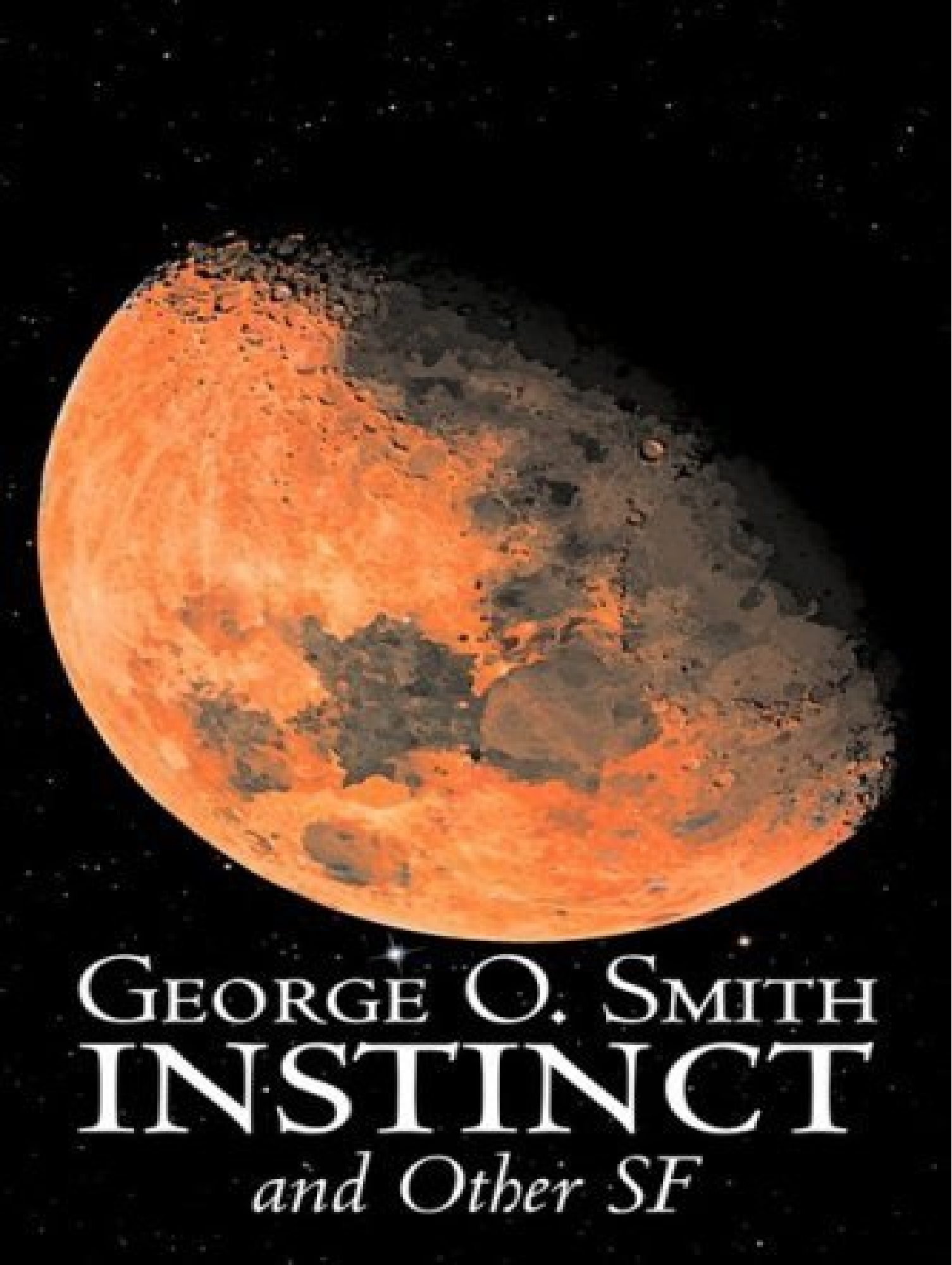

GEORGE O. SMITH

INSTINCT

and Other SF

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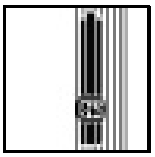
INSTINCT

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

You can keep a good man down, if you've got enough headstart, are alert and persistent ... so long as he limits himself to acting like a good man....

