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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STUTTERER ***

THE STUTTERER

BY R. R. MERLISS

A man can be killed by a toy gun—he can die of fright, for heart attacks can kill. What, then, is the deadly thing that must be sealed away, forever locked in buried concrete—a thing or an idea?

Illustrated by Riley



Out of the twenty only one managed to escape the planet. And he did it very simply, merely by walking up to the crowded ticket window at one of the rocket ports and buying passage to Earth. His Army identification papers passed the harassed inspection of the agent, and he gratefully and silently pocketed the small plastic stub that was handed him in exchange for his money.

He picked his way with infinite care through the hordes of ex-soldiers clamoring for passage back to the multitudinous planets from which they had come. Then he slowly climbed the heavy ramp into the waiting rocket.

He saw with relief that the seats were strongly constructed, built to survive the pressure of many gravities and he chose one as far removed as possible from the other passengers.

He was still very apprehensive, and, as he waited for the rocket to take off, he tried hard to remember the principles of the pulse drive that powered the ship, and whether his additional weight would upset its efficiency enough to awaken suspicion.

The seats filled quickly with excited hurrying passengers. Soon he heard the great door clang shut, and saw the red light flicker on, warning of the take-off. He felt a slow surge of pressure as the ship arose from the ground, and his chair creaked ominously with the extra weight. He became fearful that it might collapse, and he strained forward trying to shift some of the pressure through his feet to the floor. He sat that way, tense and immobile, for what seemed a long time until abruptly the strain was relieved and he heard the rising and falling whine of the rockets that told him the ship was in pulse drive, flickering back and forth across the speed of light.

He realized that the pilots had not discovered his extra weight, and that the initial hazards were over. The important thing was to look like a passenger, a returning soldier like the others, so that no one would notice him and remember his presence.

His fellow travelers were by this time chatting with one another, some playing cards, and others watching the teledepth screens. These were the adventurers who had flocked from all corners of

the galaxy to fight in the first national war in centuries. They were the uncivilized few who had read about battle and armed struggle in their history books and found the old stories exciting.

They paid no attention to their silent companion who sat quietly looking through the quartz windows at the diamond-bright stars, tacked against the blackness of infinity.

The fugitive scarcely moved the entire time of the passage. Finally when Earth hung out in the sky like a blue balloon, the ship cut its pulsations and swung around for a tail landing.

The atmosphere screamed through the fins of the rocket, and the continents and the countries, and then the rivers and the mountains took shape. The big ship settled down as gently as a snowflake, shuddered a few times and was quiet.

The passengers hurriedly gathered up their scattered belongings and pushed toward the exit in a great rush to be out and back on Earth.

The fugitive was the last to leave. He stayed well away from the others, being fearful that, if he should touch or brush up against someone, his identity might be recognized.

When he saw the ramp running from the ship to the ground, he was dismayed. It seemed a flimsy structure, supported only by tubular steel. Five people were walking down it, and he made a mental calculation of their weight—about eight hundred pounds he thought. He weighed five times that. The ramp was obviously never built to support such a load.

He hesitated, and then he realized that he had caught the eye of the stewardess waiting on the ground. A little panicky, he stepped out with one foot and he was horrified to feel the steel buckle. He drew back hastily and threw a quick glance at the stewardess. Fortunately at the moment she was looking down one field and waving at someone.

The ramp floor was supported by steel tubes at its edges and in its exact center. He tentatively put one foot in the middle over the support and gradually shifted his weight to it. The metal complained creakily, but held, and he slowly trod the exact center line to Earth. The stewardess' back was turned toward him as he walked off across the field toward the customhouse.

He found it comforting to have under his feet what felt like at least one yard of cement. He could step briskly and not be fearful of betraying himself.

There was one further danger: the customs inspector.

He took his place at the end of the line and waited patiently until it led him up to a desk at which a uniformed man sat, busily checking and stamping declarations and traveling papers. The official, however, did not even look up when he handed him his passport and identification.

"Human. You don't have to go through immigration," the agent said. "Do you have anything to declare?"

"N-no," the traveler said. "I d-didn't bring anything in."

"Sign the affidavit," the agent said and pushed a sheet of paper toward him.

The traveler picked up a pen from the desk and signed "Jon Hall" in a clear, perfect script.

The agent gave it a passing glance and tossed it into a wire basket.

Then he pushed his uniform cap back exposing a bald head. "You're my last customer for a while, until the rocket from Sirius comes in. Guess I might as well relax for a minute." He reached into a drawer of the desk and pulled out a package of cigarettes, of which he lit one.

"You been in the war, too?" he asked.

Hall nodded. He did not want to talk any more than he had to.

The agent studied his face.

"That's funny," he said after a minute. "I never would have picked you for one of these so-called adventurers. You're too quiet and peaceful looking. I would have put you down as a doctor or maybe a writer."

"N-no," Hall said. "I w-was in the war."

"Well, that shows you can't tell by looking at a fellow," the agent said philosophically. He handed Hall his papers. "There you are. The left door leads out to the copter field. Good luck on Earth!"

Hall pocketed the stamped documents. "Thanks," he said. "I'm glad to be here."

He walked down the wide station room to a far exit and pushed the door open. A few steps farther and he was standing on a cement path dug into a hillside.

Across the valley, bright in the noon sun lay the pine covered slopes of the Argus mountains, and at his feet the green Mojave flowering with orchards stretched far to the north and south. Between the trees, in the center of the valley, the Sacramento River rolled southward in a man-made bed of concrete and steel giving water and life to what had a century before been dry dead

earth.

There was a small outcropping of limestone near the cement walk, and he stepped over to it and sat down. He would have been happy to rest and enjoy for a few moments his escape and his triumph, but he had to let the others know so that they might have hope.

