who was an advertising executive.

The acquaintance confirmed Andy Britton's report on the Galcom Craze. It was a big thing, a very big thing. After only a few days, it was beginning to edge into the top popularity spot. In his opinion, it was likely to develop into the most successful tv spectacular of the past twenty years. Yes, Mars Territory definitely was backing it. The acquaintance couldn't yet see just how the Territory planned to tie in its perennial demand for Earth water, but that certainly would turn out to be the angle. Hugh presumably had become interested in the program because of its use of symbols? One heard that there appeared to be a very deft adaptation of neo-Jungian techniques involved. What was Hugh's opinion?

Hugh replied cautiously that he hadn't yet seen a Galcom program, but that it seemed possible. What effect did the symbols produce on the viewers?

"They're euphoric," the acquaintance said. It was difficult to be more specific because of wide variations in individual response. It was a

really remarkable approach, a unique accomplishment. Yes, he understood there'd been negative reactions but in such an insignificant number that they could not affect the progress of the Craze in any way... . Oh, perhaps point five per cent. There were always cranks and alarmists who objected to genuine innovations in the programs.

After Hugh hung up, he did some more intensive thinking. He was now thoroughly concerned, but there were reasons to be cautious about any action he took. Officially, he could be fitted very well into his acquaintance's classification of cranks and alarmists. He was known to be a wealthy eccentric--wealthy enough to get away with a degree of eccentricity which a man of moderate means could hardly have afforded. He was an amateur scientist. Even his friends regarded his preoccupation with things of the past, things of the mind, as somewhat morbid. And there had been a period ten years before, after an ill-fated attempt at marriage, when he suffered a quite serious nervous breakdown and required extensive psychiatric treatment.

He had developed a considerable degree of self-awareness over the years. He knew that his interests and studies reflected his mental organization ... an organization in which conscious and unconscious processes which in most men were kept much more neatly distinct tended to merge to an uncomfortable degree. He knew also that he had, in consequence, developed defensive reactions which the ordinary person simply did not have, and ordinarily had no need for. He could not be hypnotized. Drugs which were supposed to reduce resistance to hypnosis merely raised his own level. And he could not be affected by the Galcom symbols. But neither of those things would be true for the vast majority of Earth's population.

He had made a careful study of the connections between specific sensory impressions and mental effects. Form, color, motion--these things held unique meanings for the unconscious mind and aroused responses of which the conscious man might not be in the least aware.

*His* mind had produced an instantaneous, violent reaction to his first glimpse of a Galcom symbol. It had sealed itself away from something it regarded as a very dangerous threat.

What would the same impression be doing to the mind of the average man, which had never needed to learn such stringent measures of defense?

In Hugh Grover's opinion, it could plunge the possessor of that mind--after not too many encounters--into a state of psychotic helplessness.

And who would be interested in doing such a thing to the people of Earth?

Precisely Mars Territory, of course.

. . .

He had been on Mars some years before. Except for World

Government officials, whose duties held them there, not many Earth citizens visited the Territory. It held no attractions for tourists. Hugh Grover's interest was drawn by reports that excavations had begun again in some of the ruins of the aboriginal Martian culture scattered sparsely about the Territory. Earlier archaeological efforts had produced insignificant results; the ruins were over a quarter of a million years old and usually buried, and there was no evidence that the native race had advanced beyond the level of walled villages before it died out. But Hugh decided he would like to visit some of the new digs in person.

It had been a frustrating experience which gave him a very different picture of the Territorial settlers and in particular of their ruling group than he had obtained on Earth. They were a hard, sullen breed of men, rulers of a barren empire with the potential of a great industrial development—a development still stalled by Earth's refusal to supply Mars Territory with the required amounts of water. Hugh thought he understood the reason for that. Martian technology, spurred by necessity, was at least on a par with Earth's. Given unlimited water it would forge ahead. And once it was sufficiently ahead, complacent suburban Earth would be virtually at the mercy of a society which had learned again to fight and work relentlessly for what it wanted. It was hardly surprising that the World Government was reluctant to go to enormous expense to help bring such a situation about.

But it made Earth's citizens very unpopular on Mars. Hugh's attempts to obtain permission to visit the ruins of the prehistoric culture continued to run into unaccountable difficulties and delays, and the local Earth officials at last advised him quietly to give the matter up. If he did succeed in getting into the Territorial backlands, they could not be responsible for his safety there.

At the time, Hugh had thought he was confronting simple malice. But there was another explanation. If an aboriginal symbol science had existed on Mars in the distant past, Territorial scientists might have been studying its principles in order to learn how to adapt them to produce effects on the human mind. In other words, the tools of the Galcom Craze were being prepared ... and, naturally, an Earthman would not have been a welcome visitor. It was quite likely, Hugh decided, that he wouldn't have gotten out of Mars Territory alive if he had been too persistent in his efforts.

One could conclude further that Mars Territory was now at war with Earth.

The Galcom symbols would—in the opinion of the Territorials, at least—determine the issue. The derangement of the mental structure of the great majority of Earth's population could be far advanced before any outer evidence of general psychosis appeared. Then the Territorial space attack would be launched.

Mars Territory, Hugh thought, was making a mistake. Earth's material advantages would still be too great for them and in the end Earth would win out. But for the private citizens who retained their sanity, the interim period would be extremely unpleasant and dangerous.

Partway through his reflections, he had pressed the audiophile button on the tv set without giving the action much consideration, and the familiar muted flows of classical music were accompanying his

sluughts. Now, suddenly, he sat bolt upright. There had been a subtle intrusion in the music, an odd, quick, light, up-and-down rippling, like the crossing of two threads of sound, which was not a proper part of the piece to which he was listening.

Almost with that thought came an internal reaction very similar to what Hugh experienced at his glimpse of the Galcom symbol--a sense of something pulling, tugging gently at his mind, a dreamlike distortion; then the quick, solid block of mental resistance which shut the feeling off. Hugh reached out hastily and turned off the audiophile.

So they were not limited to visual channels in their attack on Earth's minds! Men like himself who ignored tv presentations could still be approached along other routes.

. . .

That decided him. This was no speculation but quite real, quite serious personal danger. He realized now that he had been getting sleepy for the past few minutes--and he could not be sure he had not heard that curious cross-ripple of sound several times before it penetrated into his awareness. When the attack was insidious enough, his subconscious watchdogs might be much less dependable than he had believed.

The important thing then was to look out for himself. Hugh was aware that he had no overwhelming or all-inclusive fondness for his fellow men; on the whole, they were there, and he could tolerate them. A few, like Andy Britton, he rather liked, when they weren't being irritating. Nevertheless, his decision now to take Andy to the old Grover bomb shelter with him was due primarily to the fact that Andy was a very capable young man whose assistance during the possibly trying period ahead might be invaluable.

As for the others, he would try to warn them in time to avert or modify the approaching disaster; but it would have to be done in a manner which could not affect his own safety. Though Mars Territory looked like the responsible agent for what was happening, it must have allies on Earth in positions where they could deal with interference ... and with those who interfered. Hugh spent an hour outlining his conclusions about the Galcom Craze in every detail. He then made approximately fifty copies of the message and addressed them to various members of the government, to news agencies, and to a number of important people whose background indicated that they might give serious thought to such a warning. He was careful to mention nothing that could serve to identify him and left the messages unsigned. Andy Britton was dispatched to South Valley to drop them into the mailing system there. After the secretary returned, Hugh told him what he believed was occurring and what his plans were.

Andy kept his face carefully expressionless, but it was plain what his own theory was--old Hugh had cracked up at last. However, he had a highly paid job, and if Hugh wanted them to sit out the next few weeks in a bomb shelter, that would clearly be all right with Andy Britton. Before dawn, all preparations had been made. They closed up the town house in Antoinette again, and installed themselves unobtrusively in the forest shelter down the river.

The next two weeks passed—to all appearances—uneventfully. Andy Britton dutifully avoided the shelter's tv room, and he and Hugh took turns observing the air traffic above the river and the road gliders passing along the highway from the shelter lookout panel. There were no signs of disturbance of any kind. Andy, an active individual by nature, began to show some degree of restiveness but made no attempts to argue Hugh out of his ideas.

Hugh saw no reason to rush matters. For the time being, he had secured himself from the Galcom attack, both as to possible personal effects and the dangers that could arise from a demented populace. His warning might or might not be heeded. Others might see the threat and take steps to end it. Whatever was to occur, he had withdrawn to a position where he could wait events out with the greatest degree of safety.

He began to give his attention to methods whereby he could—without exposing himself—regain a more complete contact with the outer world than simple observation from the shelter provided. Out of this came eventually the arrangement in the tv room with the mirror and the bull-roarer recording. The Galcom symbols, judging from the sample he had seen, were asymmetrical designs. If the specific visual image produced by them brought about some effect on the mind, the effect should be nullified by a reversal of the image. Hence the mirror through which he could observe the tv screen without looking directly at it. He was cancelling out the Gorgon's head. The bull-roarer recording was to smother Galcom's audible form of attack, the drowsiness-producing cross-rippings of light sound. The switch which started the recording would be in Hugh's left hand whenever he turned on the set, his thumb pressed down on its release. At any loss of alertness, he would let go automatically. The election of a bull-roarer with its own ritual implications hadn't been necessary for this purpose; but the notion pleased Hugh and—the subconscious being the suggestible and superstitious entity it was—a little deliberate counter-magic should strengthen the effect of sheer noise.

In spite of these supporting devices, Hugh had intended to proceed very prudently with his investigation. He couldn't be sure they would actually give him more protection than his own resources could provide. He hadn't forgotten the disconcerting feeling of having been caught off guard by a barely perceptible sound pattern, and there might, after all, be more Galcom tricks than the two he had encountered. The lack of anything in the least abnormal then in the tv programs he scanned through was rather disconcerting in itself. Something, obviously, *had* happened—must have happened. The Galcom program hadn't vanished without cause.

The appearance of it was that Galcom had been banned from the networks by World Government edict. The entire business of symbol trickery and its effects might have been turned over meanwhile to some scientific group for orderly investigation. Mars Territory could have been put under an embargo. And it was conceivable that Territorial raiders were known or suspected to be in space; and that while the Earth fleets hunted for them, the whole affair was being toned down deliberately in the networks to avoid a panic. There was, after all, no effective way of protecting the population from space attack except by stopping a raider before he got too close.

The appearance of it then was a little mystifying, not necessarily

alarming. It concurred with the undisturbed look of the countryside traffic outside the shelter.

But those reflections did not at all change Hugh's feeling about the situation. The feeling told him with increasing clarity that there was some hidden menace in the lack of mention about Galcom. That the silence covered a waiting trap. And that specifically he--Hugh Grover--was being threatened.

He could acknowledge that, theoretically, that presented the picture of a paranoid personality. But the hunch was too strong to be ignored. He didn't intend to ignore it. He could lose nothing--except for strengthening Andy's notions about his loss of mental competence, which was hardly important--by acting on the assumption that the hunch was correct. If it was correct, if there was a trap waiting outside, the trap could be sprung. Not by him, but by Andy Britton.

Hugh rubbed his chin thoughtfully. There was another place in the northern Andes which could be turned into at least as secure a hide-out as Grandfather Grover's bomb shelter. In some respects--the nearest neighbors would be many miles away--it should be a more dependable one. He could get there overnight with one of the pair of jet rigs hanging in the shelter storeroom. For the sake of obtaining definite information, which would either confirm or disprove his suspicions, he could, therefore, risk losing the bomb shelter.

And he could--though he hoped nothing would happen to Andy--risk losing Andy.

. . .

Andy Britton was in the kitchen section, having breakfast. He looked up rather blearily when Hugh came in. His red hair was still uncombed and he had obviously just come awake.

"Mind coming along to the tv room a moment?" Hugh asked. "I've found something, but I'm not quite sure what it means."

"What have you found?"

"I'd sooner let you see for yourself."

In the tv room, Andy looked at the mirror and recording with controlled distaste, asked, "Want me to use those?"

"It can't do any harm," Hugh said. "Here--I'll hold the switch for the bull-roarer myself. Now go ahead."

Andy studied his face quizzically, then turned on the tv set and clicked in a station at random. He watched the screen through the mirror, looked over at Hugh again.

"Try another one," Hugh suggested.

Ten minutes later, Andy, face very thoughtful, switched off the set, asked, "Same thing everywhere?"

"I've been going down through the list these last three hours," Hugh

said. "I don't believe I missed a station of any significance. I didn't hear a word about the Galcom Craze. Odd, isn't it?"

Andy agreed it was very odd indeed.

"What do you make of it?" Hugh asked.

Andy's lips quirked. "Isn't it obvious? Everyone in the world--except you and I, of course--has learned by now how to communicate with the alien races of the Galactic Community. Last Monday, the Solar System was elevated to full membership. Why keep the thing going after that?" He pondered a moment, added, "I owe you an apology, of course, Hugh."

"Why?"

"I thought you were tottering, and I guess I showed it. Now it looks as if you were right. Something stopped the Craze in midswing. And only our good old paternal World Government could have done it."

"The Craze couldn't have simply run itself out ... naturally?"

Andy shook his head. "I followed a lot of them when I was still young and foolish. That Galcom deal was good for another six weeks. It didn't run out naturally. It was stopped. And unless there was something mighty wrong about those symbols--just like you said--it wouldn't have been stopped." He grinned suddenly, his face lightening. "Know something? When we walk out of here now--when they find out who it was that shot off those warning messages all over the world two weeks ago--I'll be a hero's secretary!"

Hugh hesitated, said, "I'm not so sure about that, Andy."

"Huh?" The grin faded from Andy's face, was replaced by a cautious "Now what?" expression. He asked, "What do you mean, Hugh?"

Hugh said, "I don't want to seem unduly apprehensive." He indicated the tv screen. "But what we saw there does suggest something like a conspiracy to me."

"A conspiracy?"

"Exactly. I told you I was sitting here for three hours checking through the various stations. Why in all that time did no one even mention the late Galcom Craze?"

"I wouldn't know," Andy said with a trace of exasperation. "But the obvious way to find out is to get out of here and start asking questions. We can't spend the rest of our lives lurking in a bomb shelter, Hugh."

Hugh smiled. "I don't intend to, believe me. But I do think we should be a little careful about asking questions." He considered, went on, "As a first step, let's wheel out the flitter and look things over from the air for a while."

Andy said with strained patience, "That isn't going to tell us what happened to the Galcom Craze. Now suppose I put the midget road glider in the back of the flitter and--"

"Why not?" Hugh looked at his watch. "It'll be getting dark in a few hours. If it seems safe to let you do a little reconnoitering on foot

around South Valley, that would be the time to start out."

. . .

Shortly after sunset, Hugh brought the flitter down to a quiet stretch of the road leading from Antoinette to South Valley. Andy swung the glider out of the flitter's rear compartment, straightened it, and climbed into the saddle. He grinned at Hugh, said, "I'll be careful ... don't worry! See you at the bomb shelter early in the morning."

Hugh nodded. "I'll wait for you inside."

He watched the road glider disappear around the bend toward South Valley, and took the flitter up again. From the air, nothing out of the ordinary appeared to have occurred, or to be occurring, in the South Valley district. In Antoinette and the other towns and villages over which they had passed, people plainly were going about their everyday activities with no suggestion of an emergency or of disturbances. But Hugh did not intend to change any part of his plans. His instincts still smelled a trap.

By nightfall, he had locked each section of the bomb shelter individually, then left it, locking the camouflaged entrance behind him. Carrying one of the jet rigs and a knapsack of camping equipment, and with a heavy automatic pistol fastened to his belt, he moved uphill through the trees surrounding the shelter until he reached a point some three hundred yards away, from where he could watch both the approaches from the river road half a mile below and the air above the forest. Here he took out a pair of powerful night glasses, laid his other equipment beside a tree, and settled down to wait.

If Andy showed up unaccompanied in the morning, he would be there to receive him and find out what had happened during the past two weeks. But if Andy did not come alone, or if the shelter was approached by others in the interval, Hugh would vanish quietly among the big trees behind him. Once over the crest of the hill, he would be in the thick timber of a government preserve. He was an expert outdoorsman and felt no concern about his ability to remain out of sight there. Before the next morning, the jet rig would have carried him to his new retreat while any searchers would still be engaged in attempting to open the last locked sections of the bomb shelter where he was supposed to be.

Any searchers.... . Hugh admitted to himself that he could find no rational answer to the question of who should be searching for him or what their purpose might be. His hunch didn't tell him that. What it told him was to stay ready to run if he wanted to survive.

He intended to do just that.

. . .

Andy Britton appeared riding the road glider along the route from Antoinette around nine in the morning. Hugh watched him approach through the glasses. Nothing had happened during the night. Near morning, when he began to feel traces of drowsiness, he had taken wake-up pills and come alert again.



The glider could not be used in the rough natural terrain of the estate grounds. Hugh saw Andy bring it to a stop near the edge of the estate, push it out of sight among some bushes and start up toward the shelter. They had agreed that he should come on foot, rather than have Hugh bring the flitter down to the road to pick him up. Hugh remained where he was, continuing to scan the sky, the road in both directions and the woods below him as Andy came climbing higher, disappearing for minutes at a time among the trees, then emerging into open ground again.

There was no one with him, following him, or watching him from the air. Hugh stood up finally, settled knapsack and jet rig over his shoulders, and started downhill toward the shelter, still careful to remain out of sight himself.

He was standing concealed among the bushes above the shelter entrance when Andy appeared directly below him.

"Up here, Andy!" Hugh said.

Andy stopped in his tracks, stood peering about, as if in bewilderment.

Hugh repeated, "Up here. Right above you ... see me? That's right. Now come on up."

Watching the secretary scramble awkwardly through the shrubbery toward him, Hugh felt a sharp thrill of renewed apprehension, for Andy was stumbling like a man who was either drunk or on the very edge of exhaustion. Then, as he came closer, Hugh could see that his face was pale and drawn. A dazed face, Hugh told himself ... a shocked face. Caution!

He said sharply, the sense of danger pounding through him, "That's close enough to talk! Stop there."

Andy stopped obediently twelve feet away, stood staring at Hugh, then at the knapsack and jet rig Hugh had let slide to the ground, and at the pistol belted to Hugh's side. A look of growing comprehension came into his face.

"Yes," Hugh said coldly, "I'm ready to move out if necessary. Is it?"

Andy seemed to be struggling for words. Then he said, his voice thick and harsh, "I don't think that will do any good, Hugh. You were wrong, you know."

"About what?"

"Mars Territory. They weren't behind the Galcom Craze... ." His voice faltered.

"Go ahead. Then who was behind it?"

"Hugh, don't you see? The Galcom Teachers *were* aliens. They took over Mars Territory two months ago, before they ever showed up on Earth."

Staring at Andy's sweating, anguished face, Hugh felt a dryness come into his throat. He asked, "Are you trying to tell me there is such a thing as the Galactic Community--that those Teachers were

its missionaries, just as they claimed to be?"