Illustrated by Martinez



T WAS 047-63-10 when he opened the door. Before his superior could chew him for prepunctuality, Huvane said as the chief looked up and opened his mouth to start:

"Sorry, but you should know. Terra is at it again."

Chelan's jaw snapped shut. He passed a hand over his face and asked in a tone of pure exasperation. "The same?" and as Huvane nodded, Chelan went on, "Why can't they make a mistake and blow themselves out of our hair? How far did they get this time?"

"All the way."

"And out?"

Huvane sat down shaking his head slowly. "Not yet, but they're over the hump, you know." Huvane's face brightened ever so slightly. "I can't be criticized for not counting them, chief. But I'll estimate that there must be at least a couple of hundred atoms of 109 already. And

you know that nobody could *make* 109 if they hadn't already evolved methods of measuring the properties of individual atoms. So as soon as they find that their boom-sample doesn't behave like the standard mess out of a bombardment chamber, they won't rest until they find out why. They'll find out. Then it'll be 109, 109, 109 until we're forced to clobber them again."

Bitterly Chelan looked up. "I don't think I need the lecture. I admire their tenacity. I admire their ambition. I admire their blasphemous, consignatory, obscenity attitude of acting as if the Great Creator had concocted the whole glorious Universe for their own playground. Yes," said the chief wearily, "singly they aren't bad traits. Boiled down into the self-esteem of a single race, I don't admire them any more. I'm simply scared."

"Yeah. Well, we've got time."

"Not much. What's their space potential this time?"

"Still scragged on the mass-inertia-relativity barrier. Tailburners ... er, chemical reaction engines. Manned and unmanned orbital flights. Half a dozen landings on their sister planet. No," said Huvane as he saw the chief's puzzlement, "I don't mean Number Two ... the one they call Venus this time. I mean their co-orbital companion. *The* Moon. They still call it that."

The chief looked up wonderingly. "Do you suppose," he asked solemnly, "that there is really something called a 'racial memory'?"

"It's against all the theory," objected Huvane. "But there seems to be —" his voice trailed off absently. It returned after some thought: "I've tried to sort it out, just as if I were one of them. The recurrence of their ... er ... 'names of antiquity' as they call them, seem to recur and recur. Their Planet Two, now called Venus, was called Astarte last time, and before that it was Ishtar."

"Other way around."

"No matter. The names are still being used and, according to their belief, merely parallel names culled out of local pagan religious beliefs."

The chief nodded. "That's only part of the parallelism. The big thing is the way they follow the same pattern. Savage, agrarian, urban, right on up the ladder according to the rules of civic science but squabbling and battling all the way right on up and out into space. Hell, Huvane, warfare and conflict I can both understand and cope with, but not the Terran flavor. They don't come out bent on conquest or stellar colonialism. They come out with their little private fight still going on and each side lines up its volume of influence and pits one against the other until the whole section of that spiral arm is glittering like a sputtering spark along a train of black powder. I wish," he said savagely, "that we could cut off that arm and fling it deep into extragalactic space."

Huvane shook his head. "And leave the problem for our children to solve?"

"They'll have one to solve, I think," said Chelan. "In another twenty thousand years the Terrans will be right back doing business at the same old stand. Unless we can solve it for once and for all right now."

Huvane looked around as if he were seeking another door to the chief's office. "How?" he asked sarcastically. "The first time we greeted them and they took both our welcome and us for everything they could before we pulled the rug out from under them. The second time we boxed them off and they broke out after converting the isolation screen into an offensive weapon. The third time we tried to avoid them and they ran wild exploiting less ambitious races. The fourth time we missed the boat and they were chewing at our back door before we knew about them; containing them was almost a nova

job. The fifth time we went in and tried to understand them, they traded us two for one. Two things they didn't want for one they did," Huvane's lips curled, "and I'm not sure that they didn't trade us the other way around; two they needed for one they declared useless. Sixth? that was the last time and they just came out shooting as if the whole galaxy automatically objected. This time? Who knows?" Huvane sat down again and put his hands between his knees.

"They don't operate like *people*. Sensible folk settle their own problems, then look for more. Terra? One half of the globe is against the other half of the globe. Fighting one another tooth and nail, they still find time to invent and cross space to other planets and continue their fight on unknown territory."