He closed his eyes and groped across the stars toward Grismet. Almost immediately he felt an impatient tug at his mind, strong because there were many clamoring at once to be heard. He counted them. There were seventeen. So one more had been captured since he had left Grismet.

"Be quiet," he told them. "I'll let you see, after a while. First I have to reach the two of us that are still free."

Obediently, the seventeen were still, and he groped some more and found another of his kind deep in an ice cave in the polar regions of Grismet.

"How goes it?" he asked.

The figure on Grismet lay stretched out at full length on the blue ice, his eyes closed. He answered without moving: "They discovered my radiation about an hour ago. Pretty soon, they'll start blasting through the ice."

The one on Earth felt the chill despair of his comrade and let go. He groped about again until he found the last one, the only other one left. He was squatting in the cellar of a warehouse in the main city of Grismet.

"Have they picked up your trail yet?" he asked.

"No," answered the one in the cellar. "They won't for a while. I've scattered depots of radiation all through the town. They'll be some time tracking them all down, before they can get to me."

In a flash of his mind, Hall revealed his escape and the one on Grismet nodded and said: "Be careful. Be very careful. You are our only hope."

Hall returned then to the seventeen, and he said with his thoughts: "All right, now you can look." Immobile in their darkness, they snatched at his mind, and as he opened his eyes, they, too, saw the splendors of the mountains and the valley, the blue sky, and the gold sun high overhead.

The new man was young, only twenty-six. He was lean and dark and very enthusiastic about his work. He sat straight in his chair waiting attentively while his superior across the desk leafed through a folder.

"Jordan. Tom Jordan," the older man finally said. "A nice old Earth name. I suppose your folks came from there."

"Yes, sir," the new man said briskly.

The chief closed the folder.

"Well," he said, "your first job is a pretty important one."

"I realize that, sir," Jordan said. "I know it's a great responsibility for a man just starting with the Commission, but I'll give it every thing I have."

The chief leaned back in his seat and scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"Normally we start a beginner like you working in a pair with an older man. But we just haven't got enough men to go around. There are eight thousand planets there"—he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder to a wall-sized map of the galaxy—"and we've got to cover every one. It seems reasonable that if he escaped this planet, he'll go to another that will by its atmosphere or its temperature give him some natural advantage over us—some place that is either burning hot or at absolute zero, or perhaps with a chlorine or sulfur dioxide atmosphere. That's why"—he hesitated a minute, but continued because he was a truthful man—"I picked you for Earth. It's the most populated of all the planets and it seems the least likely one that he would choose."

Jordan's face dropped a little bit when he heard the last piece of information, but he said: "I understand, sir, and if he's there, I'll bring him back."

The chief slouched farther back in his seat. He picked up a shard of rubidium that served as a paper weight and toyed with it.

"I guess you know most of the facts. They are made out of permallium. Have you ever seen any of the stuff?"

The new man shook his head. "I read about it though—some new alloy, isn't it?"

"Plenty new. It's the hardest stuff anybody has ever made. If you set off one hundred successive atom blasts over a lump of permallium, you might crystallize and scale maybe a micron off the surface. It will stand any temperature or pressure we can produce. That just means there's no way to destroy it."

Jordan nodded. He felt a little honored that the chief was giving him this explanation in person rather than just turning him over to one of the scientific personnel for a briefing. He did not

understand that the old man was troubled and was talking the situation through as much for his own sake as for anyone else's.

"That's the problem," the chief continued. "Essentially an indestructible machine with a built-in source of power that one can't reach. It had to be built that way—a war instrument, you know."

He stopped and looked squarely at the bright young man sitting across the desk. "This lousy war. You'd think the human race would grow up some time, wouldn't you?" He filled a pipe with imported Earth tobacco and lit it, and took a few deep puffs. "There's something else. I don't know how they do it, but they can communicate with one another over long distances. That made them very useful for military purposes.

"They are loyal to one another, too. They try to protect each other and keep one another from being captured. Do you find that surprising?"

The question caught Jordan unprepared. "Well, yes. It is, kind of—" he said. "They are only machines."

The chief closed his eyes for a moment. He seemed tired.

"Yes," he repeated, "they are only machines. Anyway, we don't know everything about them, even yet. There are still a few secret angles, I think. The men who could tell us are either dead or in hiding.

"There's one fact though that gives us a great advantage. Their brain"—he stopped on the word and considered it—"I mean their thinking apparatus gives off a very penetrating short-wave length radiation which you can pick up on your meters anywhere in a radius of two thousand miles, and you can locate the source accurately if you get within fifty miles.

"The only real problem you'll have in finding them is the confusion created by illegal atomic piles. You'd be surprised how many of them we have turned up recently. They are owned by private parties and are run illegally to keep from paying the tax on sources of power. You have to track those down, but once you get them labeled it will be clear sailing."

He stopped to take a few puffs on his pipe.

"Don't try to be a hero," he said after a few moments. "Don't get close to the thing you are hunting. None of them yet has injured any of us, but if one should want to, he could crush you to death with two fingers. Use the permallium nets and net bombs if you locate him."

He tamped his pipe out. "Well, that's it," he said.

The new man arose. "I want you to know that I appreciate the trust you have put in me."

"Sure, sure," the chief said, but it was not unfriendly. "Do you like the job?"

"It is a great opportunity," Jordan said, and he meant it.

"What do you think about what we do to them after we capture them?"

The new man shrugged. "I suppose it's the only thing to do. It's not as though they were human."

"Yeah," the chief said. "I guess so. Anyway, good luck."

Jordan arose and shook the chief's hand. However, just as he was stepping through the door, his superior asked him another question. "Did you know that one of them stutters?"

He turned back, puzzled. "Stutters? Why should he stutter? How could that be?"

