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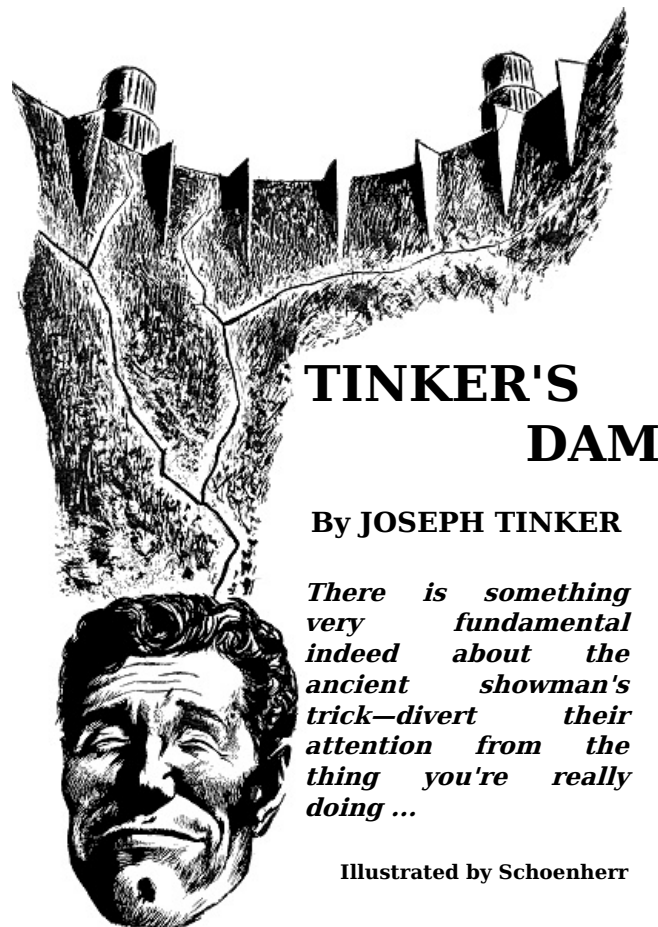
Author: Joseph Tinker
Illustrator: John Schoenherr

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TINKER'S DAM ***



HE call on the TV-phone came right in the middle of my shaving. They have orders not to call me before breakfast for anything less than a national calamity. I pressed "Accept," too startled to take the lather from my face.

"Hi, Gyp," George Kelly said to me from the screen. "Hurry it up, boy." He made no reference to my appearance on his screen. "Quit draggin' your feet!"

This I take from George Kelly. First of all, he's Director of the F.B.I. Even more important, he's my boss. "Hey, George," I protested, knowing he would not have called on a routine matter. "I got up before breakfast as it is. What's up?" I hardly needed to ask. When they call me, it's always the same sickening kind of trouble.

"Fred Plaiice and his gang got their hands on a telepath in the District last night," George told me. "It's been on the newscast already. There'll be a damned ugly mob at the office—a lynch mob. Listen, Gyp, I want you to go through the main entrance this morning."

I nodded my willingness to fight my way through the crowd that would be gathering at the office.

Usually I have my taxi drop me on the roof of the building. Call it a petty vanity if you want. It's one of the perquisites of being Washington brass.

"Swell, Gyp," George Kelly said, as if there had been any question about whether I'd come in through the main entrance. "The public has a world of confidence in you. Now, damn it, Gyp, if they want to make a fuss over you this morning, let them. We've got to get that snake out of the building alive!"

"Oh, no," I protested. "You don't mean Fred took a telepath to the office?"

"I'm afraid so," George said, his tone so neutral that I couldn't take it as personal criticism. "See you down there." His rugged features faded from the screen as he cut the image.

I had my driver drop the skim-copter to the street when we got to Pennsylvania Avenue within a block of the building, and he skimmed to the outskirts of the crowd that was pressing around the entrance. There were four or five hundred people there, milling around like a herd of restless cattle. Tighter knots of humanity were pressed around the usual four or five firebrands who were ranting and yelling for blood—telepathic blood.