"Maybe we'd better just admit that we don't know the solution. Then we can clobber Terra back to the swamp, juggle the place into another ice age, put the details down in History, and hope that our remote progeny will be smarter than we."

"Like maybe we're smarter than our remote ancestors?" jeered Huvane.

"Got a better idea?"

"Maybe. Has anybody really taken a couple of them and *analyzed* them?"

"It's inhumane."

"I agree, but—?"

"Get me a healthy, well-balanced specimen of somewhat better-than-average education and training. Can do?"

"Can do. But how are you going to keep him?"

"I don't intend to study him like I'd study a bug under a microscope.

This one won't get away. Make it in fourteen versaids, Huvane."

"Make it in ten plus or minus a radite or two. So long!"

The beast at Cape Canaveral stood three hundred and fifteen feet tall dwarfing her creators into microscopic proportions. Swarming up and down the gantry, bug-sized humans crawled in and out of check ports with instrument checks, hauling hoses, cables, lines. Some thousand feet away, a puff-bomb of red smoke billowed out and a habit-flattened voice announced: "At the mark, X Minus Fifteen Minutes ... ... Mark! X Minus Fifteen Minutes!"

Jerry Markham said, "That's me!" He looked up at the lofty porthole and almost lost his balance over backwards sighting it. He was a healthy specimen, about twenty-four and full of life. He had spent the day going through two routines that were sometimes simultaneous and at other times serially; one re-stating his instructions letter by letter including the various alternatives and contingencies that involved his making decisions if the conditions on Venus were according to this theory or that. The other was a rigorous medical checkup. Neither of them showed that Jerry Markham had spent the previous night in activities not recommended by his superiors but nothing that would bounce him if they knew. He could hardly be broken for living it up at a party.

He shook hands with the boss and stepped into the elevator. It was not his idea of a proper send-off. There should be bands playing and girls throwing paper tape, flowers and a few drinks. Sally should send him off with a proud smooch of lipstick and a tearful promise to wait. Instead it was all very military and strict and serious—which is why he'd whooped it up the night before. He'd had his good night and good by with Sally Forman, but now eighteen hours later he was fit and raring for a return match.

Jerry's mind was by no means concerned with this next half hour, which would be the most perilous part of his flight. Tomorrow would take care of itself. The possibility that thirty minutes from now he might be dead in a flaming pyre did not cross his mind, the chance that an hour from now he could be told that his bird was off-course and his fate starvation if it obtained an untrue orbit or abrupt destruction if it didn't orbit at all—nothing bothered him.

He sat there chanting the count down with the official timer and braced himself when the call came:

"Zero! Fire!"

Inwardly, Jerry Markham's mind said, "We're off!" and he began to look forward to his landing on Venus. Not the problems of landing, but what he would find there when he soared down through the clouds.

Determined to hold up through the high-G even though nobody watched, he went on and on and up and up, his radio voiced the progress tinnily. Shock followed roaring pressure, release followed shock. Orientation was lost; only logic and intellect told him where he was and which way he was going.

Then he was free. Free to eat and drink and read and smoke one cigarette every three hours and, in essence, behave in about the same way as a prisoner confined in solitary. The similarity did not bother Jerry Markham, for this was honor, not punishment.

Huvane collected him with the ease of a fisherman landing a netted crab. Easily, painlessly. Shockingly, for the crab doesn't exactly take to the net with docility.

Huvane collected the whole shebang, man and machinery; then opened the spacecraft with the same attitude as a man peeling the lid from a can of sardines. He could have breached the air lock, but he

wanted the Terran to understand the power behind the act.

Jerry Markham came out blinking; very mildly wondering about the air. It was good. Without considering the rather high probability that nobody spoke the language, he blurted:

"What gives?"

He was not very much surprised when one of them in uniform said curtly, "This way and make it snappy, Terran!"

No, he was not surprised. He was too stunned to permit anything as simple as surprise. And through the shock and the stun, his months of training came through. Jerry Markham worried his first worry: *Howwas he going to get the word back home?*

Confinement in the metal cell of his top-stage hadn't bothered him. The concept of landing on a planet that couldn't come closer to home than some twenty-seven million miles was mere peanuts. Isolation for a year was no more than a hiatus, a period of adventure that would be rewarded many-fold. Sally? So she might not wait but there were others; he'd envisioned himself fighting them off with a club after his successful return. Hell, they'd swarmed him before his take-off, starting with the moment his number had come up as possible candidate.