The chief shook his head and started cleaning out his pipe.

"I don't know for sure. You'd better get started." He sat back in his seat and watched the back of the new man as he disappeared through the doorway.

That young fellow has a lot to learn, he thought to himself. But even so, maybe he's better off than I am. Maybe I've had too much experience. Maybe too much experience puts you back where you started from. You've done the wrong thing so many times and profited so many times from your mistakes that you see errors and tragedies in everything.

He was depressed, and he did something that usually made him feel better again. He reached under the edge of his desk and pulled a little switch that made the galactic map on the wall light up in three-dimensional depth, then he swung around in his chair so he could see it. Eight thousand planets that his race had conquered, eight thousand planets hundreds of light-years apart. Looking at the map gave him a sense of accomplishment and pride in humanity which even a stupid war and its aftermath could not completely destroy.

Jon Hall, the fugitive, walked along the highway leading south from the rocket port. There was very little traffic, only an occasional delivery truck carrying meat or groceries. The real highway was half a mile overhead where the copters shuttled back and forth up and down the state in neat orderly layers.

The seventeen were inside his head, looking through his eyes, and feasting on the blueness of the sky, and the rich green vegetation that covered the fertile fields. From time to time they talked to him, giving advice, asking questions, or making comments, but mostly they looked, each knowing that the hours of their sight might be very few.

After walking a while, Hall became aware of someone's footsteps behind him. He stopped suddenly in apprehension and swung around. A dozen or so paces away was a red-headed boy of about ten or eleven, dressed in plastic overalls, and carrying a basket of ripe raspberries. The stains about his mouth showed that not all the raspberries were carried in the basket.

Hall's anxiety faded, and he was glad to see the child. He had hoped to meet someone who was not so old that they would become suspicious, but old enough that they might give him directions.

He waited for the lad to catch up.

"Hello," the boy said. "I've been walking behind you most of a mile, but I guess you didn't hear me."

"It looks as though you've been p-p-picking raspberries," Hall said.

"Yup. My dad owns a patch by the river. Want some?" He proffered the basket.

"No, thank you," Hall answered. He resumed his walk up the highway with the boy at his side.

"D-do you live around here," he asked.

"Just up the road a ways." The lad studied his companion for a minute. "You stutter, don't you?"

"A little."

"There was a boy in my class who used to stutter. The teacher said it was because he thought so far ahead of what he said he got all tangled up." The boy reached in his basket for a handful of berries and chewed them thoughtfully. "She was always after him to talk slower, but I guess it didn't do any good. He still stutters."

"Is there a p-power plant around here?" Hall asked. "You know, where the electricity comes from."

"You mean the place where they have the nu-nuclear fission"—the boy stumbled on the unfamiliar word, but got it out—"and they don't let you in because you get poisoned or something?"

"Yes, I think that's it."

"There are two places. There's one over at Red Mountain and another over at Ballarat."

"Where are they?"

"Well—" The boy stopped to think. "Red Mountain's straight ahead, maybe ten miles, and Ballarat's over there"—he pointed west across the orange groves—"maybe fifteen miles."

"Good," Hall said. "Good." And he felt glad inside of himself. Maybe it could be done, he thought.

They walked along together. Hall sometimes listening to the chattering of the boy beside him, sometimes listening to and answering the distant voices of the seventeen. Abruptly, a few hundred yards before the house that the boy had pointed out as his father's, a small sports car whipped down the highway, coming on them almost without warning. The lad jumped sideways, and Hall, to avoid touching him, stepped off the concrete road. His leg sank into the earth up to the mid-calf. He pulled it out as quickly as he could.

The boy was looking at the fast retreating rear of the sports car.

"Gee," he said. "I sure didn't see them coming." Then he caught sight of the deep hole alongside the road, and he stared at it. "Gosh, you sure made a footprint there," he said wonderingly.

"The ground was soft," Hall said. "C-come along."

But instead of following, the boy walked over to the edge of the road and stared into the hole. He tentatively stamped on the earth around it. "This ground isn't soft," he said. "It's hard as a rock." He turned and looked at Hall with big eyes.

Hall came close to the boy and took hold of his jacket. "D-don't pay any attention to it, son. I just stepped into a soft spot."

The boy tried to pull away. "I know who you are," he said. "I heard about you on the teledepth."

Suddenly, in the way of children, panic engulfed him and he flung his basket away and threw himself back and forth, trying to tear free. "Let me go," he screamed. "Let me go. Let me go."

"Just l-listen to me, son," Hall pleaded. "Just listen to me. I won't hurt you."

But the boy was beyond reasoning. Terror stricken, he screamed at the top of his voice, using all his little strength to escape.

"If you p-promise to l-listen to me, I'll let you go," Hall said.

"I promise," the boy sobbed, still struggling.

But the moment Hall let go of his coat, he tore away and ran as fast as he could over the adjacent field.

"W-wait—don't run away," Hall shouted. "I won't hurt you. Stay where you are. I couldn't follow you anyway. I'd sink to my hips."

The logic of the last sentence appealed to the frightened lad. He hesitated and then stopped and turned around, a hundred feet or so from the highway.

"L-listen," said Hall earnestly. "The teledpths are wr-wrong. They d-didn't tell you the t-truth about us. I d-don't want to hurt anyone. All I n-need is a few hours. D-don't tell anyone for j-just a few hours and it'll be all right." He paused because he didn't know what to say next.

The boy, now that he seemed secure from danger had recovered his wits. He plucked a blade of grass from the ground and chewed on an end of it, looking for all the world like a grownup farmer thoughtfully considering his fields. "Well, I guess you could have hurt me plenty, but you didn't," he said. "That's something."

"Just a few hours," Hall said. "It won't take long. Y-you can tell your father tonight."