Andy shook his head. "No. It's worse than that. It's a lot worse than that. You were right about the symbols. They were doing things to people's minds through them. But it wasn't to teach us how to communicate with others. It's almost the other way around."

"The other ... try to make sense, Andy!"

"I'm trying to. Those Teachers are the servants or slaves of another race. They were sent here because they can be made to look and sound like humans. The others are telepaths and the way they handle their servants is by telepathic orders. They're in control of whole planets, whole races. They couldn't ordinarily have got control of Earth because there were hardly any human beings with enough telepathic sensitivity to receive their orders and respond to them. So that's what was to be done through the Galcom Craze and the symbols ... soften us up mentally to the point where we could understand the master race's orders."

"And it succeeded?"

"Of course it succeeded. They're already here. They arrived on Earth almost a week ago."

"Then why...?"

"Why does everything look so peaceful?" Andy asked bitterly. "Why shouldn't it? When they give a human an order, the human obeys. He can't help it. They don't want our economy to break down. They don't want panics and anarchy. This is a valuable planet and their property. Everybody's been told to keep on with their regular activities, just as if nothing had happened. So that's exactly what they do."

"But they can *tell* you what's happened if you start asking them questions. Oh, Lord, can they tell you about it!" Andy's face wrinkled up and tears ran down his cheeks. "They've started taking people away in their ships now. Our surplus population, they say. Nobody knows what happens to...."

Hugh said, shocked, "But they couldn't have got control of everybody. Not so easily! Not so fast!"

"No, not everybody. There were the people like ourselves who just hadn't watched the programs. And what they call 'immunes'--anyone who doesn't react to a telepathic command and won't respond to conditioning. What's the difference? There weren't enough of either. The immunes are being rounded up and killed. The others get the treatment."

Take Andy or leave him? Andy could still be very useful...

"Andy," he said, "we'll have to act quickly. If we stay here until they get everything organized, we won't be able to move without being spotted. Here are the shelter keys ... catch them! That's right. Now get in there and get out your jet rig. We'll lock up the shelter and leave at once."

Andy nodded. "And then, Hugh?"

"There's another place I know of. Down south, up in the mountains."

Nobody else around for miles... . We'll be safe there a long time. It's stocked up for years." Hugh bent for knapsack and rig, added, "After we get there, we'll see. It's quite probable that I'm an immune myself. We may locate others. L... ."

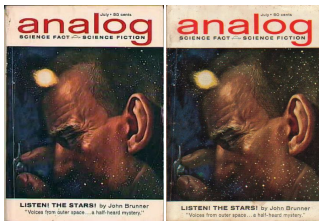
There was a sudden noise behind him. Hugh turned sharply. Andy stood four feet away, the small gun in his hand pointing straight at Hugh's head.

"You *are* an immune, Hugh," he said, chokingly. "But I'm not--I'm not!"

The tears poured down his face as he pulled the trigger.

# "The Other Likeness"

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Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.

*There is a limit to how perfect  
a counterfeit can be--  
a limit that cannot be passed without  
an odd phenomenon setting in... .*

[»](#)

When he felt the sudden sharp tingling on his skin which came from the alarm device under his wrist watch, Dr. Halder Leorm turned unhurriedly from the culture tray he was studying, walked past the laboratory technician to the radiation room, entered it and closed the door behind him. He slipped the instrument from his wrist, removed its back plate, and held it up to his eye.

He was looking into the living room of his home, fifty miles away in another section of Orado's great city of Draise. A few steps from the entry, a man lay on his back on the carpeting, eyes shut, face deeply flushed, apparently unconscious. Halder Leorm's mouth tightened. The man on the carpet was Dr. Atteo, his new assistant, assigned to the laboratory earlier in the week. Beyond Atteo, the entry from the residence's delivery area and car port stood open.

Fingering the rim of the tiny scanner with practiced quickness, Halder Leorm shifted the view to other sections of the house, finally to the car port. An empty aircar stood in the port; there was no one in sight.

Halder sighed, replaced the instrument on his wrist, and glanced over at a wall mirror. His face was pale but looked sufficiently

imposed. Leaving the radiation room, he picked up his hat, said to the technician, "Forgot to mention it, Reef, but I'll have to head over to central laboratories again."

Reef, a large, red-headed young man, glanced around in mild surprise. "They've got a nerve, calling you across town every two days!" he observed. "Whose problem are you supposed to solve now?"

"I wasn't informed. Apparently, something urgent has come up and they want my opinion on it."

"Yeah, I bet!" Reef scratched his head, glanced along the rows of culture trays. "Well ... nothing here at the moment I can't handle, even if Atteo doesn't show up. Will you be back before evening?"

"I wouldn't count on it," Halder said. "You know how those conferences tend to go."

"Uh-huh. Well, Dr. Leorm, if I don't see you before tomorrow, give my love to your beautiful wife."

Halder smiled back at him from the door. "Will do, Reef!" He let the door slide shut behind him, started towards the exit level of the huge pharmaceutical plant. Reef had acted in a completely normal manner. If, as seemed very probable, "Dr. Atteo" was a Federation agent engaged in investigating Dr. Halder Leorm, Halder's co-workers evidently had not been apprised of the fact. Still, Halder thought, he must warn Kilby instantly. It was quite possible that an attempt to arrest him would be made before he left the building.

He stepped into the first ComWeb booth on his route, and dialed Kilby's business number. His wife had a desk job in one of the major fashion stores in the residential section of Draise, and--which was fortunate just now--a private office. Her face appeared almost immediately on the screen before him, a young face, soft-looking, with large, gray eyes. She smiled in pleased surprise. "Lo, Halder!"

"Lo, Kilby... Did you forget?"

Kilby's smile became inquiring. "Forget what?"

"That we're lunching together at Hasmin's today."

Halder paused, watching the color drain quickly from Kilby's cheeks.

"Of course!" she whispered. "I did forget. Got tied up in ... and ... I'll leave right now! All right?"

Halder smiled. She was past the first moment of shock and would be able to handle herself. After all, they had made very precise preparations against the day when they might discover that the Federation's suspicions had turned, however tentatively, in their direction.

"That'll be fine," he said. "I'm calling from the lab and will leave at once"--he paused almost imperceptibly--"if I'm not held up. Meet you at Hasmin's, in any case, in around twenty minutes."

Kilby's eyes flickered for an instant. If Halder didn't make it away, she was to carry out her own escape, as planned. That was the

understanding. She gave him a tremulous smile. "And I'm forgiven?"

"Of course." Halder smiled back.

\* \* \*

The guards at the check-out point were not men he knew, but Halder walked through the id-scanning band without incident, apparently without arousing interest. Beyond, to the left, was a wide one-way portal to a tube station. His aircar was in the executive parking area on the building's roof, but the escape plan called for both of them to abandon their private cars, which were more than likely to be traps, and use the public transportation systems in starting out.

Halder entered the tube station, went to a rented locker, opened it and took out two packages, one containing a complete change of clothing and a mirror, the other half a dozen canned cultures of as many varieties of microlife—highly specialized strains of life, of which the pharmaceutical concern that employed Dr. Halder Leorm knew no more than it did of the methods by which they had been developed.

Halder carried the packages into a ComWeb booth which he locked and shielded for privacy. Then he opened both packages and quickly removed his clothing. Opening the first of the cultures, he dipped one of the needles into it and, watching himself in the mirror, made a carefully measured injection in each side of his face. He laid the needle down and opened the next container, aware of the enzyme reaction that had begun to race through him.





Three minutes later, the mirror showed him a dark-skinned stranger with high cheek bones, heavy jaw, thick nose, slightly slanted eyes, graying hair. Halder disposed of the mirror, the clothes he had been wearing and the remaining contents of the second package. Unchecked, the alien organisms swarming in his blood stream now would have gone on to destroy him in a variety of unpleasant ways. But with their work of disguise completed, they were being checked.

He emerged presently from a tube exit in uptown Draise, on the terrace of a hotel forty stories above the street level. He didn't look about for Kilby, or rather the woman Kilby would turn into on her way here. The plan called for him to arrive first, to make sure he hadn't been traced, and then to see whether she was being followed.

She appeared five minutes later, a slightly stocky lady now, perhaps ten years under Halder's present apparent age, dark-skinned as he was, showing similar racial characteristics. She flashed her teeth at him as she came up, sloe eyes flirting.

"Didn't keep you waiting, did I?" she asked.

Halder growled amiably, "What do you think? Let's grab a cab and get going." Nobody had come out of the tube exit behind her.

Kilby nodded understandingly; she had remembered not to look back. She was talking volubly about some imaginary adventure as they started down the terrace stairs towards a line of air-cabs, playing her part, high-piled golden hairdo bobbing about. A greater contrast to the slender, quiet, gray-eyed girl, brown hair falling softly to her shoulders, with whom Halder had talked not more than twenty minutes ago would have been difficult to devise. The disguises might have been good enough, he thought, to permit them to remain undetected in Draise itself.

But the plan didn't call for that. There were too many things at stake.

Kilby slipped into the cab ahead of him without a break in her chatter.

Her voice stopped abruptly as Halder closed the cab door behind him, activating the vehicle's one-way vision shield. Kilby was leaning

across the front seat beside the driver, turning off the comm box. She straightened, dropped down into the back seat beside Halder, biting her lip. The driver's head sagged sideways as if he had fallen asleep; then he slid slowly down on the seat and vanished from Halder's sight.

"Got him instantly, eh?" Halder asked, switching on the passenger controls.

"Hm-m-m!" Kilby opened her purse, slipped the little gun which had been in the palm of her left hand into it, reached out and gripped Halder's hand for an instant. "You drive, Halder," she said. "I'm so nervous I could scream! I'm scared cold! What happened?"

. . .

Halder lifted the cab out from the terrace, swung it skywards. "We were right in wondering about Dr. Atteo," he said. "Half an hour ago, he attempted to go through our home in our absence. We'll have to assume he's a Federation agent. The entry trap knocked him out, but the fat's probably in the fire now. The Federation may not have been ready to make an arrest yet, but after this there'll be no hesitation. We'll have to move fast if we intend to keep ahead of Atteo's colleagues."

Kilby drew in an unsteady breath. "You warned Rane and Santin?"

Halder nodded. "I sent the alert signal to their apartment ComWeb in the capital. Under the circumstances, I didn't think a person-to-person call would be advisable. They'll have time to pack and get out to the ranch before we arrive. We'll give them the details then."

"Did you reset the trap switch at the house entry?"

Halder slowed the cab, turning it into one of the cross-city traffic lines above Draise. "No," he said. "Knocking out a few more Federation agents wouldn't give us any advantage. It'll be eight or nine hours before Atteo will be able to talk; and, with any luck at all, we'll be clear of the planet by that time."

The dark woman who was Kilby and a controlled devil's swarm of microlife looked over at him and asked in Kilby's voice, "Halder, do you think we should still go on trying to find the others now?"

"Of course. Why stop?"

Kilby hesitated, said, "It took you three months to find me. Four months later, we located Rane Rellis ... and Santin, at almost the same time. Since then we've drawn one blank after another. A year and a half gone, and a year and a half left."

She paused, and Halder said nothing, knowing she was fighting to keep her voice steady. After a few seconds, Kilby went on. "Almost twelve hundred still to find, scattered over a thousand worlds. Most of them probably in hiding, as we were. And with the Federation on our trail ... even if we get away this time, what chance is there now of contacting the whole group before time runs out?"

Halder said patiently, "It's not an impossibility. We've been forced to



pend most of the past year and a half gathering information, studying the intricate functioning of this gigantic civilization--so many things that our mentors on Kalechi either weren't aware of or chose not to tell us. And we haven't done too badly, Kilby. We're prepared now to conduct the search for the group in a methodical manner. Nineteen hours in space, and we'll be on another world, under cover again, with new identities. Why shouldn't we continue with the plan until... "

Kilby interrupted without change of expression. "Until we hear some day that billions of human beings are dying on the Federation's worlds?"

Halder kept his eyes fixed on the traffic pattern ahead. "It won't come to that," he said.

"Won't it? How can you be sure?" Kilby asked tonelessly.

"Well," Halder asked, "what else can we do? You aren't suggesting that we give ourselves up--"

"I've thought of it."

"And be picked apart mentally and physically in the Federation's laboratories?" Halder shook his head. "In their eyes we'd be Kalechi's creatures ... monsters. Even if we turn ourselves in, they'll think it's some trick, that we'd realized we'd get caught anyway. We couldn't expect much mercy. No, if everything fails, we'll see to it that the Federation gets adequate warning. But not, if we can avoid it, at the expense of our own lives." He glanced over at her, his eyes troubled. "We've been over this before, Kilby."

"I know." Kilby bit her lip. "You're right, I suppose."

Halder let the cab glide out of the traffic lane, swung it around towards the top of a tall building three miles to their left. "We'll be at the club in a couple of minutes," he said. "If you're too disturbed, it would be better if you stayed in the car. I'll pick up our flightthinking outfits and we can take the cab on to the city limits before we dismiss it."

Kilby shook her head. "We agreed we shouldn't change any details of the escape plan unless it was absolutely necessary. I'll straighten out. I've just let this situation shake me too much."

. . .

They set the aircab to traffic-safe random cruise control before getting out of it at their club. It lifted quietly into the air again as soon as the door had closed, was out of sight beyond the building before they reached the club entrance. The driver's records had indicated that his shift would end in three hours. Until that time he would not be missed. More hours would pass after the cab was located before the man returned to consciousness. What he had to say then would make no difference.

In one of the club rooms, rented to a Mr. and Mrs. Anley, they changed to shorts and flightthinking equipment, then took a tube to the outskirts of Draise where vehicleless flight became possible. Forest

arks interspersed with small residential centers stretched away to the east. They set their flight harnesses to Draise's power broadcast system, moved up fifty feet and floated off into the woods, energizing drive and direction units with the measured stroking motion which made flighthinking one of the most relaxing and enjoyable of sports. And one--so Halder had theorized--which would be considered an improbable occupation for a couple attempting to escape from the Federation's man-hunting systems.

For an hour and a half, they held a steady course eastwards, following the contours of the rolling forested ground, rarely emerging into the open. Other groups of vehicleless fliers passed occasionally; as members of a sporting fraternity, they exchanged waves and shouted greetings. At last, a long, wild valley opened ahead, showing no trace of human habitation; at its far end began open land, dotted with small tobacco farms where automatic cultivators moved unhurriedly about. Kilby, glancing back over her shoulder at Halder for a moment, swung around towards one of the farms, gliding down close to the ground, Halder twenty feet behind her. They settled down beside a hedge at the foot of a slope covered with tobacco plants. A small gate in the hedge immediately swung open.

"All clear here, folks!" a voice curiously similar to Halder's addressed them from the gate speaker.

Rane Rellis, a lanky, red-headed man with a wide-boned face, was striding down the slope towards them as they moved through the gate. "We got your alert," he said, "but as it happens, we'd already realized that something had gone wrong."

Kilby gave him a startled glance. "Somebody has been checking on you, too?"

"Not that ... at least as far as we know. Come on up to the shed. Santin's already inside the mountain." As they started along the narrow path between the rows of plants, Rellis went on, "The first responses to our inquiries came in today. One of them looked very promising. Santin flew her car to Draise immediately to inform you about it. She scanned your home as usual before calling, discovered three strange men waiting inside."

"When was this?" Halder interrupted.

"A few minutes after one o'clock. Santin checked at once at your place of work and Kilby's, learned you both were absent, deduced you were still at large and probably on your way here. She called to tell me about it. Your alert signal sounded almost before she'd finished talking."

Halder glanced at Kilby. "We seem to have escaped arrest by something like five minutes," he remarked dryly. "Were you able to bring the records with you, Rane?"

"Yes, everything. If we get clear of Orado, we can pick up almost where we left off." Rane Rellis swung the door of the cultivator shed open and followed them in, closing and locking the door behind him. They crossed quickly through the small building to an open wall portal at the far end. Beyond the portal a large, brightly lit room was visible, comfortably furnished, windowless. Between that room and the shed the portal spanned a distance of seven miles, a vital point in the organization of their escape route. If they were traced this far, the trail

would end--temporarily, at least--at the ranch.

They stepped over into the room, and Rane Rellis pulled down a switch. Behind them the portal entry vanished. Back in the deserted ranch building, its mechanisms were bursting into flames, would burn fiercely for a few seconds and fuse to dead slag.

. . .

Rane said tightly, "I feel a little better now ... just a little! The Fed agents are good, but I haven't yet heard of detection devices that could drive through five hundred yards of solid rock to spot us inside a mountain." He paused as a tall girl with black hair, dark-brown eyes, came in from an adjoining room. Santin Rellis was the only one of the four who was not employing a biological disguise at the moment. In spite of the differences in their appearance, she might have been taken for Kilby's sister.

Halder told them what had occurred in Draise, concluded, "I'd believed that suspicion was more likely to center first on one of you. Particularly, of course, on Santin, working openly in Orado's Identification Center."

Santin grinned. "And, less openly, copying out identity-patterns!" she added. Her face sobered quickly again. "There's no indication of what did attract attention to you?"

Halder shook his head. "I can only think it's the microbiological work I've been doing. That, of course, would suggest that they already have an inkling of Kalechi's three-year plan to destroy the Federation."

Rane added, "And that at least one of the group already has been captured!"

"Probably."

There was silence for a moment. Santin said evenly, "That isn't a pleasant thought. Halder, everything we've learned recently at the Identification Center indicates that Rane's theory is correct ... every one of the twelve hundred members of the Kalechi group probably can be analyzed down to the same three basic identity-patterns, reshuffled in endless variation. The Federation wouldn't have to capture many of us before discovering the fact. It will then start doing exactly what we're trying to do--use it to identify the rest of the group."

Halder nodded. "I've thought of that."

"You still intend to use the Senla Starlight Cruisers to get out into space?" Rane asked.

"Kilby and I will," Halder said. "But now, of course, you two had better select one of the alternate escape routes."

"Why that?" Santin asked sharply.

Halder looked at her. "That's obvious, isn't it? There's a good chance you're still completely in the clear."

"That's possible. But it isn't a good enough reason for splitting up. We're a working team, and we should stay together, regardless of circumstances. What do you say, Rane?"

Her husband said, "I agree with you." He smiled briefly at Halder. "We'll be waiting for you on the north shore of Lake Senla ten minutes before the Starlight Cruise lifts. Now, is there anything else to discuss?"

"Not at the moment." Halder paused, dissatisfied, then went on. "All right. We still don't know just what the Federation is capable of ... one move might as easily be wrong as the other. We'll pick you up, as arranged. Kilby and I are flighthinking on to Senla, so we might as well start immediately."

They went into the second room of the underground hideout. Rane turned to the exit portal's controls, asked, "Where shall I let you out?"

"We'll take the river exit," Halder said. "Six miles from here, nine from the ranch ... that should be far enough. We'll be lost in an army of vacationers from Draise and the capital thirty seconds after we emerge."

. . .