No, the meeting with competence in space did not shock him greatly. What bothered him was his lack of control over the situation. Had he seen them and passed on about his business, he recounted the incident.

As it was, his desire to tell somebody about it was cut off. As he sat, alone and helpless, it occurred to him that he did not mind so much the dying, if that was to be his lot. What mattered was the unmarked grave. The mourning did not move him; the physical concept of "grave" and its fill of moldering organic substances was nothing. It

was mere symbol. So long as people knew how and where, it made little difference to Jerry Markham whether he was planted in a duridium casket guaranteed to preserve the dead flesh for a thousand years or whether he went out in a bright swift flame that glinted in its tongues of the color-traces of incandescent elements of human organic chemistry.

So long as people knew. Where and how. Vague, vague, mass-volumized concept. Granite tomb was one idea, here was a *place*. Point a spread-fingered hand in a waving sweep across the sky that encompasses the Plane of The Ecliptic and say, "It is there," and another *place* is identified. Lost on Venus is no more than a phrase; from Terra Haute or Times Square, Venus is a tiny point in the sky smaller to the vision than the granite of Grant's Tomb.

Imagination breeds irritation. Would they call it pilot error or equipment unreliability? Dying he could face. Goofing would be a disgrace that he would have to meet in fact or in symbol. Hardware crackup was a matter of the laws of probability. Not only his duty demanded that he report, his essence cried out for a voice to *let them know*.

Anybody.

Just the chance to tell one other human soul.

Chelan asked, "Who are you? Your name and rank?"

He said sullenly, "Go to hell."

"We have ways and means."

He said, "Use 'em."

"If we said that we mean no harm; if we asked what we could do to prove it, what would be your reply?"

"Take me back and let me go."

"Who are you? Will you identify yourself?"

"No."

"Stubborn Terran!"

"I know my rights. We are not at war. I'll tell you nothing. Why did you capture me?"

"We'll ask the questions, Terran."

"You'll get no answers." He sneered at them angrily. "Torture me—and then wonder whether my screamings tell the truth. Dope me and wonder whether what I truly believe is fact or fantasy."

"Please," said Chelan, "we only want to understand your kind. To know what makes you tick."

"Then why didn't you ask?"

"We've tried and we get no answers. Terran, the Universe is a vastness beyond comprehension. Co-operate and give us what we want to know and a piece of it is yours."

"Nuts!"

"Terran, you have friends."

"Who doesn't?"

"Why can't we be your friends?"

Angrily, resentfully, "Your way isn't friendly enough to convince me."

Chelan shook his head. "Take him away," he directed in his own tongue.

"Where? And how shall we keep him?"

"To the place we've prepared. And keep him safe."

Huvane asked, "Safe? Who knows what is safe? One bribed his guards. One seduced her guards. One dug his way out scratch by scratch. Disappeared, died, dead, gone, mingled off with the myriad of worlds—did one get home, perhaps, to start their legend of the gods in the sky; the legend that never dies through the rise and fall of culture from savagery to ... to ... to Element 109?"

Chelan looked at Jerry Markham, the Terran looked back defiantly as if he were guest instead of captive. "Co-operate," breathed Chelan.

"I'll tell you nothing. Force me. I can't stop that."

Chelan shook his head sorrowfully. "Extracting what you know would be less than the play of a child," he said. "No, Terran. We can know what you know in the turn of a dial. What we need is that which you do not know. Laugh? Or is that a sneer? No matter. What you know is worthless. Your problems and your ambitions, both racial and personal, are minor. We know them already. The pattern is repetitive, only some of the names are changed.

"But why? Ah, that we must know. Why are you what you are? Seven times in History Terra has come up from the mud, seven times along the same route. Seven times a history of ten thousand years from savage to savant, from beast to brilliance and always with the same will to do—to do what? To die for what? To fight for what?"

Chelan waved Huvane to take the Terran away.

Huvane said, "He's locked in air-tight with guards who can be trusted. Now what do we do with him?"

"He will co-operate."

"By force?"

"No, Huvane. By depriving him of the one thing that Life cannot exist without."

"Food? Safety?"