The boy suddenly remembered his raspberries when he saw his basket and its spilled contents on the highway.

"Why don't you go along a bit," he said. "I would like to pick up those berries I dropped."

"Remember," Hall said, "just a few hours." He turned and started walking again toward Red Mountain. Inside his mind, the seventeen asked anxiously, "Do you think he'll give the alarm? Will he report your presence?"



Back on the highway, the boy was gathering the berries back into his basket while he tried to make his mind up.

Jordan reached Earth atmosphere about two o'clock in the afternoon. He immediately reported in to the Terrestrial police force, and via the teledpth screen spoke with a bored lieutenant. The lieutenant, after listening to Jordan's account of his mission, assured him without any particular enthusiasm of the willingness of the Terrestrial forces to coöperate, and of more value, gave him the location of all licensed sources of radiation in the western hemisphere.

The galactic agent set eagerly to work, and in the next several hours uncovered two unlisted radiation sources, both of which he promptly investigated. In one case, north of Eugene, he found in the backyard of a metal die company a small atomic pile. The owner was using it as an illegal generator of electricity, and when he saw Jordan snooping about with his detection instruments, he immediately offered the agent a sizable bribe. It was a grave mistake since Jordan filed charges against him, via teledpth, not only for evading taxes, but also for attempted bribery.

The second strike seemed more hopeful. He picked up strong radiation in a rather barren area of Montana; however when he landed, he found that it was arising from the earth itself. From a short conversation with the local authorities, he learned that the phenomenon was well known: an atomic fission plant had been destroyed at that site during the Third World War.

He was flying over the lovely blue water of Lake Bonneville, when his teledpth screen flickered. He flipped the switch on and the lieutenant's picture flooded in.

"I have a call I think you ought to take," the Earth official said. "It seems as though it might be in your line. It's from a sheriff in a small town in California. I'll have the operator plug him in."

Abruptly the picture switched to that of a stout red-faced man wearing the brown uniform of a county peace officer.

"You're the galactic man?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes. My name is Tom Jordan," Jordan said.

"Mine's Berkhammer." It must have been warm in California because the sheriff pulled out a large handkerchief and mopped his brow. When he was done with that he blew his nose loudly. "Hay fever," he announced.

"Want to see my credentials?"

"Oh sure, sure," the sheriff hastily replied. He scrutinized the card and badge that Jordan displayed. After a moment, he said, "I don't know why I'm looking at those. They might be fakes for all I know. Never saw them before and I'll probably never see them again."

"They're genuine."

"The deuce with formality," the sheriff said heavily. "There's some kid around here who thinks he saw that ... that machine you're supposed to be looking for."

"When was that?" Jordan asked.

"About four hours ago. Here, I'll let you talk to him yourself." He pulled his big bulk to one side, and a boy and his father walked into the picture. The boy was red-eyed, as though he had been crying. The father was a tall, stoop-shouldered farmer, dressed like his son in plastic overalls.

The sheriff patted the boy on the back. "Come on, Jimmy. Tell the man what you saw."

"I saw him," the boy said sullenly. "I walked up the highway with him."

Jordan leaned forward toward the screen.

"How did you know who he was?"

"I knew because when he stepped on the ground, he sank into it up to his knee. He tried to say the ground was soft, but it was hard. I know it was hard."

"Why did you wait so long to tell anybody?" Jordan asked softly.

The boy looked at him with defiance and dislike in his eyes and kept his small mouth clamped shut.

His father nudged him roughly in the ribs.

"Answer the man," he commanded.

Jimmy looked down at his shoes.

"Because he asked me not to tell for a while," he said curtly.

"Stubborn as nails," the father said not without pride in his voice. "Got more loyalty to a lousy machine than to the whole human race."

"Which way did he go, Jimmy?"

"Toward Red Mountain. I think maybe to the power house. He asked me where it was."

"What do you think he wants with that?" the sheriff asked of Jordan.

Jordan shrugged and shook his head.

"Maybe it's all in the kid's head," the sheriff suggested. "These wild teledepth programs they look at give them all kinds of ideas."

"It isn't in my head," Jimmy said violently. "I saw him. He stepped on the ground and stuck his foot into it. I talked to him. And I know something else. He stutters."

"What?" said the sheriff. "Now I know you're lying."

The father started dragging the boy by the arm. "Come on home, Jimmy. You got one more licking coming."

Jordan, however, was sure the boy was not lying. "Leave him alone," he said. "He's right. He did see him." He took a fast look at the timepiece on his panel board. "I'll be down in an hour and a half. Wait for me."

He flicked the switch off, and kicked up the motors. The ship shot southward almost as rapidly as a projectile.

He had topped the Sierras and had just turned into the great central valley of California when, with the impact of a blow, a frightening thought occurred to him.

He flicked the screen on again, and he caught the sheriff sitting behind his desk industriously scratching himself in one armpit.

"Listen," Jordan said, speaking very fast. "You've got to send out a national alarm. You must get every man you can down to the power plant. You've got to stop him from getting in."

The sheriff stopped scratching himself and stared at Jordan.

"What are you so het up about, young man?"

"Do it, and do it now," Jordan almost shouted. "He'll tear the pile apart and let the hafnium go off. It'll blow half the state off the planet."

The sheriff was unperturbed. "Mr. Star boy," he said sarcastically, "any grammar school kid knows that if someone came within a hundred yards of one of those power-house piles, he'd burn like a match stick. And besides why would he want to blow himself to pieces?"

"He's made out of permallium." Jordan was shouting now.

The sheriff suddenly grew pale. "Get off my screen. I'm calling Sacramento."

Jordan set the ship for maximum speed, well beyond the safety limit. He kept peering ahead into the dusk, momentarily fearful that the whole countryside would light up in one brilliant flash. In a few minutes he was sweating and trembling with the tension.