It was dusk when Halder and Kilby turned into the crowded shore walk of the lake resort of Senla, moving unhurriedly towards a bungalow Halder had bought under another name some months before. Halder's thoughts went again over the details of the final stage of their escape from Orado. Essentially, the plan was simple. An hour from now they would slide their small star cruiser out of the bungalow's yacht stall, pick up Rane and Santin on the far shore of the lake, then join the group of thirty or so private yachts which left the resort area nightly for a two-hour flight to a casino ship stationed off the planet. A group cruise was unlikely to draw official scrutiny even tonight; and after reaching the casino, they should be able to slip on unobserved into space.

There was, however, no way of knowing with certainty that the plan ... or any other plan ... would work. It was only during the past few months that the four of them had begun to understand in detail the extent to which the vast, apparently loose complex of the Federation's worlds was actually organized. How long they had been under observation, how much the Federation suspected or knew about them—those questions were, at the moment, unanswerable. So Halder walked on in alert silence, giving his attention to anything which might be a first indication of danger in the crowds surging quietly past them along Senla's shore promenade in the summer evening. It was near the peak of the resort's season; a sense of ease and relaxation came from the people he passed, their voices seeming to blend into a single, low-pitched, friendly murmur. Well, and in time, Halder told himself, if everything went well, he and Kilby might be able to mingle undisguised, unafraid, with just such a crowd. But tonight they were hunted.

He laid his hand lightly on Kilby's arm, said, "Let's rest on that bench over there for a moment."

She smiled up at him, said, "All right," turned and led the way

towards an unoccupied bench set back among the trees along the walk. They sat down, and Halder quickly slipped the watch off his wrist and removed the scanner's cover plate. The bungalow was a few hundred yards away now, on a side path which led down to the lake. It was showing no lights, but as the scanner reached into it, invisible radiation flooded the dark rooms and hallway, disclosing them to the instrument's inspection. For two or three minutes, Halder studied the bungalow's interior carefully; then he shifted the view to the grounds outside, finally to the yacht stall and the little star cruiser. Twice Kilby touched him warningly as somebody appeared about to approach the bench, and Halder put down his hand. But the strangers went by without pausing.

At last, he replaced the instrument on his wrist. He had discovered no signs of intrusion in the bungalow; and, at any rate, it was clear that no one was waiting there now, either in the little house itself or in the immediate vicinity. He stood up, and put out his hand to assist Kilby to her feet.

"We'll go on," he said.

A few minutes later, they came along a narrow garden path to the bungalow's dark side entrance. There was to be no indication tonight that the bungalow had occupants. Halder unlocked the door quietly, and after Kilby had slipped inside, he stepped in behind her and secured the door.

For an instant, as they moved along the short, lightless passage to the front rooms, a curious sensation touched Halder—a terrifying conviction that some undefinable thing had just gone wrong. And with that, his whole body was suddenly rigid, every muscle locking in mid-motion. He felt momentum topple him slowly forwards; then he was no longer falling but stopped, tilted off-balance at a grotesque angle, suspended in a web of forces he could not feel. Not the slightest sound had come from Kilby, invisible in the blackness ahead of him.

Halder threw all his will and strength into the effort to force motion back into his body. Instead, a wave of cold numbness washed slowly up through him. It welled into his brain, and for a time all thought and sensation ended.

. . .

His first new awareness was a feeling of being asleep and not knowing how to wake up. There was no disturbance associated with it. All about was darkness, complete and quiet.

With curious deliberation, Halder's senses now began bringing other things to his attention. He was seated, half reclining, in a deep and comfortable chair, his back against it. He seemed unable to move. His arms were secured in some manner to the chair's armrests; but, beyond that, he also found it impossible to lift his body forwards or, he discovered next, to turn his head in any direction. He was breathing normally, and he could open and shut his eyes and glance about in unchanging darkness. But that was all.

Still with a dreamlike lack of concern, Halder began to ask himself what had happened; and in that instant, with a rush of hot terror, his

memory opened out. They had been trapped ... some undetectable trick of Federation science had waited for them in the bungalow at Lake Senla. He had been taken somewhere else.



What had they done with Kilby?

Immediately, almost as if in answer to his question, the darkness seemed to lighten. But the process was gradual; seconds passed before Halder gained the impression of a very large room of indefinite proportions. Twenty feet away was the rim of a black, circular depression in the flooring. At first, his chair seemed the only piece of furnishing here; then, as the area continued to brighten, Halder became aware of several objects at some distance on his right.

For an instant, he strained violently to turn his head towards them. That was still impossible, but the objects were there, near the edge of his vision. Again the great room grew lighter, and for seconds Halder could distinguish three armchairs like his own, spaced perhaps twenty feet apart along the rim of the central pit. Each chair had an occupant; in the nearest was Kilby, restored to her natural appearance, motionless, pale face turned forwards, eyes open. Suddenly the light vanished.

Halder sat shocked, realizing he had tried to speak to Kilby and that no sound had come from his throat. Neither speech nor motion was allowed them here. But he didn't doubt that Kilby was awake, or that Santin and Rane Rellis were in the farther chairs, though he hadn't seen either of them clearly. Their captors had given them a brief glimpse of one another, perhaps to let them know all had been

lught. Then, as the light disappeared, Halder's glance had shifted for an instant to his right hand lying on the armrest—long enough to see that the dark tinge was gone from his skin, as it was from Kilby's, that he, too, had been deprived of the organisms which disguised him.

And that, his studies in Draise had showed clearly, was something the Federation's science would be a century away from knowing how to do unless it learned about Kalechi's deadly skills.

Once more, it was almost as if the thought were being given an answer. In the darkness of the room a bright image appeared, three-dimensional, not quite a sphere in form, tiger-striped in orange and black, balanced on a broad, bifurcated swimming tail. Stalked eyes protruded from the top of the sphere; their slit pupils seemed to be staring directly at Halder. Down both sides ran a row of ropy arms.

. . .

Simultaneously with the appearance of this projection, a man's voice began to speak, not loudly but distinctly. Dreamlike again, the voice seemed to have no specific source, as if it were coming from every direction at once; and a numbing conviction arose in Halder that their minds were being destroyed in this room, that a methodical dissecting process had begun which would continue move by move and hour by hour until the Federation's scientists were satisfied that no further scraps of information could be drained from the prisoners. The investigation might be completely impersonal; but the fact that they were being ignored here as sentient beings, were not permitted to argue their case or offer an explanation, seemed more chilling than deliberate brutality. And yet, Halder told himself, he couldn't really blame anyone for the situation they were in. The Kalechi group represented an urgent and terrible threat. The Federation could not afford to make any mistakes in dealing with it.

"This image," the voice was saying, "represents a Great Satog, the oxygen-breathing, water-dwelling native of the world of Kalechi. There are numerous type-variations of the species. Shown here is the dominant form. It is highly intelligent; approximately a third of a Satog's body space is occupied by its brain.

"Kalechi's civilization is based on an understanding of biological processes and the means of their manipulation which is well in advance of our own. This specialized interest appears to have developed from the Satogs' genetic instability, a factor which they have learned to control and to use to their advantage. At present, they have established themselves on at least a dozen other worlds, existing on each in a modified form which is completely adapted to the new environment.

"Our occasional contacts with Kalechi and its colonies during the past two centuries have been superficially friendly, but it appears now that the Great Satogs have regarded our technological and numerical superiority with alarm and have cast about for a method to destroy the Federation without risk to themselves. A weapon was on hand—their great skill and experience in altering genetic patterns in established life forms to produce desired changes. They devised the plan of distributing Kalechi agents secretly throughout the

ederation. These were to develop and store specific strains of primitive organisms which, at an indicated later date, would sweep our major worlds simultaneously with an unparalleled storm of plagues.

"The most audacious part of the Kalechi scheme follows. Ninety-two years ago, a Federation survey ship disappeared in that sector of the galaxy. Aboard it was a man named Ohi Cantrall, an outstanding scientist of the period. We know now that this ship was captured by the Great Satogs, and that Cantrall, his staff, and his crew, were subjected to extensive experimentation by them, and eventually were killed.

"The experimentation had been designed to provide Kalechi's master-biologists with models towards which to work. They proposed to utilize the high mutability of their species to develop a Satog type that would be the exact physical counterpart of a human being and could live undetected on our worlds for the several years required to prepare for the attack. They were amazingly successful. Each group of cells in the long series which began moving towards an approximation of the human pattern was developed only far enough to initiate the greatest favorable shift possible at that point in its genetic structure. Cell generations may have followed each other within hours in this manner, for over six decades.

"The goal of the experiment, the last generation issued in Kalechi's laboratories, were Satog copies of embryonic human beings. This stage was comprised of approximately twelve hundred individuals who were now permitted to mature and were schooled individually in complete isolation by Satog teachers. They were indoctrinated with their purpose in life ... the destruction of our populations ... and trained fully in the manner of accomplishing it.

"Eventually, each was shipped to a Federation world. Cover identities as obscure Federation citizens with backgrounds and records had been prepared. The final instructions given these agents were simple. They were to do nothing to draw attention to themselves, make no attempt to contact one another. They were to create their stocks of lethal organisms, provide methods of distribution and, on a selected day, three Federation years away, release the floods of death."

. . .

The voice paused briefly, went on. "It is a sobering reflection that this plan—an attack by a comparatively minor race with one specialized skill on the greatest human civilization in history—might very well have been appallingly successful. But the Great Satogs failed, in part because of the very perfection of their work.

"From the human beings on board Ohi Cantrall's captured survey ship the Satog scientists selected Cantrall himself and two female technicians on his staff as the models to be followed in developing Kalechi's pseudohumanity. In the twelve hundred members of the group sent to the Federation ninety years later, these three identity-patterns are recognizable. They appear in varying degrees of combination, but an occasional individual will show only one or the other of the three patterns involved.



"Oh! Cantrall was regarded as a great man in his time, and his identification pattern is on record. That was the detail which first revealed the plot. When three duplicates of that particular pattern--and a considerable number of approximate duplicates--turned up simultaneously in identification banks at widely separated points in the Federation, it aroused more than scientific curiosity. Our security system has learned to look with suspicion on apparent miracles. The unsuspecting 'Cantralls' were located and apprehended at once; the threat to the Federation was disclosed; and an intensive though unpublicized search for the scattered group of Kalechi agents began immediately..."

The voice paused again.

The Satog image above the pit vanished. A clear light sprang up in the big room. Simultaneously, Halder felt the nightmare immobility draining from him and the sensation of dreamlike unreality fade from his mind. He turned to the right, found Kilby's eyes already on him, saw the Rellis couple sitting beyond her ... Rane, no longer disguised, looking like a mirror image of Halder.

They were still fastened to their chairs. Halder's gaze shifted back quickly to the center of the room. Where the pit had been, the flooring was now level, carrying a massive, polished table. Behind the table sat a heavily built, white-haired man with a strong face, harsh mouth, in the formal black and gold robes of a Councilman of the Federation.

"I am Councilman Mavig." The voice was the one that had spoken in the dark; it came now from the man at the table. "I am in charge of the operation against the Kalechi agents, and it is my duty to inform them, after their arrest and examination, of the disposition that must be made of them."

He hesitated, twisting his mouth thoughtfully, almost as if unwilling to continue. "You four have been thoroughly examined," he stated at last. "Most of the work has been done while you were still unconscious. A final check of your emotional reactions was being made throughout the stress situation just ended, in which you listened to a replay of a report on the Kalechi matter. That part is now concluded."

Mavig paused, scowled, cleared his throat. "I find," he went on, "that some aspects of this affair still strain my credulity! More than half of your group have been captured by now; the remainder are at large but under observation. The danger is past. The activities of the Great Satogs of Kalechi will receive our very close scrutiny for generations to come. They shall be given no opportunity to repeat such a trick; nor--after they have been made aware of the measures we are preparing against them--will they feel the slightest inclination to try it.

"Now, as to yourselves. After we had tracked down the first dozen or so of you, a startling pattern began to emerge. You were not following Kalechi's careful instructions. In one way and another--in often very ingenious ways--you were attempting primarily to establish contact with one another. When captured and examined while unconscious by the various interrogation instruments of our psychologists you told us your reasons for doing this."

Councilman Mavig shook his head. "The interrogation machines are

opposed to be infallible," he remarked. "Possibly they are. But I am not a psychologist, and for a long time I refused to accept the reports they returned. But still... "

He sighed. "Well, as to what is to happen with you. You will be sent to join the previously arrested members of your group, and will remain with them until the last of you is in our hands, has been examined, and.... "

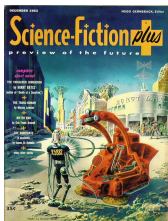
Mavig paused again.

"You see, we can accuse you of no crime!" he said irritably. "As individuals and as a group, your intention from the beginning has been to prevent the crime against the Federation from being committed. The Great Satogs simply did too good a job. You have been given the most searching physical examinations possible. They show uniformly that your genetic pattern is stable, and that in no detail can it be distinguished from a wholly human one of high order.

"You appreciate, I imagine, where that leaves the Federation! When imitation is carried to the point of identity... " Federation Councilman Mavig shook his head once more, concluded, "It is utterly absurd, in direct contradiction to everything we have understood to date! You've regarded yourselves as human beings, and believed that your place was among us. And we can only agree."

# "The Vampirate"

Published in *Science-Fiction Plus*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (December 1953), illustrated by Charles Hornstein, though this version is taken from *Telzey Amberdon* (2000, where it was retitled "Blood of Nakakia") and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



[Editor's note: This story is not part of the Telzey cycle, since it is set in a much earlier period of Hub history. It gives some of the background of the Elaigar who figure as Telzey's opponents in the "Lion Game" sequence.]

Occasionally, hard-headed science is embarrassed to find that there is basic truth in what it believed for years to be but wild superstition. A spectacular case in point was the use of quinine bark by the natives of South America to aid in the prevention and control of malaria. For decades the white man suffered from the disease and refused to admit the medicinal value of quinine. Many legends, many superstitions, such as vampires, have been investigated at great length by scholars like Montague Summers, but believed by few. The future exploration of the planets is certain to uncover evidence, scientifically verifiable, of the existence of alien races, with to us shocking and horrifying, nightmarish physical natures.

(magazine blurb)

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It was an added bitterness to Lane Rawlings to discover that in the face of sudden disaster the Nachief of Frome could react with the same unshakable, almost contemptuous, self-confidence which he showed toward her and his other human slaves. That the lonely station of the Terrestrial Bureau of Agriculture and the nameless

World far below them was both alert and heavily armed enough to ward off the attack of a spaceship should have come as a stunning surprise to him--and Lane would have exchanged her own very slim chances of survival at that point for the satisfaction of seeing the Nachief show fear.

Instead, he did instantly what had to be done to avoid complete defeat.

Lane's mind did not attempt to keep up with the Nachief's actions. The ship was still rocking from the first blow of the unseen guns beneath, when she, Grant, and Sean were being flung into the central escape bubble. When a lock snapped shut behind them and the bubble lit up inside, she saw that the Nachief had followed them in and was crouched over the controls. Tenths of a second later came another explosion, triggered by the Nachief himself--an explosion that simultaneously ripped out the side of the ship and flung the bubble free....

. . .

Lane found herself staring out of the bubble's telescopic ports at the sunlit, green and brown strip of land toward which they were falling. It was framed on two sides by a great blue sweep of sea. Behind them, to the left, was the glassy dome of the station, twin trails of white smoke marking the mile-long parallel scars the ship's guns had cut into the soil in the instant of the Nachief's savage, wanton attack. The trails stopped just short of the dome. Whoever was down there also had reacted in the nick of time.

The scene tilted violently outside, and Lane went sprawling back on the forms of Sean and Grant. The two colonists gave no indication even of being conscious. They had sat about like terrorized children for the past several days; they lay there now like stunned animals. Regaining her balance, Lane realized the bubble was falling much too fast, and for an instant she had the fierce hope that it was out of control.

Then she understood: he wants to get us down near that station--near a food supply! A wave of sick, helpless fury washed over her.

The Nachief looked around, grinning briefly, almost as if he had caught the thought.

"Pot-shooting at us, Lane! But we'll make it."

The deep voice; the friendly, authoritative, easily amused voice she'd been in love with for over a year. The voice that had told her, quite casually, less than thirty-six hours ago, that she and Sean and Grant would have to die, because she had found out something she wasn't supposed to know--and because she had made the additional mistake of telling the other two. The voice had gone on as casually to describe the grotesque indecency of the kind of death the Nachief was planning for them--

She stared at the back of his massive blond head, weak with her terror and hatred, until the bubble lurched violently again, flinging her back. This time, when she scrambled up on hands and knees, they were dropping with a headlong, rushing finality that told her the

bubble had been hit and was going to crash. But they were still a mile above ground.

She offered no resistance when the Nachief picked her up and hauled her out of the lock with him.

\* \* \*



*"Ribbon-chutes were unfolded."*

Ribbon-chutes were unfolding in a coordinated pattern of minor jolts above them. Though it was only the Nachief's arm that held her clamped hard against his side, Lane felt quite insanely calm. They had dropped below the point where the station's gunners could target on them. He was going to get her down alive. He had no intention of giving up his prey merely because his own life was in danger. Something struck against her legs—the barrel of the big hunting gun he held in his other hand. A sudden cunning thought came to her, and she went completely limp, waiting.

The ground was less than a hundred feet below, turning, tilting, expanding and rushing up at them, before she flung herself into a spasm of furious activity. She heard the Nachief's angry shout, felt them sway and jerk as his arm tightened with punishing, rib-cracking

intensity about her. Then they struck.

Lane stood up presently, looked about dazedly and went limping over to the Nachief. He lay face down two hundred feet away. The chutes were entangled in a cluster of stubby trees, but they had dragged him that far first. He was breathing. He wasn't dead; but he was unconscious. She stared down at him incredulously, briefly close to hysterical laughter. She couldn't have done it intentionally; the Nachief kept his slaves under a repression to attempt no physical harm against him. She was free, for the moment anyway, only because she had tried to kill herself. Her glance went to a rock near his head, but a sense of weakness, a heavy dread, swept through her instantly.

The thing to do was to get out of the vicinity immediately. If she could reach the station before he did, she might warn its occupants what they were up against--provided they didn't kill her first. The Nachief's hunting gun lay almost at the point where she had fallen. It was too heavy for her use, or even to carry. But she paused long enough to thrust it hurriedly into a tangle of dry brush which should hide it from him for a while. Then she set off in the general direction of the station.

Only five hundred yards away, she had an unexpected glimpse of the crashed bubble in open ground far below her and stopped to stare at it with a sensation of horrified remorse. Grant and Sean hadn't had a chance after she had told them what she knew about the Nachief; in a way, she was responsible for their deaths. Hurrying on, she dismissed the thought with an effort, because it was more important just now that somebody might be coming out from the station to investigate the crash. But she couldn't risk waiting here. The station must be more than three miles away, and her fear of the Nachief actually still seemed to be growing. Out of sight and sound, the illusion of humanity he presented was dropping away. What remained was an almost featureless awareness of a creature as coldly and savagely alien as a monstrous spider--

Suddenly breathless and shaking, Lane stopped long enough to fight down that feeling. When she set off again, it was at a pace designed to carry her all the way to the station, if nobody came to meet her.