The guards around the entrance, apparently tipped by George Kelly, started yelling, "Let him through!" They charged the mob to open a lane for me. The crowd drew back sullenly. As I pressed toward the guards, I could see the fear and panic on the faces around me.

Then a man recognized me. "God bless Gyp Tinker!" he bellowed in a voice loud enough to conjure an echo out of a prairie. People started jumping like so many animated pogo sticks, trying to get a sight of me over the heads of others. By the time I reached the steps, the whole mob was cheering and yelling, "Gyp!"

As George Kelly had asked, I paused on the steps and held up my hands for a chance to speak. It's flattering when they give you silence. In the space of two breaths it was like the inside of a morgue.

"Thanks, friends," I called out to them. "George Kelly and I have already gotten the facts on the telepath who was captured here in Washington last night. There is absolutely no cause for alarm. I hope you'll go to your homes and offices promptly. Let's not give the Russians any more satisfaction than we have to. And rest easy, friends. We'll use the full summary powers conferred by Congress."

They gave me a terrific cheer. You'd think I had said something. At least they were reminded of the summary powers granted the F.B.I. to deal with telepaths, because of the gruesome danger they are to all of us.

Anita Hadley, my secretary, was waiting for me in the outer office, although it was a good hour before we were supposed to open.

"He's in there," she said, pointing to the door to my private office.

"The snake?" I asked, startled.

"Fred Plaice," she said. "And he's got the snake in there with him." Her gray eyes flashed. She could guess how I felt about that.

"Come along," I said to her, and went into my office.

"Hi, Gyp," Fred Plaice greeted me, grinning. "Got a present for you." He gave his prisoner a shove, making him stumble a couple steps toward me. The telepath was a stoop-shouldered balding gent with large feet. He certainly didn't look like a walking bubonic plague, but then, they never do. Instinctively I closed my thoughts to him.

"What's this snake doing here, Fred?" I asked my Section Chief quietly.

He flushed. He knew my policies. "What did you expect me to do with him?" he said hotly. "This isn't some common snake we picked up out in the country. We snagged this viper right here in Washington, Gyp! I suppose I should have spirited him out of town on the midnight jet!"

"Yes," I said. "That would have been my idea. Do you realize that all this publicity has gotten us a mob of five hundred people around our doors, a mob that's waiting to lynch this prisoner of yours?"

The man gulped and started to say something, but Fred hit him hard between the shoulder blades. "Shut up," he said. "Nobody cares what you think." He walked up close to me. "Sure I know there's a mob down there," he said. "And I know why they're there. Plain scared to death of what it means to have had a telepath loose in Washington. You're wrong to hustle this guy out of town, Gyp. Look at this pathetic case—does he look like a superman?"

I looked at the snake. "No," I agreed. "He looks like they roped him somewhere in West Virginia a few months ago, put shoes on him, and brought him to town."

"Right," Fred snapped. "Let the mob get a look at him. The contrast of you dragging him along by the ear and him stumbling along behind you is the sort of thing the public laps up. It'll put you right in the driver's seat."

"I thought Congress had already done that," I reminded him coldly. No bureaucrat could want powers more absolute than mine. "Unfortunately," I growled at him. "I gave orders that no snakes were to be brought into this building without my prior consent. This ineffective-looking hill-billy has possibly read a thousand minds since you dragged him in here. How much of what he has picked up around here this morning will be peeped by some Russian telepath before you get him out of town?"

"Relax," Fred scoffed. "He's a short-range punk."

That was too much. "I'll do my own thinking, Fred," I said. "From now on, you follow orders."

I turned on the telepath. "Before I sentence you," I said. "What have you got to say?"

"I never hurt nothin'," he grumbled.

They're all alike, so help me. "You are a telepath?" I asked him.