Over Walnut Grove, he recognized the series of dams, reservoirs and water-lifts where the Sacramento was raised up out of its bed and turned south. For greater speed, he came close to Earth, flying at emergency height, reserved ordinarily for police, firemen, doctors and ambulances. He set his course by sight following the silver road of the river, losing it for ten or fifteen miles at a time where it passed through subterranean tunnels, picking it up again at the surface, always shooting south as fast as the atmosphere permitted.

At seven thirty, when the sun had finally set, he sighted the lights of Red Mountain, and he cut his speed and swung in to land. There was no trouble picking out the power plant; it was a big dome-shaped building surrounded by a high wall. It was so brilliantly lit up, that it stood out like a beacon, and there were several hundred men milling about before it.

He settled down on the lawn inside the walls, and the sheriff came bustling up, a little more red in the face than usual.

"I've been trying to figure for the last hour what the devil I would do to stop him if he decided to come here," Berkhammer said.

"He's not here then?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Not a sign of him. We've gone over the place three times."

Jordan settled back in relief, sitting down in the open doorway of his ship. "Good," he said wearily.

"Good!" the sheriff exploded. "I don't know whether I'd rather have him show up or not. If this whole business is nothing more than the crazy imagination of some kid who ought to get tanned and a star-cop with milk behind his ears, I'm really in the soup. I've sent out an alarm and I've got the whole state jumping. There's a full mechanized battalion of state troops waiting in there." He pointed toward the power plant. "They've got artillery and tanks all around the place."

Jordan jumped down out of the ship. "Let's see what you've got set up here. In the meantime, stop fretting. I'd rather see you fired than vaporized along with fifty million other people."

"I guess you're right there," Berkhammer conceded, "but I don't like to have anyone make a fool out of me."

At Ballarat, an old man, Eddie Yudovich, was the watchman and general caretaker of the electrical generation plant. Actually, his job was a completely unnecessary one, since the plant ran itself. In its very center, buried in a mine of graphite were the tubes of hafnium, from whose nuclear explosions flowed a river of electricity without the need of human thought or direction.

He had worked for the company for a long time and when he became crippled with arthritis, the directors gave him the job so that he might have security in his latter years.

Yudovich, however, was a proud old man, and he never once acknowledged to himself or to anyone else that his work was useless. He guarded and checked the plant as though it were the storehouse of the Terrestrial Treasury. Every hour punctually, he made his rounds through the building.

At approximately seven thirty he was making his usual circuit when he came to the second level. What he discovered justified all the years of punctilious discharge of his duties. He was startled to see a man kneeling on the floor, just above where the main power lines ran. He had torn a hole

in the composition floor, and as Yudovich watched, he reached in and pulled out the great cable. Immediately the intruder glowed in the semidarkness with an unearthly blue shine and sparkles cracked off of his face, hands and feet.

Yudovich stood rooted to the floor. He knew very well that no man could touch that cable and live. But as he watched, the intruder handled it with impunity, pulling a length of wire out of his pocket and making some sort of a connection.

It was too much for the old man. Electricity was obviously being stolen. He roared out at the top of his voice, and stumped over to the wall where he threw the alarm switch. Immediately, a hundred arc lights flashed on, lighting the level brighter than the noon sun, and a tremendously loud siren started wailing its warning to the whole countryside.

The intruder jumped up as though he had been stabbed. He dropped the wires, and after a wild look around him, he ran at full speed toward the far exit.

"Hold on there," Yudovich shouted and tried to give chase, but his swollen, crooked knees almost collapsed with the effort.

His eyes fell on a large wrench lying on a worktable, and he snatched it up and threw it with all his strength. In his youth he had been a ball player with some local fame as a pitcher, and in his later life, he was addicted to playing horseshoes. His aim was, therefore, good, and the wrench sailed through the air striking the runner on the back of the head. Sparks flew and there was a loud metallic clang, the wrench rebounding high in the air. The man who was struck did not even turn his head, but continued his panicky flight and was gone in a second.

When he realized there was no hope of effecting a capture, Yudovich stumped over to see the amount of the damage. A hole had been torn in the floor, but the cable itself was intact.

Something strange caught his attention. Wherever the intruder had put his foot down, there were many radiating cracks in the composition floor, just as though someone had struck a sheet of ice with a sledge hammer.

"I'll be danged," he said to himself. "I'll be danged and double danged."

He turned off the alarm and then went downstairs to the teledisplay screen to notify the sheriff's office.

A few hundred yards from the powerhouse, Jon Hall stood in the darkness, listening to the voices of his fellows. There were eighteen of them, not seventeen, for a short while before the one in the ice cave had been captured, and they railed at him with a bitter hopeless anger.

He looked toward the bright lights of the powerhouse, considering whether he should return. "It's too late," said one of them. "The alarm is already out." "Go into the town and mix with the people," another suggested. "If you stay within a half mile of the hafnium pile, the detection man will not be able to pick up your radiation and maybe you will have a second chance."

They all assented in that, and Hall, weary of making his own decisions turned toward the town. He walked through a tree-lined residential street, the houses with neatly trimmed lawns, and each with a copter parked on the roof. In almost every house the teledisplay screens were turned on and he caught snatches of bulletins about himself: "... Is known to be in the Mojave area." "... About six feet in height and very similar to a human being. When last seen, he was dressed in—" "Governor Leibowitz has promised speedy action and attorney general Markle has stated—"

The main street of Ballarat was brilliantly lighted. Many of the residents, aroused by the alarm from the powerhouse, were out, standing in small groups in front of the stores and talking excitedly to one another.

He hesitated, unwilling to walk through the bright street, but uncertain where to turn. Two men talking loudly came around the corner suddenly and he stepped back into a store entrance to avoid them. They stopped directly in front of him. One of them, an overalled farm hand from his looks, said, "He killed a kid just a little while ago. My brother-in-law heard it."