Ten minutes later, she heard the sharp crack of a missile-gun and a whistling overhead, followed by a distant shout. It wasn't the Nachief's gun. She turned to look for her challenger, a vast relief flooding through her.

. . .

The tall, brown-skinned man who stepped out of a little gravity-rider a few dozen feet away held a gun in his hands, but looked at Lane with no particular indication of anything but self-confident wariness and some curiosity. A sharp-snouted, sinuous, streamlined animal, something like a heavy, short-legged dog, flowed out of the rider's door behind him, sat up on muscular haunches and regarded Lane with gleaming black eyes. The man said, "Unh-uh, Sally!" warningly.

"Any other survivors?" His voice was not loud but carried the same self-assurance as his attitude.

"Only one." Lane hadn't missed the by-play. That animal, whatever it was, needed only a gesture to launch itself at her throat. Its lean brown form was that of a natural killer, and the command could easily be given. "Look," she hurried on, "will you just listen to me for thirty seconds, without interrupting--without any questions?"

"Thirty seconds?" He almost smiled. "Why not?"

"This other survivor--he's armed and dangerous! He's the one who tried to destroy your station--"

She hesitated and swallowed, realizing for the first time how preposterous her story would sound. "He's not a human being," she said flatly, almost sullenly.

The man's eyes might have become a trifle more wary, but he only nodded. And suddenly something seemed to break in Lane. She heard herself babbling it out--how Frome was a small human colony on a franchised world; how they had gone out there in a group from the Hub Systems a year before. That the Nachief, Bruce Sinclair Frome, had organized the emigration, the trip, everything. She'd been his secretary--

The station man kept on nodding and listening, noncommittally.

"I found out a few days ago that he's a man-eater! A blood-drinker--like a vampire--that was why he had set up the colony of Frome. He had eight hundred people under hypnotic control, and he was using ultrasonic signals to keep the controls in force. He's got instruments for that!" Lane said, her voice going shrill suddenly. "And he's been living on our blood all along, and nobody knew, and--"

"Take it easy!" It was a crisp though level-toned interruption, and it checked her effectively. She was sweating and shivering.

"You don't believe me, of course. He'll--"

"I might believe you," the man said amazingly. "You think he's after you now?"

"Of course, he's after me! He'll want to keep me from telling anyone. He brought us out here to kill us, the three who knew. The other two crashed in the bubble... "

He studied her another moment and motioned toward the gravity rider. "Better get in there."

The brown animal he'd called Sally slipped into the back of the rider ahead of Lane. It had a pungent, catty odor--the smell of a wild thing. The man came in last, and the rider rose from the ground. Seconds later, it was tracing a swift, erratic course at a twenty-foot height among the trees, soundless as a shadow.

"We're retreating a bit until we get this straightened out," the station man explained. "My name's Frazer. Yours?"

"Lane. Lane Rawlings."

"Well, Lane, we've a problem here. You see, I'm manning the station alone at present--unless you count Sally. There's a mining outfit five space-days away; they're the closest I know of. But they're not too

operative. They might send an armed party over if I gave them an urgent enough call; and they might not. Five days is too long to wait anyway. We'll have to handle this ourselves."

"Oh, no!" she cried, stunned. "He--you don't realize how dangerous he is!"

"There'll be less risk," Frazer continued bluntly, "in going after him now, before he gets his bearings, so to speak, than to wait till he comes after us. We're on an island here, and it's not even a very big island. If he's--well, a sort of ogre, as you describe him--he'll find precious little to live on. The Bureau cleaned the animal life off the island quite a while ago. We're using it as an experimental ranch."

"Why can't we lock ourselves up in the station?" Fear was pounding in her again, a quick, hot tide.

Frazer brought the rider around in a slowing turn, halting it in mid-air.

"There's some sixty years of experimental work involved," he explained patiently. "And some of our cultures, some of the stuff we're growing here, becomes impossibly dangerous if it's not constantly controlled. The Bureau could get out a relief crew within two weeks, but we'd be obliged to raze the island from one end to the other by that time. That's getting rid of your Nachief of Frome the hard way."

Lane realized in abrupt dismay that she wouldn't be able to shake this man's hard self-confidence. And recalling suddenly the speed and effectiveness with which he had countered the Nachief's space-attack, she admitted that he might have some justification for it.

"He's got a long-range hunting gun," she warned shakily. "I suppose you know what you're doing--"

"Sure I know," Frazer smiled down at her. "Now, I'll drop you off at the station; and then Sally and I will go after your friend--"

"No!" she interrupted, terrified again at the prospect of being trapped alone on an island with the Nachief of Frome if Frazer failed. "I'll go with you. I can help."

Frazer seemed surprised but pleased. "You could be a help at that," he admitted. "Particularly since you know all his little ways. And we've got the rider--that should give us about the advantage we need..."

. . .

"What makes you so sure," Lane inquired a while later, "that he'll come to the bubble? He may suspect it's being watched."

They sat side by side hidden by shrubbery, a half mile from the wreck of the escape bubble, on somewhat higher ground. The gravity rider stood among bushes thirty feet behind them. A few hundred yards behind that was a great, rugged cliff face, bare of vegetation. It curved away to their left until, in the hazy distance, it dipped toward the sea.



"I imagine he does suspect it," Frazer conceded. "If he's anywhere around, he may even have seen us touch ground here." They had lifted high into the air to scan the area but had made sure of only one thing: that the Nachief of Frome was no longer where Lane had left him. On the other hand, there were a great many places where he could be by now. This part of the island was haphazardly forested. Thickets of trees alternated with stretches of rocky soil which seemed to support only a straw-colored reed. Zigzagging dense lines of hedgelike growths, almost black, seemed to follow concealed watercourses. Except for the towering cliff front, it was a place without distinguishing features of any kind where one could get lost very easily. It also provided, Lane realized uncomfortably, an ideal sort of background for the deadly game of hide-and-seek in which she was involved.

"He hasn't much choice though," Frazer was saying. "As I told you, the island's bare of all sizable animal life. He'll get hungry eventually."

Staring at the bubble, Lane felt herself whitening. Frazer went on, unaware of the effect he'd produced or unconcerned about it. "The other thing he might try is to get into the station, but his gun won't help him there. So he'll be back." His eyes shifted past Lane to the wide spread of scrub growth beyond her. "Just Sally," he said in a low voice, as if reassuring himself.

Sally came gliding into view a moment later, raised her head to gaze at them impersonally and vanished again with an undulating smoothness of motion that reminded Lane of a snake. It was as if the creature had slipped without a ripple into a gray-green sea.

"Trapped Sally on the mainland four years ago," Frazer remarked conversationally, still in low tones. "She's an elaig--seventy-pounds of killer and more brains than you'd believe. In bush like this, the average armed man wouldn't stand a chance against Sally. She knows pretty well what we're here for by now."

Lane shivered. Something about the cool, unhurried manner of Frazer as he talked and acted gave her, for minutes at a time, a sense of security she knew was false and highly dangerous. He seemed actually incapable of understanding the uncanny deadliness of this situation. She felt almost sorry for Frazer.

"You're wondering why I'm so afraid of him, aren't you?" she said slowly.

Frazer didn't answer immediately. Gun across his knees, a small knapsack he'd taken out of the rider strapped to his hip, he was studying her. Pleasantly enough, but not without an obvious appreciation of what he saw, even a touch of calculation. A tall, sun-darkened, competent man who felt capable of handling this or any other problem that might come his way to his complete satisfaction.

"Irrational fear of him could have been part of that hypnotic treatment he gave you," he told her, almost absently.

Lane shrugged, aware of a wave of sharp irritation. In the year since she'd known Bruce Sinclair Frome, she had almost forgotten the attraction the strong, clean lines of her body had for other men. She was being reminded of it now. And, perhaps because of that, she was realizing that part of her hatred for the Nachief was based in the complete shattering of her vanity in being discarded by him. She had

a moment of unpleasant speculation as to what her reaction would have been if she had found out the truth about him—but had found out also that he still wanted her nevertheless...

She drove the thought away. The Nachief would die, if she could abet it. But the chances were that he regarded her and this overgrown boy scout beside her as not much more of a menace than Sean and Grant had been. She sat silent, fingering the small Deen nerve-gun Frazer had given her to pocket—"just in case." She'd warned him she probably wouldn't be able to force herself to use it--

"I just had the pleasant notion," Frazer remarked, "that your Nachief might ramble into one of our less hospitable cultures around here. That's what happened to the last two assistants they gave me, less than six months ago--and it would settle the problem, all right." He paused, thinking. "But I suppose any reasonably alert outworlder would be able to spot most of those things."

"I'm afraid," Lane agreed coolly, "that he'll be quite alert."

He looked at her again, digesting that in silence. "You really believe he isn't human, don't you?"

"I know he isn't human! He's different biologically. He actually needs blood to live on."

"Frome was his farm, and you colonists were his livestock, eh?"

"Something like that," she said, displeased at a description that was accurate enough to jolt her.

"The three of you he brought out here--what was his purpose in that?"

"To turn us loose, hunt us down, and eat us!" Lane said, all in a breath. And there was a momentary, tremendous relief at having been able to put it into so many words, finally.

Frazer blinked at her in thoughtful silence. "That gives us a sort of special advantage," he grinned then. "There's a group of primitive little humanoids along the mainland coast the Nachief could live on, if he got over there. But he doesn't know about them. So he'll be pretty careful not to blast us to pieces with that big gun you told me about."

Lane twisted her hands hard together. "He'd prefer that... ." she agreed tonelessly.

"Then there's the gravity rider." Frazer turned a glance in the direction of the half-hidden vehicle behind them. "It gives us the greater mobility. If I were the Nachief, I'd wreck the rider before I tried to close in."

"And what do we do then?"

"Why, then we'll have a few tricks to play." He gave her his quick grin. "The rider's our bait. Until the Nachief takes it--or shows himself at the bubble--we can't do much about him. But after he's taken it, he'll try to move in on us."

Lane shook her head resignedly. She didn't particularly like Frazer. But she had a feeling now that he wasn't bluffing. He was decidedly of a different and more dangerous breed than the colonists of

Frome. "You're in charge," she said.

"Still afraid of him?" he challenged.

"Plenty! But in a way this is better than I'd hoped for. I thought if I told anyone here about the Nachief, they'd think I was crazy--until it was too late."

Frazer scratched his chin, squinting at the distant bubble, as if studying some motion she couldn't see. "If he isn't human," he said, "what do you think he is?"

"I don't know," she admitted, with the surge of superstitious terror that speculation always aroused in her.

"I might have thought you were crazy," Frazer went on, smiling at her, "except--it seems you've never heard of the Nalakians?"

She shook her head.

"It was a colony of Earth people. Not too far from the Hub Systems, but not much of a colony either--everybody seems to have forgotten about it for about eight generations after it was started. When it was rediscovered, the descendants of the original colonists had changed into something more or less like you describe your Nachief. There were internal physiological modifications--I forget the details. Those new Nalakians showed a cannibalistic interest in other human beings, which may have been mainly psychological. And they're supposed to have been muscled like lions, with a lion's reactions. In short, a perfect human carnivore type."

He had her interest now--because it fitted! She sat up excitedly. "What happened to them?"

Frazer grinned. "What a lion can expect to happen when he draws too much attention to himself. They raided colonies in nearby systems, got tracked back to their own planet, and were pretty thoroughly exterminated. All that was about eighty years ago. But there may have been survivors in space at the time, you see. And those survivors may have had descendants who were clever enough to camouflage themselves as ordinary human beings. I thought of that when you first told me about your Nachief."

It gave her a curious sense of relief. The Nachief of Frome had become somewhat less terrifying, seemed much more on a par with themselves. "It could be."

"It could very much be," Frazer nodded. "Aside from wanting to play cat-and-mouse with you, he didn't tell you of any special motive for bringing you to this particular world, did he?"

"No," Lane said puzzled. "He was taking us away from Frome, so he could make it look like an accident. What other special motive should he have?"

"Probably not a very sane one," Frazer said, "but it checks, all right. I was born on this station, you see, and I know the area pretty well. This planet is Nalakia, and the original Nalakian colony was on the mainland, only eight hundred miles from here. They even used animals like Sally there in their hunting."



*"The Nachief of Frome had grounded them."*

They stared at each other in speculative silence; and Lane shivered.

"They're not here now," Frazer said positively. "Not one of them--or I would have spotted their traces. But what was his purpose? A sort of blood-sacrifice to his lamented ancestors, or to planetary gods? I almost wish we could take him alive, to find out--"

He stopped suddenly. Lane stiffened, wondering what he'd seen or heard. He made a tiny gesture with one hand, motioning her to silence. In the stillness, she became aware of something moving into her range of vision to the left and becoming quiet again. She realized Sally had joined them.

Then there were long seconds filled with nothing but the wild beating of her heart.

The period ended in a brief, not-very-loud thudding sound behind them, which was nevertheless the complete and final shattering of the gravity rider.

The Nachief of Frome had grounded them.

. . .

More than a mile off, Frazer was flattened on the rocky ground beside her, pulling her backward. "He's got me outgunned, all right. Now, just keep crawling back till you reach the gully that's twenty feet behind us. When you get there, keep low and let yourself slide down into it."

Lane tried to answer and shook her head instead.

"Is he using one of those ultrasonic gadgets you were telling me about? Sally feels something she doesn't like."

"I--I don't know. He never used one on me before."

"Well, how do you feel?"

"It's crazy!" she bleated. "I want to run back there! I want to run back to him!" Her legs were beginning to jerk uncontrollably.

"Close your eyes a moment, Lane."

She didn't question him ... he was going to do something to help her. She closed her eyes.

. . .

Very gradually, Lane Rawlings became aware of the fact that she and Frazer and Sally were in a different sort of place now. It began to shape itself in her consciousness as a deeply shaded place with tall trees all around. To the right, a wall of gray rock rose steeply to a point where it vanished above the tops of the trees. The nearby area was dotted with boulders and grown with straggling gray grass. It was enclosed by solid ranks of gray-green thickets which rose up to a height of twenty feet or more between the trees.



Lane had a vague feeling next that a considerable amount of time had passed. Only then did she realize that her eyes were open—and that she was suspended somehow in mid-air, her feet free of the ground. The next thing she noticed was that her hands were fastened together before her. Jolted fully awake by that, she discovered finally the harness of straps around her by which she swung from a thick tree-branch overhead.

Frazer was standing beside her. He looked both apologetic and

grimly amused.

"Sorry I had to tie you up. You were being very active." His voice was low and careful.

"What happened?" Becoming aware of assorted aches and discomforts in her body, she squirmed futilely. "Can't you let me down?"

"Not so loud." He made a gesture of silence. "Afraid not. Your friend isn't so far off, though I don't think he's actually located us as yet."

She swallowed and was still.

"He keeps trying to get a reaction out of you," Frazer went on, in the same careful tone. "It's some kind of signal. Sally can sense it, and it makes her furious; though I don't feel anything myself. You must be conditioned to it--and the effect is to make you want to run toward the source of the vibrations."

"I didn't know he'd brought any instruments with him," Lane said dully.

"He may not have intended to use them, unless the game took a turn he didn't like. Which I expect it has now. I gave you a hypo shot back at the gully that knocked you out, an hour ago," he added mildly. "The reason you're tied up is that, conscious or not, you keep trying to run back to the Nachief. It's rather fantastic to watch, but running in the air won't get you any closer to him... ."

He turned suddenly. Sally, upright on her haunches twenty feet away, had made a soft, snarling sound. Her head was pointing at the thickets to their left, and the black eyes glittered with excitement.

"Better not talk any more," Frazer cautioned. "He's fairly close, though he's taking his time. He's a good hunter." he added with a curious air of approval. "Now I'm giving you another shot to keep you quiet while he closes in, or he might be able to force you to do something that would spoil the play." He was reaching for her arm as he spoke.

Lane started to protest but didn't quite make it. Something jolted through her body like an electric shock. Her legs jerked violently--and Frazer's face, and the trees and rocks behind him, started vanishing in a swirling blackness. In the blackness, she felt herself running; and at its other end, the Nachief's smiling face looked at her, waiting. She thought she was screaming and became briefly aware of the hard, sweaty pads of Frazer's palm clasped about her mouth.

. . .



*"... he moved quietly back to Sally, gun ready ..."*

Frazer stood beside Lane's slowly twisting and jerking body a few seconds longer, watching her anxiously. He couldn't very well load her down with any more drug than she was carrying right now. Satisfied then that she was incapable of making any disturbance for the time, he moved quietly back to Sally, gun ready in his hands.

"Getting close, eh?" he murmured. Sally twitched both ears impatiently and thereafter ignored him.

Frazer, almost immediately, became as oblivious of his companion. In a less clearly defined way, he was also quite conscious of the gradual approach of the Nachief of Frome, though the fierce little animal beside him was using more direct channels of awareness. He knew that the approach was following the winding path through the thickets he had taken thirty minutes earlier with Lane slung across his shoulder. And he didn't need the bristling of the hair at the back of his neck or the steady thumping of his heart to tell him that an entirely new sort of death was walking on his trail.

If the Nachief of Frome followed that path to the end, he told himself

calculatingly, it was going to be a very close thing—probably not even the fifty-fifty chance he'd previously considered to be the worst he need expect. He had selected the spot where they and their guns would settle it, if it came to that. But it would be the Nachief then who could select the exact instant in time for the meeting. And Frazer knew by now, with a sure, impersonal judgment of himself and of the creature gliding up the path, that he was outmatched. The Nachief simply had turned out to be a little more than he'd counted on.

For a long minute or two, it seemed the stalker had stopped and was waiting. Lane hung quietly in her harness. Frazer decided the Nachief had given up trying to prod her into action. So he knew also, now, that it was between the two of them. Frazer grinned whitely in the shadows.

But what happened next took him completely by surprise. A sense of something almost tangible but invisible, a shadow that wasn't a shadow, coming toward him. Sally, Frazer realized, wasn't aware of it; and he reassured himself by thinking that whatever Sally couldn't detect could not be very damaging, physically. Nevertheless, he discovered in himself, in the next few seconds, an unexpected capacity for horror. The mind of the Nachief of Frome was speaking to him, demandingly, a momentary indecision overlying its dark, icy purpose of destruction. Frazer, refusing the answer, felt his own mind shudder away from that contact.

Almost immediately, the contact was broken; the shadow had vanished. He had no time to wonder about it; because now the final meeting, if it came, would be only seconds away... .

Then, as if she had received a signal, Sally made a soft, breathing sound and settled slowly back to the ground on all fours, relaxing. She glanced up at Frazer for a moment, before shifting her gaze to a point in the bushes before her.