Chelan shook his head. "More primitive than these." He lowered his voice. "He suffers now from being cut off from his kind. Life starts, complaining about the treatment it receives during the miracle of birth and crying for its first breath of air. Life departs gasping for air, with someone listening for the last words, the last message from the dying. Communication, Huvane, is the primary drive of all Life, from plant to animal to man—and if such exists, superman.

"Through communication Life goes on. Communication is the prime requisite to procreation. The firefly signals his mate by night, the human male entices his woman with honeyed words and is not the gift of a jewel a crystalline, enduring statement of his undying affection?"

Chelan dropped his flowery manner and went on in a more casual vein: "Huvane, boil it down to the least attractive form of simplification, no life stands alone. And no viable life goes on without communication, I shall shut off the Terran's communication."

"Then he will go rank staring, raving mad."

"No, for I shall offer him the alternative. Co-operate, or molder in utter blankness."

Huvane shrugged. "Seems to me that any Terran locked in a duralim cell so far from home the distance means nothing is already cut from communication."

"Deeper, deeper, Huvane. The brain lies prisoner within a cell of

bone. Its contact with the Outside world lies along five channels of sensory communication. Everything that the brain believes about the Universe is the product of sensory information carried inward by sight, touch, sound, taste and smell. From five basic bits of information, knowledge of the Great Truth is formed through logic and self-argument. Everything."

"But—"

"Oh, now stop. I am not expressing my own singular opinion. I believe a rather great proportion of the things that I was taught, and I was taught through the self-same five sensory channel."

"Um-m-m."

"Good. Just plain 'Um-m-m.' Now we shall shut off the Terran's channels of communication until he consents as an alternative. This, Huvane, hasn't been tried before. It may bring us the final important bit of information."

Slowly the lights went out. Jerry Markham was prepared for dark isolation, he could do nothing about it so he accepted it by the simple process of assuring himself that things were going to get worse before they got better.

The darkness became—absolute. Utter. Complete. Not even the dots and whorls and specks that are technically called "Visual noise" occurred. A level of mental alertness niggled at him; for nearly twenty-four years it had been a busy little chunk of his mind. It was that section that inspected the data for important program material and decided which was trivial and which was worthy of the Big Boy's attention. Now it was out of a job because there wasn't even a faint background count of plateau-noise to occupy its attention.

The silence grew—vast. Brain said that the solid walls were no more

than ten feet from him; ears said that he was in the precise middle of absolutely nowhere. Feeling said that the floor was under his feet, ears said that upward pressure touched his soles. Deeper grew the deadening of his ears, and orientation was lost. Feeling remained and he felt his heart beating in a hunting rhythm because the sound-feedback through the ear was gone, and the hortator had lost his audible beat.

Feeling died and he knew not whether he stood or sat or floated askew. Feeling died and with it went that delicate motor control that directs the position of muscle and limb and enables a man to place his little finger on the tip of his nose with his eyes closed.

Aside from the presence of foreign matter, the taste of a clean mouth is—tasteless. The term is relative. Jerry Markham learned what real tastelessness was. It was flat and blank and—nothingness.

Chemists tell us that air is tasteless, colorless, and odorless, but when sense is gone abruptly one realizes that the air does indeed have its aroma.

In an unemployed body the primitive sensors of the mind had nothing to do, and like a man trained to busy-ness, loafing was their hardest task. Gone was every sensory stimulus. His heart pumped from habit, not controlled by the feedback of sound or feeling. He breathed, but he did not hear the inrush of air. Brain told him to be careful of his mouth, the sharp teeth could bite the dead tongue and he could bleed to death never feeling pain nor even the swift flow of salty warmth. Habit-trained nerves caused a false tickle in his throat; he never knew whether he coughed or whether he thought that he coughed.

The sense of time deserted him when the metronome of heartbeat died. Determined Brain compromised by assuming that crude time could be kept by the function of hunger, elimination, weariness. Logical Brain pointed out that he could starve to death and feel

nothing; elimination was a sensory thing no more; weariness was of the body that brought no information anyway—and what, indeed was sleep?

Brain considered this question. Brain said, I am Jerry Markham. But is it true that no brain can think of nothing? Is it possible that "Sleep" is the condition that obtains when the body stops conveying reliable information to the brain, and then says to Hell with Everything and decides to stop thinking?