"Murderer," the other said viciously.

The farmer turned his head and his glance fell on Hall. "Well, a new face in town," he said after a moment's inspection. "Say I bet you're a reporter from one of the papers, aren't you?"

Hall came out of the entrance and tried to walk around the two men, but the farmer caught him by the sleeve.

"A reporter, huh? Well, I got some news for you. That thing from Grismet just killed a kid."

Hall could restrain himself no longer.

"That's a lie," he said coldly.

The farmer looked him up and down.

"What do you know about it," he demanded. "My brother-in-law got it from somebody in the state guard."

"It's still a lie."

"Just because it's not on the teledisplay, you say it's a lie," the farmer said belligerently. "Not everything is told on the teledisplay, Mr. Wiseheimer. They're keeping it a secret. They don't want to scare the people."

Hall started to walk away, but the farmer blocked his path.

"Who are you anyway? Where do you live? I never saw you before," he said suspiciously.

"Aw, Randy," his companion said, "don't go suspecting everybody."

"I don't like anyone to call me a liar."

Hall stepped around the man in his path, and turned down the street. He was boiling inside with an almost uncontrollable fury.

A few feet away, catastrophe suddenly broke loose. A faulty section of the sidewalk split without warning under his feet and he went pitching forward into the street. He clutched desperately at the trunk of a tall palm tree, but with a loud snap, it broke, throwing him head on into a parked road car. The entire front end of the car collapsed like an egg shell under his weight.

For a long moment, the entire street was dead quiet. With difficulty, Hall pulled himself to his feet. Pale, astonished faces were staring at him from all sides.

Suddenly the farmer started screaming. "That's him. I knew it. That's him." He was jumping up and down with excitement.

Hall turned his back and walked in the other direction. The people in front of him faded away, leaving a clear path.

He had gone a dozen steps when a man with a huge double-barreled shotgun popped out from a store front just ahead. He aimed for the middle of Hall's chest and fired both barrels.

The blast and the shot struck Hall squarely, burning a large hole in his shirt front. He did not change his pace, but continued step by step.

The man with the gun snatched two shells out of his pocket and frantically tried to reload. Hall reached out and closed his hand over the barrel of the gun and the blue steel crumpled like wet paper.

From across the street, someone was shooting at him with a rifle. Several times a bullet smacked warmly against his head or his back.

He continued walking slowly up the street. At its far end several men appeared dragging a small howitzer—probably the only piece in the local armory. They scurried around it, trying to get it aimed and loaded.

"Fools. Stupid fools," Hall shouted at them.

The men could not seem to get the muzzle of the gun down, and when he was a dozen paces from it they took to their heels. He tore the heavy cannon off of its carriage and with one blow of his fist caved it in. He left it lying in the street broken and useless.

Almost as suddenly as it came, his anger left him. He stopped and looked back at the people cringing in the doorways.

"You poor, cruel fools," Hall said again.

He sat down in the middle of the street on the twisted howitzer barrel and buried his head in his hands. There was nothing else for him to do. He knew that in just a matter of seconds, the ships with their permallium nets and snares would be on him.

Since Jordan's ship was not large enough to transport Jon Hall's great weight back to Grismet, the terrestrial government put at the agent's disposal a much heavier vessel, one room of which had been hastily lined with permallium and outfitted as a prison cell. A pilot by the name of Wilkins went with the ship. He was a battered old veteran, given to cigar smoking, clandestine drinking and card playing.

The vessel took off, rose straight through the atmosphere for about forty miles, and then hung, idly circling Earth, awaiting clearance before launching into the pulse drive. A full course between Earth and Grismet had to be plotted and cleared by the technicians at the dispatch center because the mass of the vessel increased so greatly with its pulsating speed that if any two ships passed within a hundred thousand miles of each other, they would at least be torn from their course, and might even be totally destroyed.

Wilkins had proposed a pinochle game, and he and Jordan sat playing in the control room.

The pilot had been winning and he was elated. "Seventy-six dollars so far," he announced after some arithmetic. "The easiest day's pay I made this month."

Jordan shuffled the cards and dealt them out, three at a time. He was troubled by his own thoughts, and so preoccupied that he scarcely followed the game.

"Spades, again," the pilot commented gleefully. "Well, ain't that too bad for you." He gave his cigar a few chomps and played a card.

Jordan had been looking out of the window. The ship had tilted and he could see without rising the rim of Earth forming a beautiful geometric arc, hazy and blue in its shimmering atmosphere.

"Come on, play," the pilot said, impatiently. "I just led an ace."

Jordan put down his cards. "I guess I better quit," he said.

"What the devil!" the pilot said angrily. "You can't quit like that in the middle of a deal. I got a flush and aces."

"I'm sorry," Jordan said, "but I'm going to lie down in my cabin until we are given clearance."

He opened the door of the little room and went into the hall. He walked down past his own cabin and stopped in front of another door, a new one that was sheathed in permallium. He hesitated a few moments; then he snapped open the outside latch and walked in, letting the door swing closed behind him.

Hall lay unmoving in the middle of the floor, his legs and arms fastened in greaves of permallium.

Jordan was embarrassed. He did not look directly at the robot.

"I don't know whether you want to talk to me or not," he started. "If you don't want to, that's all right. But, I've followed you since you landed on Earth, and I don't understand why you did what you did. You don't have to tell me, but I wish you would. It would make me feel better."

The robot shrugged—a very human gesture, Jordan noted.

"G-go ahead and ask me," he said. "It d-doesn't make any difference now."

Jordan sat down on the floor. "The boy was the one who gave you away. If not for him, no one would have ever known what planet you were on. Why did you let the kid get away?"