Frazer, a little less certain of his senses, did not relax just yet. But he, too, turned his eyes cautiously from the point where the path came into the glade to study the thickets ahead of them.

Those twenty-foot bushes were an unusual sort of growth. Not precisely a native of Nalakia, but one of the genetic experiments left by the colonists, that couldn't have been tolerated on any less isolated world. The tops of a group of the shrubs dead ahead, near one of the turns of the hidden path, were shivering slightly. The Nachief, having decided to make his final approach through the thickets, was a sufficiently expert stalker not to disturb the growth to that extent.

The growth was disturbing itself... .

Aware of the warm-blooded life moving through below it, it was gently shaking out the fluffy pods at its tips to send near-microscopic enzyme crystals floating down on the intruding life form. Coating it with a fine, dissolving dust—

Dissolving through the pores of the skin; entering more swiftly through breathing nostrils into the lungs. Seeping through mouth, and ears, and eyes—

A thrashing commotion began suddenly in the thickets. It shook a new cloud of dust out of the pods, which made a visible haze in the



air, even from where Frazer stood. He watched it a trifle worriedly, though the crystals had not traveled far, even on a good breeze. The growth preferred to contact and keep other life forms where they would do it the most good, immediately above its roots.

The thrashing became frenzied. There was a sudden gurgling screech.

"That's fine," Frazer said softly between his teeth. "A few good breaths of the stuff now. It'll be over quicker."

More screeches, which merged within seconds into a wet, rapid yapping. The thrashing motions had weakened but they went on for another half minute or so, before they and the yapping stopped together, abruptly. The Nachief of Frome was giving up life very reluctantly; but he gave it up.

And now, gradually, Frazer relaxed. Oddly enough, watching the tops of the monstrous growth that had done his killing for him continue to quiver in a gentle, satisfied agitation, he was aware of a feeling of sharp physical letdown. Almost of disappointment--

But that, he realized, was scarcely a rational feeling. Frazer was, by and large, a very practical man.

. . .

Some time later, he removed from his knapsack one of the tools an employee of the Bureau's lonely outworld stations was likely to require at any time. Carefully, without moving from his tracks, he burned his vegetable ally out of existence. With another tool, he presently smothered the spreading flames again.

After a little rummaging, he discovered what must be the ultrasonic transmitter--a beautifully compact little gadget, which the fire had not damaged beyond the point of repair. Frazer cleaned it off carefully and pocketed it.

It was near nightfall when he put Lane Rawlings down on his bed in the station's living area. She had not regained consciousness on the long hike back to the station. He was a little worried, since he had never been obliged to use that type of drug in so massive a dose on a human being before. However, he decided that Lane was sleeping naturally now. Her sleep might be due as much to emotional exhaustion as to the effects of the drug. She should wake up presently, very hungry and with very sore muscles, but otherwise none the worse.

Straightening up, he found Sally beside him with her forepaws on the bed, peering at the girl's face. Sally looked up at him briefly, with an obvious question. The same hungry question she had asked when they first met Lane.

He shook his head, a gesture Sally understood very well. "Unh-uh," he said softly. "This one's our friend--if you can get that kind of idea into your ugly little head. Outside, Sally!"

He shut the door to the room behind him, because one couldn't be quite sure of Sally, though the chances were she would simply ignore

and the girl's existence from now on. A decision involving Lane Rawlings had been shaping itself in his mind throughout the day; but he had kept pushing it back out of sight. There was no point in getting excited about it before he found out whether or not it was practicable.

Sally padded silently after him as he made his customary nightfall round of the station's control areas. A little later, checking one of the Bureau's star-maps, he found the world of Frome indicated there. That was exceptionally good luck, since he wouldn't have to rely now on the spotty kind of information regarding its location he could expect to get from Lane. And, considering his plans, the location couldn't have been improved on--almost but not quite beyond the range of the little stellar flier waiting to serve in emergencies in its bombproof hangar beneath the station. He intended to leave the Bureau's investigators no reason to suspect anything but a destructive space-raid had occurred here. But even if he slipped up, they wouldn't think of looking for Frazer as far away as Frome.

What had been no more than a notion in his mind not many hours before suddenly looked not only practicable, but foolproof. Or very nearly--

Whistling gently, he settled down in the central room of his living area, to think out the details. Now he could afford to let the excitement grow up in him.

"Know what, Sally?" he addressed his silent companion genially. "That might, just possibly, have been my old man we bumped off today!"

It was a point Sally wasn't interested in. She had jumped up on a table and was thumping its surface gently with her tapered, muscular tail, watching him--waiting to be fed. Frazer brought a container that held a day's rations for Sally out of a wall cabinet, and emptied its liquid contents into a bowl for her. Sally began to lap. Frazer hesitated a moment, took out a second container and partly filled another bowl for himself. Looking from it to the animal with an expression of sardonic amusement, he raised the second bowl to his lips. Presently he set it down empty. Sally was still lapping.

It wasn't too likely, he knew, that the late Nachief of Frome actually had been his father. But it was far from being an impossibility. Frazer had known since he was twelve years old that he had been fathered by a Nalakian living in the Hub Systems. His mother had told him, when an incident involving one of the humanoids of the mainland had revealed Frazer's developing Nalakian inclinations. She had made a fumbling, hysterical attempt to kill him immediately afterward, but had died herself instead. Even at that age, Frazer had been very quick. It had taught him, however, that to be quick wasn't enough--even living on the fringes of the unaware herds of civilization as he usually was, there remained always for one of the Nalakian breed the disagreeable necessity of being very cautious.

Until today--

At this point in his existence, he could afford to drop caution. Pure, ruthless boldness should make him sole lord and owner of the colony and the world of Frome within a week. Frazer was comfortably certain that he had enough and to spare of that quality to take over his heritage in style.

He studied the Nachief's ultrasonic transmitter a while.

"Have to learn how to use this gadget," he informed Sally idly. "But it's not very complicated. And if he has them already conditioned--"

Otherwise, he decided, he was quite capable now of doing it himself. An attempt to assume hypnotic control of his two latest station assistants had turned out unsatisfactorily half a year before, so that he'd been obliged to dispose of them. The possibility of reinforcing controls by mechanical means hadn't occurred to him at the time. His admiration for the Nachief of Frome's ingenuity was high. But it was mingled with a sort of impersonal contempt.

"Sally, if he hadn't overplayed it like a fool, he would have had all he could want for life. But a pure carnivore's bound to have a one-track mind, I suppose--"

He completed the thought to himself: That he had a very desirable advantage over the Nachief there. Biologically, he could get by comfortably on a humanly acceptable diet. Aside from the necessity of indoctrinating Lane Rawlings with a suitable set of memories, he might even decide to refrain from the use of hypnotic conditioning, until an emergency might call for it. His Nalakian qualities, sensibly restrained, would make him a natural leader in any frontier colony. There was something intriguing now about the notion of giving up the lonely delights of the predator to assume that role on Frome. In another generation, the genetically engineered biological pattern should be diluted beyond the danger point in his strain. No one need ever know.

Frazer chuckled, somewhat surprised by the sudden emergence of the social-human side of him--and also aware of the fact that he probably wouldn't take the notion too seriously in the end. But that was something he could decide on later... .

He sat there a while, thinking pleasurably of Lane's strong young body. To play the human role completely should have undeniable compensations. Finally he became aware of Sally again, watching him with quiet black eyes. She had finished her bowl.

"Have some more?" he invited good-humoredly. "It's a celebration!"

Sally licked her lips.

He poured the balance of his container into her bowl and stood beside her, scratching her gently back of the ears, while she lapped swiftly at the thick, red liquid, shivering in the ecstasy of gorging. Frazer waited until she had finished the last drop before shooting her carefully through the back of the skull. Sally sank forward without a quiver and lay still.

"Hated to do it, Sally," he apologized gravely. "But I just couldn't take you along. We carnivores can't ever really be trusted."

Which was, he decided somewhat wryly, the simple truth. He might accept the human role, at that; but, depending on the circumstances, never quite without qualification.

It was almost his last coherent thought. The very brief one that followed was a shocked realization that the sudden, terrible, thudding sensation in his spine and skull meant that a Deen gun was being

unaware on him.

\* \* \*

Lane Rawlings remained motionless in the doorway behind Frazer, leaning against it as if for support, for a good three minutes after he had dropped to the floor and stopped kicking. It wasn't that she was afraid of fainting. She only wanted to make very sure, at this distance, that Frazer was going to stay dead. She agreed thoroughly with his last remark.

The thought passed through her mind in that time that she could be grateful to the Nachief of Frome for one thing, at any rate—it had amused him to train his secretary to be a very precise shot.

After a while, she triggered the Deen gun once more, experimentally. Frazer produced no reactions now; he was as dead as Sally. Lane gave both of them a brief inspection before she pocketed the little gun and turned her attention to the food containers in the wall cabinet. With some reluctance, she opened one and found exactly what she expected to find. Now, the mainland humanoids Frazer had talked about might have a less harried existence in the future.

She looked down at Frazer's long, muscular body once more, with almost clinical curiosity. Then left the room and locked it behind her. She had no intention of entering it again, but there was evidence here that would be of interest to others—provided she found herself capable of operating the type of communicators used by the station.

Thirty minutes later, with no particular difficulty, she had contacted the area headquarters of the Bureau of Agriculture. She gave them her story coherently. Even if they didn't believe her, it was obvious they would waste no time in getting a relief crew to the station. Which was all Lane was interested in. After the Bureau concluded its investigations, somebody might do something about providing psychological treatment for the Frome colonists. But she wasn't concerned about that. She was returning to the Hub Systems.

She remained seated in the dim light of the communications cell for a time. She watched her dark reflection in the polished surfaces of its walls and listened to the intermittent whirring of a ventilator in the next office, which was all that broke the silence of the station now. She wondered whether she would have become suspicious of Frazer soon enough to do her any good, if she hadn't known for the past few weeks that she was carrying a child of the Nachief of Frome. For the past three days, she had been wondering also whether saving her life, at least for a while, by informing the Nachief of the fact, would be worthwhile. It was easy to imagine what a child of his might grow up to be.

Unaware, detail by detail since their meeting, Frazer had filled out her mental picture of that. So she had known enough to survive the two feral creatures in the end... .

As soon as she returned to the easy-going anonymity of the Hub Systems, this other one of their strain would die unborn. The terrible insistence on life on their own terms which Frazer and the Nachief had shown was warning enough against repetition of the nightmare.

Lane caught herself thinking, though, that there had been something basically pitiful about that inward-staring, alien blindness to human values, which forced all other life into subservience to itself because it could see only itself. She stirred uneasily.

The ventilator in the next office shut off with a sudden click.

"Of course, it will die!" she heard herself say aloud in the silence of the station. *Perhaps a little too loudly...*

After that, the silence remained undisturbed. A new contemplation grew in Lane as she sat there wondering about *Frazer's* mother.

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# "The Altruist"

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When something disappears, there is always a reason.

But it may be pleasanter to have the mystery than find out the explanation!

»

"I put them right there!" Colonel Olaf Magrumssen said aloud.

He was referring to his office scissors, with which he wanted to cut some string. The string, designed for official use, was almost unbreakably tough, and Colonel Magrumssen had wrapped one end of it around a package containing a set of reports of the Department of Metallurgy, which was to be dispatched immediately. The other end of the string led through a hole in the wall to an automatic feeder spool somewhere behind the wall, and the scissors should have been on a small desk immediately under the point where the string emerged, because that was where the colonel always left them. Just now, however, they weren't there.

There wasn't anything else on the desk that they might have slipped behind; they weren't lying on the floor, and the desk had no drawers into which he could have put them by mistake. They were simply and inexplicably gone.

"Damn!" he said, holding the package in both hands and looking about helplessly. He was all alone in the Inner Sanctum which separated his residential quarters from the general office area of the Department of Metallurgy. The Sanctum, constructed along the lines

f a bank vault, contained Metallurgy's secret files and a few simple devices connected with an automatic transportation system between Metallurgy and various other government departments. There was nothing around that would be useful in the present emergency.

"Miss Eaton!" the colonel bellowed, in some exasperation.

Miss Eaton appeared in the doorway a minute later, looking slightly anxious and slightly resentful, which was her normal expression. Otherwise, she was a very satisfactory secretary and general assistant to the colonel.

"Your scissors, Miss Eaton!" he ordered, holding up his package. "Kindly cut this string!"

. . .

Miss Eaton's gaze went past him to the desk, and her expression became more definitely resentful.

"Yes, sir," she said. She stepped up and, with a small pair of scissors attached by a decorative chain to her belt, cut the string.

"Thank you," said the colonel. "That will be all."

"There's a Notice of Transfer regarding Charles E. Watterly lying on your desk," Miss Eaton said. "You were to pass on it early this morning."

"I know." The colonel frowned. "You might get out Watterly's record for me, Miss Eaton."

"It's attached to the Notice of Transfer," Miss Eaton told him. She went out without waiting for a reply.

The colonel dropped the package into a depository that would dispatch it to its destination untouched by human hands, and turned to leave the Inner Sanctum. Still irritated by the disappearance, he glanced back at the desk.

And there the scissors were, just where he remembered having left them!

The colonel stopped short. "Eh?" he inquired incredulously, of no one in particular.

A long-forgotten childhood memory came chidingly into his mind... .

"*Lying right there!*" a ghostly voice of the past was addressing him again. "*If it were a snake,*" the voice added severely, rubbing the lesson in, "*it would bite you!*"

The colonel picked up the scissors rather gingerly, as if they might bite him, at that. He looked surprised and alert now, all distracting annoyances forgotten.

Colonel Magrumssen was a logical man. Now that he thought back, there was no significant doubt in his mind that, the evening before, he had left those scissors on that desk. Nor that, after opening the Sanctum and sealing the package this morning, he had discovered

they were gone.

Nor, of course, finally, that they now had returned again.

Those were facts. Another fact was that, aside from himself, nobody but Miss Eaton had entered the Inner Sanctum meanwhile--and she hadn't come anywhere near the desk.

Touching a sticky spot on one of the blades of the scissors, the colonel dabbed at it and noticed something attractively familiar about the pale brown gumminess on his finger.

He put the finger to his mouth. Why, certainly, he told himself--it's just taffy.

His mind paused a moment. *Just taffy!* it repeated.

Now wait a minute, the colonel thought helplessly.

One could put it this way, he decided: at some time last night or this morning, an Unseen Agency had borrowed his scissors for the apparent purpose of cutting taffy with them, and then had brought his scissors back....

. . .

Perhaps it was the complete improbability of that explanation which made him want to accept it immediately. In the humdrum, hard-working decades following Earth's Hunger Years, Colonel Magrumssen had become a hobbyist of the Mysterious, and this was the most mysterious-looking occurrence he'd yet run into personally. He'd been trained in espionage during the last counter-revolution, and while the lack of further revolutions ultimately had placed him in an executive position in Metallurgy, his interests still lay in investigating the unexplained, the unpredictable, in human behavior, and elsewhere.

As a logical man, however, he realized he'd have to put in his customary day's work in Metallurgy before he could investigate the unusual behavior of a pair of office scissors.

He locked the double doors of the Inner Sanctum behind him--locked them, perhaps, with exceptional attention to the fact that they *were* being locked--and went into the outer offices, to decide on Charles E. Watterly's Notice of Transfer.

The Department of Metallurgy, this section of which was under Colonel Olaf Magrumssen's supervision, was as smoothly operating an organization as any government coordinator could want to see. So was every other major organization--the simple reason being that employees who couldn't meet the stiff requirements of governmental employment were dropped quietly and promptly into the worldwide labor pool known as Civilian General Duty. Once cgd swallowed you, it was rather difficult to get out again; and life at those levels was definitely unattractive.

Charles E. Watterly's standing in Metallurgy was borderline at best, the colonel decided after going briefly over his record--a rather incredible series of preposterous mistakes, blunders, slip-ups and



oversights. Watterly's immediate superior had made up a Notice of Transfer as a matter of course and sent it along to the colonel's desk to be signed. Signing it would send Charles E. Watterly automatically to Civilian General Duty.

The colonel was a tolerant man. He didn't care a particular hang how the Department of Metallurgy fared, providing his own position wasn't threatened. But even colonels who failed to keep their subordinates in line could wind up doing Civilian General Duty.

He could afford to give the unfortunate Watterly one more chance, the colonel decided. A man who could operate so consistently against his own interests should be worth studying for a while! And since Watterly's superior had passed the buck by making out the Notice of Transfer, the colonel summoned Miss Eaton and instructed her to have Watterly placed on his personal staff, on probation.

Miss Eaton made no comment. The airtight organization which was beginning to haul humanity, uncomfortably and sometimes brutally enough, out of the catastrophic decline of the Hunger Years did not encourage comment on one's superior's decisions.

"Mr. John Brownson of Statistics is here to see you," she announced.

. . .

"The two per cent Normal Loss," John Brownson, a personal assistant of the Minister of Statistics, informed Colonel Magrumssen presently, "has shown striking variations of late, locally. That's the situation in a nutshell. The check we're conducting in your department is of a purely routine nature."

He was relieved to hear that, the colonel said drily. What did Statistics make of these variations?

Brownson looked surprised.

"We've made nothing of them as yet," he admitted. "In time, we hope, somebody will." He paused and looked almost embarrassed. "Now in your department, we have localized one area of deviation so far. It happens to be the cafeteria."

The colonel stared. "The cafeteria?"

"The cafeteria," Brownson continued, flushing a trifle, "shows currently a steady point three increase over Normal Loss. Processed foodstuffs, of course, are so universally affected by the loss that almost any dispersal point can be used conveniently to check deviations. Similar changes are reported elsewhere in the capital area, indicating the possible development of a local trend... "

"Trend to what?" the colonel demanded.

Brownson shrugged thoughtfully. He wasn't, he pointed out, an analyst; he only produced the statistics.

"Well, never mind," said the colonel. "Our poor little cafeteria, eh? Let me know if anything else turns up, will you?"

Now that was an odd thing, he reflected, still idly, while he gazed after Brownson's retreating back. When you got right down to it, nobody actually seemed to know why there should be a two per cent untraceable loss in the annual manipulations of Earth's commodities! People like Brownson obviously saw nothing remarkable in it. To them, Normal Loss had the status of a natural law, and that was that.

Why, he realized, his reaction hovering somewhere between amusement and indignation, he'd been fooled into accepting that general viewpoint himself! He'd let himself be tricked into accepting a "natural law" which involved an element of the completely illogical, the inexplicable.

The colonel felt a flush of familiar excitement. Look, he thought, this could be—*why, this is big! Let's look at the facts!*

He did. And with that, almost instantly, a breathtakingly improbable but completely convincing explanation was there in his mind.

Furthermore, it tied in perfectly with the temporary disappearance of his office scissors that morning!

Colonel Magrumssen conceded, however, with something like awed delight at his own cleverness, that it was going to be a little difficult to prove anything.

. . .

The problem suddenly had become too intriguing to put off entirely till evening, so the colonel sent Miss Eaton out to buy a bag of the best available taffy. And he himself made a trip to his private library in his living quarters and returned with a couple of books which had nothing to do with his official duties.