The Brain called Jerry Markham did not stop thinking. It lost its time sense, but not completely. A period of time passed, a whirlwind of thoughts and dreamlike actions went on, and then calmness came for a while.

Dreams? Now ponder the big question. Does the brain dream the dream as a sensory experience—or is a dream no more than a sequence of assorted memories? Would a dying brain expire in pleasure during a pleasant dream—or is the enjoyment of a pleasant dream only available to the after-awakened brain?

What is Man but his Memories?

In one very odd manner, the brain of Jerry Markham retained its intellectual orientation, and realized that its physical orientation was uncontrollable and undetectable and therefore of no importance. Like the lighthouse keeper who could not sleep when the diaphone did not wrneeee-hrnawwww for five seconds of each and every minute, Jerry Markham's brain was filled with a mild concern about the total lack of unimportant but habitual data. There was no speckle of light to classify and ignore, no susurrus of air molecules raining against the eardrum. Blankness replaced the smell and taste and their absence was as disturbing as a pungence or a poison. And, of course, one should feel something if it is no more than the tonus of muscle against

the mobile bones.

Communication is the prime drive of life. Cut off from external communication entirely, section A, bay 6, tier 9, row 13 hollered over to box Q, line 23, aisle F and wanted to know what was going on. The gang on the upper deck hailed the boiler room, and the crew in the bleacher seats reported that the folks in charge of C.I.C.—Communication Information Center—were sitting on their hands because they didn't have anything to do. One collection of bored brain cells stirred. They hadn't been called upon since Jerry Markham sang "*Adeste Fidelis*" in memorized Latin some fifteen years earlier and so they started the claque. Like an auditorium full of people impatient because the curtain had not gone up on time, bedlam broke loose.

Bedlam is subject to the laws of periodicity, stochastic analysis, and with some rather brilliant manipulation it can be reduced to a Fourier Series. Fourier says that Maxwell is right and goes on to define exactly when, in a series of combined periodicities of apparently random motion, all the little particles will be moving in the same direction. Stochastic analysis says that if the letter "U" follows the letter "Q" in most cases, words beginning with "Q" will have "U" for a second letter.

Jerry Markham began to think. Isolated and alone, prisoner in the cell of bone, with absolutely nothing to distract him, the Brain by common consent pounded a gavel, held a conference, appointed a chairman and settled down to do the one job that the Brain was assembled to do. In unison, ten to the sixteenth storage cells turned butter side up at the single wave of a mental flag.

He thought of his father and his mother; of his Sally. He thought of his commanding officer and of the fellows he liked and disliked. The primitive urge to communicate was upon him, because he must first establish communication before he could rise from the stony mineral stage to the exalted level of a vegetable. Bereft of his normal senses,

undistracted by trivia such as noise and pain and the inestimable vastness of information bits that must be considered and evaluated, his brain called upon his memory and provided the background details.

The measured tread of a company of marching soldiers can wreck a bridge.

The cadence of ten to the sixteenth brain cells, undivided by the distraction of incoming information, broke down a mental barrier.

As vividly as the living truth, Jerry Markham envisioned himself sauntering down the sidewalk. The breeze was on his face and the pavement was beneath his feet, the air was laden with its myriad of smells and the flavor of a cigarette was on his tongue. His eyes saw Sally running toward him, her cry of greeting was a welcome sound and the pressure of her hug was strong and physical as the taste of her lips.

Real.

She hugged his arm and said, "Your folks are waiting."

Jerry laughed. "Let the general wait a bit longer," he said. "I've got a lot to tell him."

Huvane said, "Gone!" and the sound of his voice re-echoed back and forth across the empty cell.

"Gone," repeated Chelan. "Utterly incomprehensible, but none the less a fact. But how—? Isolated, alone, imprisoned—cut off from all communication. All communication—?"

"I'll get another specimen, chief."

Chelan shook his head. "Seven times we've slapped them down.

Seven times we've watched their rise—and wondered how they did it. Seven times they would have surpassed us if we hadn't blocked them. Let them rise, let them run the Universe. They're determined to do that anyway. And now I think it's time for us to stop annoying our betters. I'd hate to face them if they were angry."

"But chief, he was cut off from all communication—?"

"Obviously," said Chelan, "not!"

THE END

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