The robot looked straight at the agent. "Would you kill a child?" he asked.

"No, of course not," Jordan said a little bit annoyed, "but I'm not a robot either." He waited for a further explanation, but when he saw none was coming, he said: "I don't know what you were trying to do in that powerhouse at Ballarat, but, whatever it was, that old man couldn't have stopped you. What happened?"

"I l-lost my head," the robot said quietly. "The alarm and the lights rattled me, and I got into a p-panic."

"I see," said Jordan, frustrated, not really seeing at all. He sat back and thought for a moment. "Let me put it this way. Why do you stutter?"

Hall smiled a wry smile. "Th-that used to be a m-military secret," he said. "It's our one weakness—the one Achilles heel in a m-machine that was meant to be invulnerable."

He struggled to a sitting position. "You see, we were m-made as s-soldiers and had to have a certain loyalty to the country that m-made us. Only living things are loyal—machines are not. We had to think like human beings."

Jordan's brows contracted as he tried to understand the robot.

"You mean you have a transplanted human brain?" he asked incredulously.

"In a way," Hall said. "Our b-brains are permallium strips on which the mind of some human donor was m-magnetically imprinted. My mind was copied f-from a man who stuttered and who got panicky when the going got rough, and who couldn't kill a child no matter what was at s-stake."

Jordan felt physically ill. Hall was human and he was immortal. And according to galactic decree, he, like his fellows, was to be manacled in permallium and fixed in a great block of cement, and that block was to be dropped into the deep silent depths of the Grismet ocean, to be slowly covered by the blue sediment that gradually filters down through the miles of ocean water to stay immobile and blind for countless millions of years.

Jordan arose to his feet. He could think of nothing further to say.

He stopped, however, with the door half open, and asked: "One more question—what did you want with the electrical generator plants on Earth?"



Slowly and without emotion Hall told him, and when he understood, he became even sicker.

He went across to his cabin and stood for a while looking out the window. Then he lit a cigarette and lay down on his bunk thinking. After a time, he put out the cigarette and walked into the hall where he paced up and down.

As he passed the cell door for about the tenth time, he suddenly swung around and lifted the latch and entered. He went over to the robot, and with a key that he took from his pocket, he unlocked the greaves and chains.

"There's no point in keeping you bound up like this," he said. "I don't think you're very dangerous." He put the key back in his pocket.

"I suppose you know that this ship runs on an atomic pile," he said in a conversational tone of voice. "The cables are just under the floor in the control room and they can be reached through a little trap door."

Jordan looked directly into Hall's face. The robot was listening with great intentness.

"Well," the agent said, "we'll probably be leaving Earth's atmosphere in about fifteen minutes. I think I'll go play pinochle with the pilot."

He carefully left the door of the cell unlatched as he left. He walked to the control room and found Wilkins, a dry cigar butt clenched between his teeth, absorbed in a magazine.

"Let's have another game," Jordan said. "I want some of that seventy-six dollars back."

Wilkins shook his head. "I'm in the middle of a good story here. Real sexy. I'll play you after we take off."

"Nothing doing," Jordan said sharply. "Let's play right now."

Wilkins kept reading. "We got an eighteen-hour flight in front of us. You have lots of time."

The agent snatched the magazine out of his hands. "We're going to play right now in my cabin," he said.

"You quit when I have aces and a flush, and now you come back and want to play again. That's not sportsmanlike," Wilkins complained, but he allowed himself to be led back to Jordan's cabin. "I never saw anybody so upset about losing a miserable seventy-six bucks," was his final comment.

The robot lay perfectly still until he heard the door to Jordan's cabin slam shut, and then he arose as quietly as he could and stole out into the hall. The steel of the hall floor groaned, but bore his weight, and carefully, trembling with excitement inside of his ponderous metallic body, he made his way to the control room. He knelt and lifted the little trap door and found the naked power cable, pulsating with electrical current.

In a locker under the panel board he found a length of copper wire. It was all he needed for the necessary connection.

Since his capture, his fellows on Grismet had been silent with despair, but as he knelt to close the circuit, their minds flooded in on him and he realized with a tremendous horror that there were now nineteen, that all except he had been bound and fixed in their eternal cement prisons.

"We are going to have our chance," he told them. "We won't have much time, but we will have our chance."

He closed the circuit and a tremendous tide of electric power flowed into his head. Inside that two-inch shell of permallium was a small strip of metal tape on whose electrons and atoms were written the borrowed mind of a man. Connected to the tape was a minute instrument for receiving and sending electromagnetic impulses—the chain by which the mind of one robot was tied to that of another.

The current surged in and the tiny impulses swelled in strength and poured out through the hull of the ship in a great cone that penetrated Earth's atmosphere in a quadrant that extended from Baffin land to Omaha, and from Hawaii to Labrador. The waves swept through skin and bone and entered the sluggish gelatinous brain of sentient beings, setting up in those organs the same thoughts and pictures that played among the electrons of the permallium strip that constituted Jon Hall's mind.

All nineteen clamored to be heard, for Hall to relay their voices to Earth, but he held them off and first he told his story.

The Casseiopeian delegate to the Galactic Senate was at the moment finishing his breakfast. He was small and furry, not unlike a very large squirrel, and he sat perched on a high chair eating salted roast almonds of which he was very fond.

Suddenly a voice started talking inside of his head, just as it did at that very second inside the heads of thirteen billion other inhabitants of the northwest corner of Earth. The Casseiopeian delegate was so startled that he dropped the dish of almonds, his mouth popping open, his tiny red tongue inside flickering nervously. He listened spellbound.