"Shoah."

"Prove it," I demanded, opening a chink in my mind.

His long red face twisted in a crooked grin, showing poorly-cared-for teeth scattered here and there in his gums.

"Yo' think I never had no orthodonture, whatever *thet* is," he said.

I shut my mind like a clam. If there's anything I detest, it's the ghastly creeping of a telepath into my own thoughts. "Hello, Pete!" he exclaimed. "Yo' done shet yo' mind!" He shook his head. "Ain't never seen a body could do *thet*!" I'll bet he hadn't. There are only a few of us who can keep telepaths out of our thoughts. It takes a world of practice. Well, I'd had that.

"Can you do that?" I asked the snake.

He shook his head. "No, suh," he admitted.

"So here you are," I said, more heatedly. "Wandering around in a town full of *secrets*—Washington, the capital of your country, where the military, the diplomatic people, the security people, all of them have locked in their heads the things that keep us one step ahead of the Russians. Isn't that true?"

"I reckon. But—"

"But nothing," I snapped, getting sore about it for the thousandth time. "And you, you miserable snake, you *can't* keep your thoughts from being read by another telepath. No telepath can. Your mind is open *two* ways—to let thoughts in but, damn it, equally to leak out anything you know." I smiled coldly at him. "Can you get my thoughts now?"

The telepath shook his head. "Still got yo' mind closed," he said. He sounded bitter about it.

"You're right," I told him. "Something that few can do, and that *no telepath can do*! How can we let you wander around Washington leaking out thoughts of every secret your mind might accidentally have overheard from some ranking official? How many Russian telepaths have been accredited to their Embassy? How many crypto-telepaths have the Reds got in town? How many secrets have you *already* given away? How big a traitor have you been?"

That was the one that got him. "Traitor!" he yelled at me, starting across the office to where I stood leaning against my desk. Fred grabbed him and twisted his arm cruelly to stop all movement.

"Cut that out!" he snapped.

"Cut it out yourself, Fred," I said. "Just because you're sore at me, you don't have to take it out on the snake."

The telepath was not to be silenced. "My folks been in this country over three hundred years," he stormed at me. "And it takes someone like you to call me a traitor!"

I am very dark, and my hair is black and curly. I don't mind. With my heredity, it should be.

"Under the power vested in me—" I started.

"Aw, shet up," he said, turning to walk to the door. "I reckon I know the rest!"

Anita stayed behind after Fred Plaice dragged the snake out with him. "Better get me George Kelly on the 'visor," I said to her.

"Right away," Anita said, coming over to my desk. "But first—"

I looked up. "Yes?"

"Fred Plaice is throwing you a curve, Gyp."

The instant she used my nickname, I knew Anita felt that it was important. She never did that unless we were alone and talking seriously.

"What the devil!"

"Fred caught *another* telepath last night, at the same time he got the snake you just saw," Anita said. "You didn't know that, did you, Gyp?"

"Hell, no," I growled. "Does George Kelly know?"

"No," she said.

"How did you find out, Anita?"

She shrugged. "I stand pretty good with a couple of the guys in Fred's section. One of them tipped me on the 'visor at home before I came to work. That's how I knew to be down here, actually."

I scowled over that one. "What did your buddy tell you?"

"Fred had said he'd have your O.K. to execute the second snake by noon and that everything about her was top-secret."

That was enough. "Get Fred and this top-secret snake in here, Anita, and right now! Forget about that call to the Director."

"Yes, *sir!*" she said, and went out with a swish of skirts.

But Fred came in alone. I decided it was about time to get him back on his heels. "Don't you give a damn about my orders?" I growled at him. His eyebrows shot up. "I distinctly told Anita I wanted you to bring that other snake in *with* you. I know Anita got the message to you."

But it didn't shake him up. Fred Plaice came right toward my desk, leaned over and put his hands on it, and looked me in the eye. "Gyp," he said. "Gyp, this is once you're going to let me have *my* way."