He proceeded to study them until Miss Eaton returned with the taffy, which he put in a drawer of his desk. Then, tapping the last page of the text he had been studying—the chapter was titled "Negative Hallucinations"—he reviewed the tentative conclusions he'd formed so far.

The common starting point in the investigation of any unusual occurrence was to assume that nothing just occurred; that everything had a cause. The next step being, of course, the assumption that anything that happened was part of a greater pattern of events; and that if one got to see enough of it, the greater pattern generally made sense.

The mysterious disappearance and reappearance of his office scissors certainly seemed unusual enough. But when one tied it in with humanity's casual acceptance of the fact that some two per cent of Earth's processed commodities disappeared tracelessly every year, one might be getting a glimpse of a possible major pattern.

The colonel glanced back over a paragraph he had marked in "Negative Hallucinations":

*Negative hallucinations are comprehensive in the sense that they*

*also negate the sensory registration of any facts that would contradict them. Install in a hypnotic subject the conviction that there is no one but himself in the room; he will demonstrate that he does not permit himself to realize that he cannot see when another person present places both hands over his eyes... .*

Assuming that it wasn't too logical of humanity to take Normal Loss for granted, one could conclude that humanity as a whole might be suffering from a very comprehensive negative hallucination--in which case, it wouldn't, of course, be permitting itself to wonder about Normal Loss.

It was a rather large assumption to make, the colonel admitted; but he might be in a position to test it now.

For one then could assume also that there was somebody around, some Unseen Agency, who was benefiting both by Normal Loss and by humanity's willingness to accept Normal Loss without further investigation.

An outfit who operated as smoothly as that shouldn't really have bungled matters by returning his scissors under such suspicious circumstances. But even that sort of outfit might be handicapped by occasional members who weren't quite up to par. Somebody, say, who was roughly the equivalent of a Charles E. Watterly.

The notion satisfied the colonel. He unlocked a desk drawer which contained a few items of personal interest to him. A gun, for one thing--in case life eventually turned out to be just a little too boring, or some higher-up decided some day that Colonel Magrumssen was ripe for a transfer and cgd. A methodical man should be prepared for any eventuality.

Beside the gun, carefully wrapped, was a small crystal globe, a souvenir from a vacation trip he'd made to Africa some years before. There had been a brief personal romance involved with the trip and the globe; but that part of it no longer interested the colonel very much.

The thing about the globe right now was that, when one pressed down a little button set into its base, it demonstrated a gradual succession of tiny landscapes full of the African sunlight and with minute animals and people walking about in it. All very lifelike and arranged in such a manner that one seemed to be making a slow trip about the continent. It was an enormously expensive little gadget, but it might now be worth the price he'd paid for it.

The colonel wrapped the globe back up and set it on the desk next to the bag of taffy. Then he went about finishing up the day's official business, somewhat amazed at the fact that he seemed to be accepting his own preposterous theory as a simple truth--that invisible beings walked the Earth, lived among men and filched their sustenance from Man's meager living supplies....

But he hadn't, he found, the slightest desire to warn humanity against its parasites. That had nothing to do with the fact that nobody would believe him anyway. So far, he rather approved of the methods employed by the Unseen Agency.

By the time the next twenty-four hours were over, he also might have a fair idea of its purpose.

He laughed. The whole business was really outrageous. And he realized that, for some reason, that was just what delighted him about it.

. . .

He was sitting in his study, shortly after nine o'clock that evening, when he had the first indication that his plans were beginning to work out.

Up till then, he had remained in a curiously relaxed frame of mind. Having accepted the apparent fact of the Unseen Agency's existence, the question was whether its mysterious powers went so far that it actually could read his thoughts and know what he intended to do before he got around to doing it. If it could, his tricks obviously weren't going to get him anywhere. If it couldn't, he should get results--eventually. He felt he lost nothing by trying.

He was aware of no particular surprise then when things began to happen. It was as if he had expected them to happen in just that way.

He had pushed away the papers he was working on and leaned back to yawn and stretch for a moment. As if by accident, his gaze went to the mantel above the study's electronic fireplace, where he had placed the little crystal globe showing Africa's scenic wonders. He had left it switched to the picture of a burned brown desert, across which a troop of lean, pale antelopes trotted slowly toward a distant grove of palm trees.

From where he sat, he could see that the crystal no longer showed the desert view. Instead, Kilimanjaro's snow-covered peak was visible in it, reflecting the pink light of an infinitesimal morning sun.

The colonel frowned slightly, permitting a vague sense of disturbance--an awareness of something being not quite as it should be--to pass through his mind. Presumably, that awareness would reflect itself to some degree in his expression and might be noticed there by a sufficiently alert observer.

He dismissed the feeling and turned back to his papers.

What he caught in that moment, from the corner of his eye, couldn't exactly be described as motion. It was hardly more than a mental effect, a fleeting impression of shifting shadows, light and lines, as if something had alighted for an instant on the farthest edge of his vision and been withdrawn again.

The colonel didn't look up. A chill film of sweat covered the backs of his hands and his forehead. That was the only indication he gave, even to himself, of feeling any excitement. Without moving his eyes, he could tell that the gleaming crystal globe had vanished from its place on the mantel.

. . .

How did they do it? In some way, they were cutting off the links of awareness that existed between all rational human beings. They were broadcasting the impression that they, and the things they touched, and the traces of their activities did not exist. Once the mind accepted that, it would refuse to acknowledge any contradictory evidence offered by its senses of reasoning powers.

He'd started out by assuming that there was something there, so the effect of the negative hallucination was weakened in him. Every new advance in understanding he made now should continue to weaken it--and there was one moment when the Unseen Agency's concrete reality must manifest itself in a manner which his mind, at this point, couldn't refuse to accept. That was the instant in which it was manipulating some very concrete item, such as the crystal globe, in and out of visibility.



It was obvious, at any rate, that the Agency couldn't read his thoughts. He'd tricked it, precisely as he'd set out to do, into making a hurried attempt to resolve his apparently half-formed suspicion that someone might have been playing with the globe behind his back. It showed a certain innocence of mind. But, presumably, people who had such unusual powers mightn't be accustomed to the sort of devious maneuvering and conscious control of emotion and thought which was required to survive at an acceptable level in the colonel's everyday world.

He became aware suddenly of the fact that the crystal globe had been returned to its place on the mantel. For that same instant, he was aware also of a child-shape, definitely a girl, standing on tiptoe before the mantel, still reaching up toward the globe--and then fading quickly, soundlessly, beyond the reach of his senses again.

That was considerably more than enough--

He'd been thinking of some super-powered moron, of the Charles E. Watterly type, not a child! But it made even better sense this way, and it took only a few seconds of flexibility to adapt his plans to include the new factor.

The colonel took two white cards and a lead pencil out of a drawer of the desk at which he was working. He unhurriedly printed three words on the first card and five on the second. Putting the cards into his pocket, he finally looked up at the globe.

As he expected, it showed the scene he'd last been studying himself—brown desert, the grove of palms and the antelopes.

He gazed at it for a moment, as if absently accepting this correction of the Unseen Agency's lapse as any good hypnotic subject should. And then, still casually, he took the bag of fresh taffy he'd had Miss Eaton buy that afternoon out of the desk drawer. He opened it, opening his mind simultaneously to the conviction that the child-shape would come now to this new bait.

Almost instantly, he realized, with a sense of sheer delight, that she was there!

At any rate, there was an eagerness, an innocent greed, swirling like a gusty, soundless little wind of emotion about him, barely checked now by the necessity of remaining unseen. He took out a piece of the taffy and popped it solemnly into his mouth, and the greed turned into a shivering young rage of frustration, and a plea, and a prayer: *Oh, make him look away! Just once!*

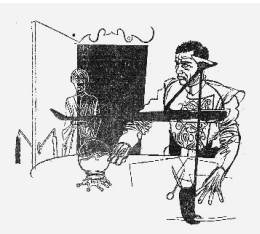
The colonel put the paper bag into his pocket, walked deliberately to the mantel and propped one of the two cards up against the globe.

There was a fresh upsurge of interest, and then an almost physically violent burst of other emotions behind him.

For the three words on the card read:

I saw you!

Whistling soundlessly, the colonel waited a moment and replaced that card with the next one. He scratched his jaw and, as an apparent second thought, produced three pieces of taffy from his pocket, which he arranged into an artistic little pyramid in front of the card. He turned and walked back to his desk.



When he looked around from there, the card was gone.

So were the three pieces of taffy.

He waited patiently for over a minute. Something white fluttered momentarily before the globe on the mantel and the card had reappeared. For a moment again, too, the child became visible, looking at him still half in alarm, but also half in laughter now, and then vanished once more.

Reading what was written on the card, the colonel knew he'd won the first round anyway. His reaction wasn't the feeling of alert, cautious triumph he'd expected, but a curious, rather unaccountable happiness.

The five words he'd printed on the card had been:

Don't worry—I won't tell

That message was crossed out now with pencil. Underneath it, two single words had been printed in a ragged slope, as if someone had been writing very hurriedly:

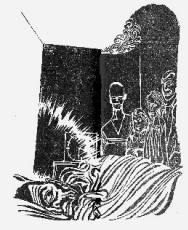
Thank you!

. . .

By two o'clock that night, the colonel was still wide awake, though he had followed his methodical pattern of living by going to bed at midnight, as usual. Whatever the Unseen Agency's reaction might be, it wouldn't be bound by any conventional restrictions.

There was the chance, of course, that they would decide it was necessary to destroy him. Since he couldn't protect himself successfully against invisible opponents, the colonel wasn't taking any measures along that line. He'd accepted the chance in bringing himself to their attention.

They also might decide simply to ignore him. He couldn't, he conceded, do much about it if they did. Everyday humanity had its own abrupt methods of dealing with anyone who tried to dispel its illusions, and he, for one, knew enough not to make any such attempt. But the Unseen Agency should have curiosity enough to find out how much he actually knew and what he intended to do about it... .



His eyes opened slowly. The luminous dial of the clock beside his bed indicated it was three-thirty. He had fallen asleep finally; and now there were--presences--in his room.

After his first involuntary start, the colonel was careful not to move. The channels of awareness that had warned of the arrival of the Unseen Agency seemed to be approximately the same he had used unwittingly in sensing the emotions of the child earlier that night. Under the circumstances, he might regard theirs as more reliable than his eyes or ears.

Apparently encouraged by his acceptance of the fact, his mind reported promptly that the child herself was among those present--and that there was a new quality of stillness and expectancy about her now, as if this were a very important event to her, too.

Of the others, the colonel grew aware more gradually. But as he did, he discovered the same sense of waiting expectancy about them, almost as if they were trying to tell him that the next move actually was up to him, not them. In the instant he formed that conclusion, his feeling of their general presence seemed to resolve itself into the recognition of a number of distinct personalities who were presenting themselves to him, one by one.

The first was a grave, aged kindliness, but with a bubble of humor in it--almost, he thought, surprised, like somebody's grandmother.

Two and Three seemed to be masculine, darker, thoughtfully judging.

And, finally, there was Four, who appeared to come into the room only now, as if summoned from a distance to see what her friends had found--a personality as clear and light as the child's, but an adult intelligence nevertheless. Four joined the others, observant and waiting.

Waiting for what?

That, the colonel gathered, was for him to experience in himself and understand. His awareness of their existence had been enough to attract their attention to him. Moving and living securely beyond the apparent realities of civilization, as if it were so much stage scenery which had hypnotized the senses of all ordinary human beings, they seemed ready to welcome and encourage any discoverer, without



fear or hostility, as one of themselves.

He could sense dimly the quality of their strange ability, and the motives that had created it. The ruthless mechanical rigidity of the human society that had developed out of the Hunger Years had been the forcing factor. These curious rebels must have felt a terrible necessity to escape from it to have found and developed in their own minds a means of bypassing society so completely--the means being, essentially, so perfect a control of the outgoing radiations of thought and emotion that they created no slightest telltale ripple in the ocean of the subconscious human mind and left a negative impression there instead.

But they were not hiding from anyone who followed the same path they had taken.

There was a sudden unwillingness in him to go any further in that direction at the moment. Full understanding might lie in the very near future; but it was still in the future.

As if they had accepted that, too, he could sense that the members of the Unseen Agency were withdrawing from him and the room. Four was last to go; lingering a moment after the others had left, as if looking back at him; a light, clear presence as definite as spoken words or the touch of a hand.

A moment after she had left, the colonel realized, with something of a shock, that for the first time in his adult life, he had fallen in love...

\* \* \*

First thing he did next morning was to have himself measured for a new uniform of the kind he'd always avoided--the full uniform of his rank, white and gold, and with the extra little flourishes, the special unauthorized richness of cloth that only a colonel-and-up could afford or get away with. It was the sort of gesture, he felt, that Four might appreciate. And he had a reason for wanting to stay away from Metallurgy that morning for the four hours or so it might take to complete the suit.

He was in the position of a strategist who, having made an important gain, can take time out to consolidate it and consider his next moves. He preferred to do that beyond the range of any too observant eyes--and mind.

That Four and her kind should be content to live--well, like mice, actually--behind the scenery of the world, subsisting on the crumbs of civilization, was ridiculous. They seemed to have no real understanding of their powers, and of the uses to which they could be put.

It was the most curious sort of paradox.

The colonel found a park bench and settled down to investigate the problems presented by the paradox.

He was, he decided, a practical man. As such, he'd remained occluded, till now, to their solution of the problems of a society with which he was basically no more contented than they had been. But

had adjusted effectively to the requirements of that society, while they had withdrawn from it in the completest possible fashion this side of suicide.

To put it somewhat differently, he had learned how to influence and manipulate others to gain for himself a position comfortably near the top. *They* had learned how to avoid being manipulated.

But if a man could do that--without losing the will to employ his powers intelligently!

The colonel checked the surge of excitement which arose from that line of reflection, almost guiltily. The structure of society might be--and was--more than ripe for an overhauling. But he was quite certain that Four's people would not be willing to follow his reasoning just yet. Their whole philosophy of living was oriented in the opposite direction of ultimate withdrawal.

But give me time, he thought. Just give me time!

Four showed herself to him that afternoon.

He'd returned to his office--the white-and-gold uniform had created a noticeable stir in the department--and instructed Miss Eaton to send someone out for a lunch tray from the cafeteria.

A little later, he suddenly realized that Four was standing in the door of the office behind him. He knew then that, for some reason, he had expected her to come.

He was careful not to look around, but he sensed that she both approved of the white uniform and was laughing at him for having put it on to impress her. The colonel's ears reddened slightly. He straightened his shoulders, though, and went on working.

Next, the child-shape slipped by before his desk, an almost visibility. He glanced up at it, and it smiled and disappeared as abruptly as if it had gone through a door in mid-air and closed the door behind it. A moment later Four stood just beyond the desk, looking down at the colonel, no less substantial than the material of the desk itself.

He stared up at her, unable to speak, aware only of a slow, strong gladness welling up in him.

Then Four vanished--

Someone had opened the door of the office behind him.

"Your lunch, sir," the familiar voice of Charles E. Watterly muttered apologetically.

The colonel let his breath out slowly. But it didn't matter too much, he supposed. Four would be back.

"Thank you, Watterly," he said, with some restraint. "Set it down, please."

Watterly's angular shape appeared beside him and suddenly seemed to teeter uncertainly. The colonel moved an instant too late. The coffee pot lay on its side in the brown puddle that filled the lunch tray on the desk. The rest of the contents were about evenly distributed over the desk, the carpet, and the white uniform.

On his feet, flushed and angry, the colonel looked at Watterly.

"I'm sorry, sir!" Watterly had fallen back a step.

Now, *this* was interesting, the colonel decided, studying him carefully. This was the familiar startled white face, its slack mouth twisted into an equally familiar, frightened grin. But why hadn't he ever before noticed the incredible, cold, hidden malice staring at him out of those pale blue eyes?

Not a bungler. A hater. The airtight organization of society kept it suppressed so well that he had almost forgotten how the underdogs of the world could hate!

He let the rage in him ebb away.

Anger was pointless. It was the compliment one paid an equal. To withdraw beyond the reach of human malice, as Four and the rest of them had done, was a better way—for the weak. For those who were not, the simplest and most effective way was to dispose of the malicious by whichever methods were handiest, and forget about them.

. . .

At seven in the evening, Miss Eaton looked in at the colonel's central office and inquired whether he would need her any more that day.

"No, thank you, Miss Eaton," said the colonel, without looking up. "A few matters I want to finish by myself. Good night."

There was silence for a moment. Then Miss Eaton's voice blurted suddenly, "Sometimes it's much better to finish such matters in the morning, sir!"

The colonel glanced up in surprise. Coming from Miss Eaton, the remark seemed out of character. But she looked slightly resentful, slightly anxious, as always, and not as if she attributed any importance to her words.

"Well, Miss Eaton," the colonel said genially, while he wondered whether it had been a coincidence, "I just happen to prefer not to wait till tomorrow."

Miss Eaton nodded, as though agreeing that, in that case, there was no more to be said. He listened to her heels clicking away through the glass-enclosed aisles of the general offices, and then the lights went out there, and Colonel Magrumssen was sitting alone at his desk.

It was odd about Miss Eaton. He was almost certain now it had been no coincidence. Her personality which, for a number of years, he'd felt he understood better than one got to understand most people, had revealed itself in a single sentence to be an entirely different sort of personality—a woman, in fact, about whom he knew exactly nothing! At any other time, the implications would have fascinated him. Tonight, of course, it made no difference any more.

His gaze returned reflectively to a copy of the Notice of Transfer by which Charles E. Watterly had been removed from Metallurgy some hours before, to be returned to the substratum of Earth's underdogs, where he obviously belonged.

It had seemed the logical thing to do, the colonel realized with a feeling of baffled resentment. What did one more third-rate human life among a few billions matter?

But it seemed his unseen acquaintances believed it did matter, very much. Somewhere deep in his mind, ever since he had signed the Transfer, a cold, dead area had been growing which told him, as clearly as if they had announced it in so many words, that he wouldn't be able to contact them again.

Notices of Transfer weren't revocable, but he felt, too, that it wouldn't have done him much good if they had been. One committed the unforgivable sin, and that was that.

He had pushed Watterly back down where he belonged. And he was no longer acceptable.

There was one question he would have liked answered, the colonel decided, as he went on methodically about the business of cleaning up his department's top-level affairs for his successor.



What, actually, was the unforgivable sin?

A half hour later, he decided he wasn't able to find the answer. Something involved with Christian charity, or the lack of it, apparently. He had sinned in degrading Watterly. Civilization similarly had sinned on a very large scale against the major part of humanity. And so they had withdrawn themselves both from civilization and from him.

He shook his head. He might still be misjudging their motives--because it still didn't seem quite right!

On the proper form and in a neat, clear hand, he filled out his resignation from Metallurgy and from life, to make it easy for the investigators. He frowned at the line headed Reasons given and decided to leave it blank.