The voice told him of the war on Grismet and of the permallium constructed robots, and of the cement blocks. This, however, he already knew, because he had been one of the delegates to the Peace Conference who had decided to dispose of the robots. The voice, however, also told him things he did not know, such as the inability of the robots to commit any crime that any other sane human being would not commit, of their very simple desire to be allowed to live in peace, and most of all of their utter horror for the fate a civilized galaxy had decreed for them.

When the voice stopped, the Casseiopeian delegate was a greatly shaken little being.

Back on the ship, Hall opened the circuit to the nineteen, and they spoke in words, in memory pictures and in sensations.

A copter cab driver was hurrying with his fare from Manhattan to Oyster Bay. Suddenly, in his mind, he became a permallium robot. He was bound with cables of the heavy metal, and was suspended upside down in a huge cement block. The stone pressed firmly on his eyes, his ears, and his chest. He was completely immobile, and worst of all, he knew that above his head for six miles lay the great Grismet Ocean, with the blue mud slowly settling down encasing the cement in a stony stratum that would last till the planet broke apart.

The cab driver gasped: "What the hell." His throat was so dry he could scarcely talk. He turned around to his fare, and the passenger, a young man, was pale and trembling.

"You seeing things, too?" the driver asked.

"I sure am," the fare said unsteadily. "What a thing to do."

For fifteen minutes, over the northwest quadrant of Earth, the words and the pictures went out, and thirteen billion people knew suddenly what lay in the hearts and minds of nineteen robots.

A housewife in San Rafael was at the moment in a butcher shop buying meat for her family. As the thoughts and images started pouring into her mind, she remained stock-still, her package of meat forgotten on the counter. The butcher, wiping his bloodied hands on his apron froze in that position, an expression of horror and incredulity on his face.

When the thoughts stopped coming in, the butcher was the first to come out of the trancelike state.

"Boy," he said, "that's sure some way of sending messages. Sure beats the teledepths."

The housewife snatched her meat off the counter. "Is that all you think of," she demanded angrily.

"That's a terrible thing that those barbarians on Grismet are doing to those ... those people. Why didn't they tell us that they were human." She stalked out of the shop, not certain what she would do, but determined to do something.

In the ship Hall reluctantly broke off the connection and replaced the trap door. Then he went

back to his cell and locked himself in. He had accomplished his mission; its results now lay in the opinions of men.

Jordan left the ship immediately on landing, and took a copter over to the agency building. His conversation with his superior was something he wanted to get over with as soon as possible.

The young woman at the secretary's desk looked at him coldly and led him directly into the inner office. The chief was standing up in front of the map of the galaxy, his hands in his pockets, his eyes an icy blue.

"I've been hearing about you," he said without a greeting.

Jordan sat down. He was tense and jumpy but tried not to show it. "I suppose you have," he said, adding, after a moment, "Sir."

"How did that robot manage to break out of his cell and get to the power source on the ship in the first place?"

"He didn't break out," Jordan said slowly. "I let him out."

"I see," the chief said, nodding. "You let him out. I see. No doubt you had your reasons."

"Yes, I did. Look—" Jordan wanted to explain, but he could not find the words. It would have been different if the robots' messages had reached Grismet; he would not have had to justify himself then. But they had not, and he could not find a way to tell this cold old man of what he had learned about the robots and their unity with men. "I did it because it was the only decent thing to do."

"I see," the chief said. "You did it because you have a heart." He leaned suddenly forward, both hands on his desk. "It's good for a man to have a heart and be compassionate. He's not worth anything if he isn't. But"—and he shook his finger at Jordan as he spoke—"that man is going to be compassionate at his own expense, not at the expense of the agency. Do you understand that?"

"I certainly do," Jordan answered, "but you have me wrong if you think I'm here to make excuses or to apologize. Now, if you will get on with my firing, sir, I'll go home and have my supper."

The chief looked at him for a long minute. "Don't you care about your position in the agency?" he asked quietly.

"Sure I do," Jordan said almost roughly. "It's the work I wanted to do all my life. But, as you said, what I did, I did at my own expense. Look, sir, I don't like this any better than you do. Why don't you fire me and let me go home? Your prisoner's safely locked up in the ship."

For answer the chief tossed him a stellogram. Jordan glanced at the first few words and saw that it was from Galactic Headquarters on Earth. He put it back on the desk without reading it through.

"I know that I must have kicked up a fuss. You don't have to spell it out for me."

"Read it," the chief said impatiently.

Jordan took back the stellogram and examined it. It read.

To: Captain Lawrence Macrae Detection Agency, Grismet.

From: Prantal Aminopterin Delegate from Casseiopeia Chairman, Grismet
Peace Committee of the Galactic Senate.

Message: You are hereby notified that the committee by a vote of 17-0 has decided to rescind its order of January 18, 2214, directing the disposal of the permallium robots of Grismet. Instead, the committee directs that you remove from their confinement all the robots and put them in some safe place where they will be afforded reasonable and humane treatment.

The committee will arrive in Grismet some time during the next month to decide on permanent disposition.

Jordan's heart swelled as he read the gram. "It worked," he said. "They have changed their minds. It won't be so bad being discharged now." He put the paper back on the desk and arose to go.

The chief smiled and it was like sunlight suddenly flooding over an arctic glacier. "Discharged? Now who's discharging you? I'd sooner do without my right arm."

He reached in a desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of old Earth bourbon and two glasses. He carefully poured out a shot into each glass, and handed one to Jordan.

"I like a man with a heart, and if you get away with it, why then you get away with it. And that's just what you've done."

He sat down and started sipping his whisky. Jordan stood uncertainly above him, his glass in his hand.

"Sit down, son," the old man said. "Sit down and tell me about your adventures on Earth."

Jordan sat down, put his feet on the desk and took a sizable swallow of his whisky.

"Well, Larry," he started, "I got into Earth atmosphere about 2:40 o'clock—"

THE END

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