He laid down the pen and picked up the gun and squinted down its barrel distastefully. And then somebody who now appeared to be sitting in the chair on the other side of his desk remarked:

"That mightn't be required, you know."

. . .

The colonel put the gun down and folded his hands on the desk. "Well, John Brownson!" he said, politely surprised. "You're one of them, too?"

The assistant to the Minister of Statistics shrugged.

"In a sense," he admitted. "In about the same way that you're one of them."

The colonel thought that over and acknowledged that he didn't quite follow.

"It's very simple," Brownson assured him, "once you understand the basic fact that we're all basically altruists--you and I and every other human being on Earth."

"All altruists, eh?" the colonel repeated doubtfully.

"Not, of course, always consciously. But each of us seems to know instinctively that he or she is also, to some extent, an irrational and therefore potentially dangerous animal. The race is developing mentally and emotionally, but it hasn't developed as far as would be desirable as yet."

"That, at any rate, seems to be a fact," the colonel conceded.

"So there is a conflict between our altruism and our irrationality. To solve it, we--each of us--limit ourselves. We do not let our understanding and abilities develop beyond the point at which we can trust ourselves not to use them against humanity. Once you accept that, everything else is self-explanatory."

Now how could Brownson hope to defend such a statement, the colonel protested after an astonished pause, after taking a look at history? Or, for that matter, at some of the more outstanding public personalities in their immediate environment?

But the assistant to the Minister of Statistics waved the objection aside.

"Growth isn't always a comfortable process," he said. "Even the Hunger Years and our present social structure might be regarded as forcing factors. The men who appear primarily responsible for this stage of mankind's development may not consciously look on themselves as altruists, but basically, as I said, that is the only standard by which we do judge our activities--and ourselves! Now, as for you--"

"Yes?" said the colonel. "As for me?"

"Well, you're a rather remarkable man, Colonel Magrumssen. You certainly gave every indication of being prepared to expand your

understanding to a very unusual degree—which was why," John Brownson added, somewhat apologetically, "I first directed your attention to the possible implications of Normal Loss. Afterward, you appear to have fooled much more careful judges of human nature than I am. Though, of course," he concluded, "you may not really have fooled them. It's not always easy to follow their reasoning."

"Since you're being so informative," the colonel said bluntly, "I'd like to know just who and what those people are."

"They're obviously people who can and do trust themselves very far," Brownson said evasively. "A class or two above me, I'm afraid. I don't know much about them otherwise, and I'd just as soon not. You're a bolder man than I am, Colonel. In particular, I don't know anything about the specific group with which you became acquainted."

"We didn't stay acquainted very long."

"Well, you wouldn't," Brownson agreed, studying him curiously. "Still, it was an unusual achievement."

. . .

The colonel said nothing for a moment. He was experiencing again a hot resentment and what he realized might be a rather childish degree of hurt, and also the feeling that something splendidly worthwhile had become irretrievably lost to him through a single mistake. But, for some reason, the feeling was much less disturbing now.

"The way it seemed to me," he said finally, "was that they were willing to accept me as an equal—whatever class they're in—until I fired Watterly. That wasn't it, then?"

"No, it wasn't. They were merely acknowledging that you had accepted yourself as being in that class, at least temporarily. That seems to be the only real requirement."

"If I knew instinctively that I couldn't meet that requirement, on a completely altruistic basis," the colonel said carefully, "why did I accept myself as being in their class even temporarily?"

John Brownson glanced reluctantly at the gun on the desk. For a moment, the colonel was puzzled. Then he grinned apologetically.

"Well, yes, that might explain it," he admitted. "I believe I've had it in mind for some time. Life had begun to look pretty uninteresting." He poked frowningly at the gun. "So it was just a matter of satisfying my curiosity—first?"

"I wouldn't know what your exact motive was," Brownson said cautiously. "But I presume it went beyond simple curiosity."

"Well, supposing now," said the colonel, tapping the gun, "that on considering what you've told me, I decided to change my mind."

Brownson smiled. "If you change your decision, you'll do it for good and sufficient reasons. I'd be very happy—and, incidentally, there's no

eed to blame yourself for Watterly. Watterly knew he couldn't trust himself in any position above Civilian General Duty. If you hadn't had him sent back there, he would have found someone else to do it. Self-judgment works at all levels."

"I wasn't worrying much about Watterly," the colonel said. He reflected a moment. "What actually induced you to come here to talk to me?"

"Well," said Brownson carefully, "there was one who expressed an opinion about you so strongly that it couldn't be ignored. I was sent to make sure you had the fullest possible understanding of what you were doing."

The colonel stared. "Who expressed an opinion about me?"

"Your Miss Eaton."

. . .

"Miss Eaton?" The colonel almost laughed. For a moment, he'd had a wild, irrational hope that Four had showed concern about him. But Four hardly would have been obliged to go to John Brownson for help.

"Miss Eaton," Brownson smiled wryly, "has a wider range of understanding than most, but not enough courage to do anything about what she knows. The bravest thing she ever did was to speak to you as she did tonight. After that, she didn't know what else to do, so--well, she prayed. At any rate, it seemed to be a prayer to her."

"For me?"

"Yes, for you."

"Think of that!" said the colonel, astonished. "That was why you came?"

"That's it."

The colonel thought about Miss Eaton for a moment, and then of what a completely fascinating, interesting world it was--if one could only become really aware of it. It seemed unreasonable that people should be going thorough life in blind, uneasy dissatisfaction, never quite realizing what was going on around and behind them... .

Of course, a good percentage of them might drop dead in sheer fright if they ever got a sudden inkling of what was there. For one thing, quite enough power to extinguish nine-tenths of the human life on Earth between one second and the next.

And the thought of that power and various perhaps not too rational manipulations of it, he reflected truthfully, might have been the really fascinating part of it all to him.

"Well, thank you, Brownson," he said.

There was no answer.

. . .

When the colonel looked up, the chair on the other side of the desk was empty. Brownson seemed to have realized that he'd done the best he could. The others, being wiser, would have known all along there was nothing to be done. His self-judgment stood.

"Damn saints!" the colonel said, grinning. The trouble was that he still liked them.

Trying not to think of Four again, he picked up the gun and then a final thought came to him. He laid it down long enough to write neatly and clearly behind Reasons given on the resignation form: If it were a snake, it would bite you!

A slim hand moved the gun away and a light voice laughed, at the inscrutable message he had written. Then his own hand was taken and he smiled back at Four, while the room stayed substantial and he did not.

It was remarkable how easily and completely one could retreat from the world, clear to the point of invisibility. There had always been people like that, people who could lose themselves in a crowd or be totally unnoticeable at a party. They just hadn't carried their self-effacement far enough. Probably the pressure of reality hadn't been as savage as it was now, to compel both extremes of assertion and withdrawal.

Normal Loss would rise an infinitesimal amount, the colonel thought with amusement—he'd have to live, too. The world wouldn't know why, of course.

The devil with this world. He had his own to go to, and a woman of his own to go with.

"You didn't really think I was going to kill myself, did you?" he asked Four, feeling the need to make her understand and respect him. "It was only a trick to get your attention."

"As if you had to," she laughed tenderly.

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# "Attitudes"

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Three slightly different versions, just for comparison.

»

It was now six of *their* hours since the Federation escort ships had signaled that they had completed their assignment and were turning back. Soon, Azard told himself, it would be safe to act ... to take the final steps in the great gamble which had seemed so dangerous and had been so necessary. Without the Malatlo Attitude, it would have been impossible. Malatlo had helped him in more ways than one.

He stared from the back of the big control compartment at the three Federation humans. They were turned away, intent on various instruments, as the giant cargo carrier made its unhurried approach to the planet. Sashien had said he would begin landing operations in an hour. It would seem unnatural if Azard wasn't with them to observe

process in the screens. Therefore the arrangements he had to make must be made now.

He turned, left the room silently. They mightn't miss him. If they did, it wouldn't matter. He'd established on the voyage out from the Hub that he was constantly preoccupied with the condition and security of the immeasurably precious cargo destiny had placed in his care. As in all other matters, they did nothing to interfere with him in this.

He stepped into a transfer drop and emerged five levels below in a dully gleaming passage studded by many doors. This ship was huge, greater than anything he could have imagined was possible before he came to the Hub. A large part of it contained the layered multitudes of artificially grown inert human bodies, each of which presently would be imprinted with a mature eld and thus come to conscious, intelligent life. A gift to lost Malatlo from the Federation of the Hub. Gifts, too, were the endless thousands of tools, machines, and instruments stored in shrink-containers elsewhere on the ship; the supplies and means of immediate colonial life. The Federation was rich and generous. And it had respected, if it did not share generally, the Malatlo Attitude. It respected Azard and his mission ... the mission to let Malatlo come into renewed existence on the world which now lay ahead.

Azard hurried down the echoing passages to the sealed ship area to which, by agreement, he alone had the means of entry. He hadn't taken it for granted that the agreement would be kept. His responsibilities were far too great to permit himself the weakness of trust. Supposedly the two men and the woman in the control compartment were the only Federation humans on the ship. Yet in this vast vessel one couldn't be certain of it; so, in the section which was his greatest concern, he had set up many concealed traps and warnings. If anyone entered there, he surely must leave some indication for Azard to read. So far there had been no indications.

He opened a massive compartment lock, went through and sealed it behind him. He checked the hidden warning devices meticulously. They had registered no intrusion. He went down another level, opened a second lock.

This one he left open. In the room beyond were the culture cases. Eight of them. Two contained, between them, in the energies flowing through their microscopically honeycombed linings, over half a billion elds--over half a billion personalities, identities, selves. Azard was not trained in the eld sciences, and had been given no information about the forces which maintained and restricted the elds in the cases. But he knew they were there.

He stood, head half turned sideways, eyes partly closed, in an attitude of listening. Nothing detectable, he thought. Nothing that possibly could be detected here while the cases remained shut, by instruments of any kind, or even by sensitivities such as his own. He bent forward, went through the complicated series of manipulations which alone could open a culture case. The thick lid of the one he was handling presently lifted back, revealing the instruments on its underside. Azard didn't touch those. He waited. A moment passed; then, gradually, he grew aware of the confined personalities.

It was like the rising hum of an agitated cloud of tiny swarming creatures. His ears didn't hear it, but his mind did. They were awake,

onscious, greedy—terribly greedy, terribly driven to move, sense, live again. He wondered whether Federation humans would be able to hear them as he did, and, if they could, whether they would understand what they heard.

Not long, he told the elds. Not long! But the hum of their urge to regain the trappings of life didn't abate.

He closed the case, then checked the security devices on all eight. There were no signs of attempted tampering. The last six cases did not contain elds but something almost as valuable. The Federation humans didn't know about that. At least, Azard could be nearly certain they didn't know.

He left the sealed ship compartment. It no longer mattered, he told himself, whether or not he had avoided suspicion entirely. The gamble had succeeded this far, was close to complete success. His three ship companions in the control room soon would be dead. Then the ship and everything on it would be in his hands.

He went off to complete his arrangements.

. . .

Sashien, the engineer, had brought the ship down on the planet's nightside, to the area suggested by Hub colonization specialists as being one where all conditions favored Malatlo's new beginning. The giant vehicle settled so smoothly that Azard didn't realize the landing had been completed until Sashien began shutting down the engines.

"And now," Odun said presently to Azard, "let's go out and have a firsthand look at your world."

Azard hesitated. He didn't want to be away from the ship, even for a few of their hours, while one of the Federation humans stayed on it. But it turned out then that they were all going ... Odun, Sashien and the woman Griliom Tantrey who represented the project which had mass-produced and mass-conditioned the stored zombie bodies for Malatlo. A small atmosphere cruiser lifted from the cargo ship's flank. Thirty minutes later they were floating in sunshine.

It was a world of pleasing appearance, verdant and varied, with drifting clouds and rolling oceans. They flew over great animal herds in the plains, skimmed the edges of towering mountains. Finally they turned back into the night.

"What's that?" Azard asked, indicating a great glowing yellow patch on the dark ocean surface below and to their left.

Sashien turned the cruiser in that direction.

"A sea creature which eventually should become a valuable source of food and chemicals," said Odun. He'd been involved in the study of the records of this world and its recommendation for the Malatlo revival. "Individually it's tiny. But at various seasons it gathers in masses to spawn."

Sashien checked a reading on the screen, said, "That patch covers more than forty square miles. That's quite a mass!"

They flew across the blanket of living fire on the sea surface. Azard said, "This is a rich planet. The Federation is being very generous...."

"Not too generous, really," said Odun. "This is a world which was surveyed and earmarked for possible settlement a long while ago. But it's so very far from the Hub that it's quite possible it never would have been put to any use. There's no shortage of habitable planets much closer to us." He added, "Its remoteness from the Federation and from any civilization of which we know is, of course, one of the reasons this world was chosen for Malatlo."

"It is still an act of great generosity," said Azard.

"Well, you see," Odun explained, "there are many more of us in the Federation than Malatlo believed who cared for it and its ideals."

Griliom Tantrey nodded. "We loved Malatlo," she said. "That's why we three are here...."

\* \* \*

Malatlo. The Malatlo Attitude.

Turn back something like two centuries from the night the giant cargo carrier came down to an untouched world.

The Federation of the Hub had been forged at last. It was forged in blood and fire and fury, but that was over now. For the first time in many human generations no Cluster Wars were being fought. And a great many people everywhere had begun to look back with shock and something like growing incredulity on the destruction and violence and cruelties of the immediate past. They wanted no more of that. None whatever.

But, of course, the forming of the Federation did not end violence and cruelties. It did establish a working society and one with a good deal of promise in it, but it was not a perfect society and probably never would be perfect. And when these people realized they couldn't change that, they simply wanted no more to do with the Federation either.

That was Malatlo, the Malatlo Attitude. No one seemed able to say how the term originated. On a thousand worlds it was somehow in the air. There were no great leaders of this movement or cult or philosophy, whatever one wanted to call it. But there were very many minor leaders.

They put it to the Federation. They wanted to be away from the Federation, these people who shared the Malatlo Attitude, away from all people who did not fully share it; they wanted to be by themselves. They had no dislike for other human beings, but they did not want to have Malatlo disturbed by those whose thinking and actions weren't in accord with it.

The Federation accepted the demand. Perhaps the men in authority looked on it as an experiment. Possibly they approved individually of the Malatlo Attitude but considered it impractical for most human beings—certainly impractical for the Federation. At any rate, they did

everything needed to bring the world of Malatlo into being.

The location of the world was never made public. But it was known that it lay at an immense distance from the Hub, beyond any probability of chance discovery. It had a neighbor planet on which lived a race of beings who called themselves Raceels and called their world Tiurs. They had a well-developed civilization but had not yet discovered space flight. The followers of the Malatlo Attitude had wanted such neighbors to demonstrate that man could live in peace with all other creatures. Some eighty million of them were transferred to the world Malatlo within the time of a few years. Thereafter almost all ties with the Federation were dissolved. The people of Malatlo were opposed to galactic travel and retained only spacecraft designed to let them move about the system of their new sun.

By agreement, one connection with the Federation was retained. Once every ten years a small ship traveled from the Hub to the Malatlo system. It had few people on board, and all of them were sufficiently sympathetic to the Malatlo Attitude to create no discord. Even so they remained on the planet only long enough to gather the information wanted by the Federation, and then returned to report.

The reports remained favorable. In something less than two centuries, Malatlo's population increased to two hundred million and stabilized at that level. They had developed new branches of science dealing with the human psyche but were unwilling to reveal their findings in that area to outsiders. They established increasingly friendly contacts with the Raceels of Tiurs, who looked with favor on the Malatlo Attitude. That had been the last report.

And then Azard arrived in the Federation in a small battered ship which had taken more than three years to make the voyage from the Malatlo System. The world of Malatlo had been destroyed. The Raceels of Tiurs had struck against it with matter conversion fields which within days made the planet uninhabitable, then consumed it completely. With the exception of Azard, the followers of the Malatlo Attitude no longer existed in the flesh. But the elds, the personalities, of over half of them had been preserved, in the eight cases Azard brought with him. The isolation of the eld, the ability to maintain it in independence of a physical body, had been the last of Malatlo's great discoveries.

Azard reported that Tiurs had destroyed itself in the process. Evidently at least one conversion field had gone out of control on the planet, and once a field became active, there was no way to check it. Whatever had been the cause, it was apparent that before the one ship which escaped from Malatlo left the system, the Raceel world also was undergoing rapid disintegration.

Azard came with the plea that the Federation should once more help Malatlo become established. Federation science knew how to construct human bodies which were physically functional but lacked self-awareness, lacked a developed personality. The elds of Malatlo could be transferred to such bodies and resume physical existence.

The Federation agreed. Zombie bodies were primarily research tools, there had been no previous occasion to produce them in large quantities. But given sufficient supervisory personnel, their mass production involved no significant problems, and forced growth processes could bring armies of them to the point of physical

maturity in months. Concurrent mechanical exercise and programmed neuron stimulation completed the process. The result was a limited but viable human facsimile. If the discoveries of Malatlo's experimenters could turn the facsimile into a complete new human being, they were welcome to the material.

So the construction of the bodies began. Meanwhile a world was selected which would meet the requirements of the Malatlo Attitude, and presently the zombies and the basic tools of a simple civilization were stored away on the great cargo ship. Azard brought his precious cases aboard. The Federation had selected Sashien, Odun and Griliom as the three specialists who would ferry the ship to the planet, supervise the automatic unloading and construction equipment, and check the final conditioning of the zombies, before returning with the ship to the Hub.

From Azard's point of view, the thing basically wrong with this schedule was that a considerable number of people were aware of the new world's location. It made it inevitable that someone presently would come out to see how things fared with Malatlo. And that was not an acceptable situation.

Naturally he'd made no mention of this. But the cargo ship would neither return to the Hub after disgorging its contents, nor would it remain on this world. Azard planned to destroy his Federation aides within hours after the landing, then equip as many selected elds as would be required to handle the ship with their new bodies, and lift the ship back into space to search for another planet so far from the Federation that they could be sure it never would be found.

As soon as the atmosphere cruiser returned from the survey tour of the planet, he took steps to execute the plan.

He was somewhat afraid of the three specialists. They would not have been chosen for this mission if they hadn't been very competent people. During the trip he'd avoided their company as much as possible, for which they showed no offense. But he'd still had enough contact with them to know that they were alert and quick thinking. It was unlikely that anything would go wrong. But it was possible. His first move, therefore, was to make the ship transmitters inoperative. It was quickly done, and with that, they were temporarily cut off from any chance of summoning help. No doubt it wouldn't take them long to trace down and repair the damage, if they discovered it in time, but before that happened, Azard's maneuvers would engulf them in one way or another.

His immediate preparations for their death were complete. The control compartment was one place on the ship where they regularly could be found together. Another was an adjoining three-room area where they took their meals, worked on their records, sometimes relaxed with music and tapes. From various points on the ship, he could now release an odorless vapor which killed on contact into either of these sections, but it was necessary to do this at a time when the three of them would be destroyed simultaneously.

They were in the control compartment, engaged in calculations connected with the disembarking of the heavy automatic construction equipment, when Azard went down once more to the ship's sealed section. When he emerged from it, he was carrying one of the eld cases. A few minutes later, he locked himself into a storage area

where thirty zombie bodies lay in individual full-stimulation containers.

He'd been instructed thoroughly by Griliom Tantrey and others in the methods required to bring these bodies out of the stage of almost totally quiescent metabolism used to store them and to the functional level normal for an active human body. These thirty had been approaching that level for the past shipday, and the instruments on the containers told Azard that they now had reached it. All that remained to be done was to give them consciousness--and the elds could handle that.

He opened the case and slowly and carefully began to adjust its settings. Most of the vast swarm of personalities in there could not be isolated or handled individually. But the members of certain key groups could be contacted individually by the combined use of a number of dials and released one by one, and that was all that was required. Azard set the case down before one of the opened zombie containers, directed the release needle at the inert body within and set an eld free. He sensed it hurtle forward and take possession. The others knew at once what was happening. He felt their body-greed surge up like a roaring pressure against his mind. Not yet, he thought.

But thirty in all he set free. They were disciplined entities. The zombie bodies remained still, unstirring, except for their deep regular breathing. Azard turned on a device, and his voice began to speak from it. As he left the section, it was telling the thirty elds, listening now through the bodies' senses, what they must do. And, elsewhere in the ship, Azard was switching on a small viewscreen. It showed him first the control compartment--empty now. He turned to a view of one of the living-area rooms. Griliom Tantrey was just coming in through a door, and Sashien turned from a table to speak to her. Their voices became audible, and Azard listened a moment to what they were saying. Then Sashien called off to Odun, and Odun came through the door.

Azard smiled briefly, reached back of the screen, uncovered a stud set flush into its surface, pressed the stud down and held it. The gas which drifted into the room towards the three Federation specialists was colorless, soundless, odorless. It touched them in seconds, and one after the other, they collapsed. Azard released the stud. They were already dead ... and within an hour, the ship's ventilation system would have filtered the poisonous vapor out of the living area again and disposed of it.

. . .

And now his duties were nearly concluded! With a sense of vast relief and triumph, he told himself the moment had come when he could turn all responsibility back to others greater than himself. Almost running in his eagerness, he returned through the ship to the sealed section. This time he didn't bother to close its locks behind him; there was no need.

There were over two thousand widely varying genetic patterns represented in the zombie bodies provided by the Federation. One of them was truly outstanding, both in physical development and

mental potential. Azard had brought a specimen of this group here the preceding day and activated the awakening mechanisms of its container. It was to receive the eld of the greatest of all those who had been in his charge so long. He now examined the zombie and its condition for the final time with great care. But it was clearly an excellent choice, the best he could have made in the circumstances.

As he was setting the last of the transfer dials, there was a touch of odd weakness, a heaviness. A feeling then as if, in an instant, all his strength had been drained from him.

With immeasurable effort, in total dismay and incredulity, he forced himself to turn his head.

And there they stood. Sashien and the woman Griliom--

The third?

The insane realization came that the third figure was himself.

"No," the figure said, "This isn't you, Azard. We've concocted a disguise which will lend me your physical appearance for a while." The voice was Odun's.

Staring, unable to do more than stare, Azard watched Sashien hand a device which had been pointed at him to Griliom. The two men approached, picked him up from the floor and set him in a chair.

Griliom told him, "I'm reducing the pressure. You'll be able to speak."

Azard drew a deep breath. Some hope flowed back into him. The elds he had provided with bodies and information should soon be arming themselves and coming here. He'd warned them to be cautious. If these three wanted him to talk, he would talk. He said hoarsely, "What do you want?"

Odun said, "Why did you try to kill us?"

"I didn't," Azard said. How could they possibly have escaped? "You should have been unconscious for a time, but unhurt."

They stared at him a moment. Sashien said, "What was your purpose in making the attempt?"

Azard sighed. "I needed this ship for Malatlo."

"Malatlo could have had the ship for the asking," said Odun. "You knew that."

"Yes. But we can't stay here. This world is still too close to the Federation, and too many people would know Malatlo was here. We owe renewed gratitude to the Federation. But now we must break all ties with its people. The new Malatlo must be born on a world no one knows about--and too far away to be discovered accidentally."

"Malatlo," said Griliom, "did not object to maintaining limited contacts with the Federation before this."

"Many did object to it," Azard assured her. "And at the end many believed that our trouble arose because the Raceels of Tiurs had learned through us about the Federation. They tried to exterminate us not because they were afraid of us but because they were afraid



of the Federation where the Malatlo Attitude didn't prevail."

"You still needed the Federation to supply you with zombie bodies," Griliom remarked. "The number we were able to store on this ship were no more than a beginning."

"But they were sufficient," said Azard. "Naturally our best scientists would have been among those awakened first. Their study of the bodies and of what I recorded of the techniques involved in developing them would allow them to duplicate the process."

He went on earnestly. "You must believe that no harm would have come to you. You would have been left here on the planet with the atmosphere cruiser and supplies. As soon as the cargo carrier was far enough away so that it could no longer be traced, we would have transmitted word to the escort ships to return and pick you up."

Sashien and Odun looked at Griliom. She shook her head. "Analysis showed three lethal components in the gas he released," she said. She glanced at Azard. "We weren't in that room. What you saw and heard were programmed zombies. They died in moments—as we would have done in their place." She added to the other two, "So we have here an alleged Malatlo Follower who was willing to kill three human beings to attain his ends. That seems difficult to believe."

Azard said doggedly, "The fact that I am a Malatlo Follower must indicate to you that if the gas I used was in fact deadly, it could only have been a mistake! A mistake which, I must admit, might have had terrible consequences..."

Odun said thoughtfully, "Perhaps we should question one of the others." He nodded at the case standing before the body container. "I'll take the paralyzer, Griliom. Will you see how far along he was with that."

Azard slowly tensed his muscles as the woman went to the eld case, stooped above it to inspect the pattern of dials inside. There was no hesitancy in her manner—did she understand what she saw?

She said, "He's selected a specific psyche for transfer to the body. Let me see... " She turned to the container, opened it, bent over the zombie. Her shoulders moved. Azard couldn't see what she was doing, but he could assume she was checking its condition on the various instruments. She straightened again presently, looked at Odun. "Total capacity," she said. "We can effect the transfer."

Azard made a straining effort to arise. But they were watchful; the paralyzer's pressure increased instantly—he could not move, and now he discovered he had also become unable to speak. A wave of dizziness passed through him, his vision blurred. He became aware next that Griliom and Sashien were moving about him; then clear sight gradually returned.

He found himself still immobilized in the chair, looking out into the room through something like a thin veil of darkness. He guessed it was an energy field of some kind. Odun stood in the center of the room. Some twenty feet from him the zombie body Azard had prepared lay on its back, on the floor. Azard realized then that Sashien and Griliom stood on either side of his chair, a little behind him.

The body stirred, opened its eyes, sat up.

It looked about the room but seemed unable to see Azard and the two on his right and left. The energy veil evidently blocked vision from that side. Its gaze fastened on Odun, who stood watching it with the face of Azard. It came to its feet.

There had been no uncertainty in any of its motions. This was a powerful eld, instantly capable of impressing its intentions on the full range of the zombie's physical and mental response patterns. Azard should have been able to sense its presence in the room, but he could force no eld contact through the energy barrier. There was no way to transmit a warning.

"Dom belke anda grom, Azard!" the body addressed Odun. It was a strong, self-assured voice.

"Gelan ra Azard," Odun said. "Ra diriog Federation. Sellen ra Raceel."

The body moved instantly. It sprang sideways to a table standing ten feet away. And Azard saw only now what it must have noted in its sweeping glance about the room--the gun which lay on the table. The body snatched it up, pointed the muzzle at Odun, pulled the trigger.

And dropped limply back to the floor, the gun spinning from its hand.

. . .

"This was a test," Odun told Azard. He no longer wore Azard's face; the false skin or whatever it was had been removed. "You heard what I said to him. I identified myself as a human of the Federation and told him he was a Raceel. He immediately attempted to destroy me. The weapon, of course, was rigged. If the trigger was pressed, it would kill the user."

Azard did not reply.

"So you are Raceels," Odun went on. "And you'd kill any of us--any human being--as readily as you destroyed the people of Malatlo. We should like to know how this came about. Are you willing to talk?"

"Yes. I'll tell you whatever you want to know." Azard made his voice dull, his expression listless and resigned. But there was savage anger in him--and the longer he held these three in talk, the more certain their death and eventual Raceel victory became. The thirty elds he'd released had been a select group of superb fighters, and they must be searching the ship by now, in strong new bodies and with weapons in their hands. The demonstration here confirmed that they'd know very quickly how to put those bodies to full use.

"We were desperate," he said, and went on, knowing the statement had gained him their full attention. Before the Malatlo settlers contacted it, Tiurs had faced the problem of a population constantly on the verge of expanding beyond the ability of the planet to support it, and had no adequate techniques of space travel, which might have helped alleviate the problem. A temporary and unsatisfactory solution had been the development of methods of preserving a conscious personality indefinitely without the support of a physical

body... .

"So it was you and not Malatlo," said Sashien, "who originated the eld sciences."

"They were investigating the subject," Azard told him. "But we accomplished the eld separation a century before they began to make significant progress in that direction--"

The Malatlo Followers did not push their contacts with Tiurs, believing it best to let the relationship develop gradually and in a manner which would be satisfactory to the Raceels. And the Raceels, though hungry for the information they might get from the humans, remained equally cautious. For them the situation held both great promise and a great threat. There were means of practical interstellar space travel, and there were worlds upon worlds among the stars to which their kind might spread. That was the promise.

The threat was the prospect of encountering competitors in space more formidable than themselves. The Followers were harmless, but from what they had told the Raceels of the species to which they belonged, the species certainly was not. Evidently it already controlled an enormous sector of space. Further, there might be other species equally dangerous to those weaker than they.

The logical approach was to remain unnoticed until one became strong enough to meet any opposition.

The Raceels immersed themselves in research on many levels, including lines long since abandoned as being too immediately dangerous to themselves. Somewhat to their surprise, they found Malatlo completely willing to supply them with spaceships for study when they indicated an interest in them. Unfortunately, these craft were not designed to accomplish interstellar flights, but they advanced the scientists of Tiurs a long step in that direction. The Raceels kept this as well as their other hopes and fears a careful secret from Malatlo.

They were a race which had a naturally high rate of reproduction and which throughout a war-studded history had made a fetish of the expansion of its kind. That drive became a liability when Tiurs was united at last into a single rigidly controlled society confined to the surface of its planet. Now suddenly it might be turned into an asset again. When they burst upon the stars, it would be in no timid and tentative colonial probes, but in many thousands of ships, each capable of peopling a world in a single generation.

They worked towards that end with feverish determination. From Malatlo they learned of the eld-less zombie bodies Federation science knew how to produce in theoretically limitless quantities, and they took up that line of investigation. The disembodied elds in the storage vaults, for whom there had been no room for normal existence on Tiurs, would come to life again in new bodies on new worlds. Dormant fertile germ cells of selected strains were stockpiled by the millions. Weaponry research moved quickly forwards. The full interstellar drive seemed almost within reach.

And then--

"Malatlo Followers informed us they had become aware of our plans and were horrified by them," Azard said. "Apparently they believed

they could persuade us to abandon them." He hesitated. "So we silenced them."

"You extinguished a living world," said Griliom.

Azard said, "We couldn't stop what we were doing. And Malatlo would reveal what it had learned to the Federation. We believed we had no choice."

"How was Tiurs destroyed?" Sashien asked.

"We had intended to destroy it with mass-converter fields after we left," said Azard. "To later investigators it would appear that Malatlo and Tiurs had been engulfed by the same unexplained disaster. We didn't realize then how dangerously unstable the fields were. There was a premature reaction among the ones being positioned on Tiurs. After that--"

He shrugged. For a moment a three-year old horror seemed to darken his mind again.

"We were totally unprepared, and we had only days left to act," he continued. Up to the last moment, the most valuable sections of the population were moved through eld separation centers. Only one ship equipped with an experimental interstellar drive had escaped the initial conversion burst. It was very small. But it could carry as many Raceel elds as there would be time to salvage. It could carry a relatively huge quantity of stored fertile germ cells. And supplies for one Raceel during a trip that must take years. Because there was now only one place where zombie bodies for the salvaged elds could be produced, and that place was the human Federation of the Hub.

Griliom remarked, "The body you use has been analyzed. It obviously is a human one. How did you obtain it?"

"There were a number of Followers on Tiurs when we destroyed Malatlo," Azard said. "I was one of a group who had the various qualifications required to take our survival ship to the Federation. My eld was transferred to the body of a Follower for the purpose. The method employed was to bring the human subject to the point of physical death. The death process dissolved the inhabiting eld. The Raceel eld was then injected and an attempt made to revive the body. The first forty-eight such attempts failed, and the Raceel elds involved also died before they could be detached again from the dying bodies which had absorbed them. I was the forty-ninth transfer. That body was successfully revived, and so I lived."

He added, "There is much valuable information we could exchange if, for example, the Raceel scientists in charge of the eld transfer methods and the ones who developed the mass-converter fields were restored to physical existence. We offer you what they have learned in return for the use of your zombie bodies."

He didn't expect them to respond to the offer. They must believe that if they wanted such information they could get it from the elds who were now in effect their prisoners, without giving anything in return. But if they continued to let him talk, the released elds would have more time to find them here and destroy them.

He added again, "You must not judge us too harshly. Our history and traditions made the continued expansion of our species a matter of

...giving necessity to us. Nothing could be allowed to block it. But your species and mine can now be of value to each other. You should consider that rather than the question of avenging Malatlo."

"Azard," Odun said, "you don't fully understand the situation. The story you told in the Federation was tentatively accepted, but you were under close observation. And certain incongruities gradually became evident. Even allowing for the shock of the disaster, you didn't speak and act quite as a Malatlo Follower might be expected to speak and act. Your demands were logical, in the light of the Malatlo Attitude. But they were a trifle too precisely logical and uncompromising."

"Then there is the matter of your mind. It presents automatic blocks to psychic probes. Human minds can demonstrate that ability in various forms. In your case, however, it is brought into action in a manner no human mind of record has employed to date. So there presently was the question of whether you were in fact, in spite of physical appearances, wholly human. Meanwhile it had been confirmed that, as you reported, the worlds of Malatlo and Tiurs had disappeared. If you weren't human then, it followed that you were in all probability a Raceel eld in a human body ... and that you were trying to trick the Federation into helping you re-establish the Raceel species."

Azard stared at him. "If that was suspected, why--"

"It was a test."

"A test?" Azard repeated.

Odun sighed. "Even at second hand," he remarked, "the Malatlo Attitude seems to retain a curious power. It was decided that if some indication could be found that the destruction of Malatlo was an act of thoughtless panic, an act which you and your kind regretted not only because of the destruction it brought in turn on yourselves, we would then help bring the stored Raceel elds into physical existence. But everything you've done since this voyage began was continuing evidence of the implacable hostility your species entertains towards all others. And you've been kept under constant observation."

Azard said harshly, "That would have been impossible!"

"We employed certain safeguards, of course," Griliom Tántrey told him. She nodded at the zombie body on the floor. "I gave that body a final stimulant before we transferred the eld of what was presumably one of your people's leaders to it. This was a step in the animation of zombies of which you had not been informed. The bodies to which you transferred elds an hour ago lacked that stimulant. They all died therefore within minutes after the elds brought them into full normal activity, and the elds, of course, died with them."

He tried for some seconds to make himself disbelieve her, but it was clear that she spoke the truth. He looked at their faces, addressed Odun. "You used our language. How did you learn it?"

"I've made a study of the Malatlo-Raceel relationship for some years," Odun said. "The last ship to return from the system provided me with language tapes." He looked at his companions. "I believe Azard has told us as much as we need or wish to know."

They nodded.

"Then," Odun resumed, "it's time to take the final steps in this."

His hand moved. And darkness closed in with a rush around Azard.

. . .

He came awake again presently and looked about in dimness. He was seated in another chair, again unable to move his limbs or body, and the three were busy with something not far from him.

After some seconds he realized they were in the atmosphere cruiser. The screen showed the surface of one of the planetary oceans. The two eld cases stood near it.

Azard discovered he could speak and asked aloud, "What are you doing?"

They looked around. Griliom said matter-of-factly, "We'll dispose of the elds here."

In spite of everything, Azard felt a shock of incredulous rage.

But at least, he thought, these three would also die! Released simultaneously, the eld hordes would struggle furiously for possession of their bodies as well as his own. And neither the inhabiting elds nor the physical bodies could survive such an onslaught.

He said, "You have no authority to make such a decision!"

"We do have that authority, Azard," said Odun. "That's why we're here."

"Then," Azard told him, "you're worse than we ever were. We destroyed only the population of a world. You're taking it on yourselves to destroy an intelligent species."

They didn't respond immediately. They were watching the screen now, and Azard was able to shift his head far enough to watch it too. After a moment the rim of a glowing yellow formation came drifting into the screen. He realized it was a spawning swarm of billions of tiny sea creatures such as the one they'd seen earlier that night.

Griliom said without looking around at him, "Down there is an endless supply of bodies which have neither elds nor intelligence. I've set the controls on these cases so that the Raceel elds will be released within a minute after the cases strike the surface of the water. They'll emerge and enter host bodies in which they can live for something less than a standard year—the life span of these creatures. And then they'll die with them. That's the way we're settling this."

Odun added, "But you're mistaken in one basic respect, Azard. We're preserving the stored Raceel ova, and a new generation will be raised from them under our supervision. Only some terrible necessity would force us to destroy a species. So your species will not die. Its history, its traditions and its attitudes will die."

Azard asked, "And what are we if not our history, our traditions, and our attitudes?"

The humans didn't reply, and he wasn't certain then whether he'd asked the question aloud. He discovered he was indifferent about the matter, and that the question itself had been an indifferent one. Then he noticed that the cruiser had moved close to the surface of the sea, and that someone was opening a hatch. The eld cases were dropped out, and the hatch closed again.

It occurred to Azard that he had no emotional feeling about this or about anything else. By their skills, they'd drained his emotions from him. He realized next that his senses were dimming and that he was dying. But he remained indifferent to that, too. He decided that in their way they were merciful.

Then he died.

Down below, the open eld cases bobbed in the glowing water. The elds, conscious and terribly hungry for physical existence, discovered abruptly that they had been released. They flashed out of the cases and found life in abundance about them. They entered, took possession, affixed themselves. Perhaps for an instant some of them retained awareness enough to understand they had become joined to a form of life which provided no vehicle for consciousness. But then, with nothing to give it support, their own consciousness drained away.

However, they would live on for a while. For something less than a standard year.