"Not that it makes any difference," I snapped. "But why?"

"That's exactly what I'm not going to tell you," he said. "Listen, Gyp, have I ever tried to stick it in you, in any form?"

Fred's a hot-shot. He's the hardest-charger among my Section Chiefs. But I had never found his ambitions extending to my own job as head of the Division of Psychic Investigation. "You're still here," I conceded. "I guess I never caught you at it, Fred."

"And you never will, Gyp," he said. "You've given me the greatest breaks a guy ever got. This time I'm returning the favor."

"By *executing* a telepath?" I demanded. "And a woman, at that!"

He didn't ask me how I knew, but I could see it annoyed him.

"The biggest break you ever got," he insisted. "This thing is so hot it will burn you to death. Another crypto-telepath, right here in the District. I want to make summary disposition of her, and I don't want you to so much as look at the papers. Just give me instructions to use my own discretion."

Talk about a blank check. "Fred," I said, searching for words that wouldn't offend him. "I have more confidence in you than in any man I've ever worked with. But *execution!* Sure, three years ago, when the President declared the psychic emergency, we were killing the most fatally dangerous ones. But that's a couple years behind us. I just can't go that far without more reason than you've given me."

"It's perfectly legal," Fred said sullenly and beside the point. "Congress has given you summary _"

"Of course," I cut in. "What F.B.I. man would suggest an illegal course of action? But why should I delegate? If this is so touchy, I should handle it myself. Why delegate?"

"Simply because, I ask it," he said. "And because you trust me. Listen, Gyp," he added, almost passionately. "Don't ask me any more questions. I've said too much already. If you know *why*, it wouldn't be right for you to delegate. Do as I ask. Trust me. I'm saving you a world of trouble."

"Boy, oh boy!" I said. "This doesn't sound like the way to stay out of trouble. What is so dangerous about this telepath?"

"Nothing doing," Fred said. "I know I'm asking for a blank check. There's no other way for me to help you play it."

"This is your own idea, Fred?"

"Sure."

"Talked it over with Anita?"



He shook his head furiously. "I wouldn't compromise you, Gyp, and not with *her!*"

That settled it. I would trust Anita with the crown jewels.

"No dice, Fred," I said. "Give me the facts."

"Gyp," he pleaded. "*Don't* ask for them!"

"The facts!"

He straightened up from where he had hung over my desk during the whole argument. "This cuts my guts right out," he said. "Suspect apprehended around two o'clock this morning and now in detention at the City Jail. Native white female, age fifty-eight. Named Maude Tinker." He stopped.

I couldn't start. Maude Tinker! My given name is Joseph Tinker—although they all call me Gyp. "What ..." I got out at last. "What did she look...?"

He nodded, looking sick. "She's a gypsy, if that's what you mean, Gyp," he said to me. "I'm sorry. You *know* I'm sorry."

"Has she made any statement, Fred?" I asked softly, staring at the surface of my desk.

"She demanded to be taken at once to the Chief of the Division of Psychic Investigation, Mr. Joseph Tinker," he said.

"Give any reason?"

He was quiet for a while, until I looked up. "She said," Fred told me, "she said Gyp Tinker was her son."

I smiled wanly at him. "Obviously I can't let a statement like that go unchallenged, not in my position as the man charged with extirpating the danger of the snakes," I said.

"Obviously," Fred agreed. "Now that you know about it. If you had done as I asked, Gyp ..."

"Get her over here, Fred," I said. "I'll see her at once. And send Anita in as you leave."

"Sure, Gyp," he said, starting for the door.

"And thanks, Fred," I said. "But it never would have worked."

"Maybe not," he conceded from the door. "But the guy in the jam would have been me, not you."

I turned my swivel around and stared out the window at the Mall and didn't move until the light scent of Anita's perfume reminded me that I had asked her to come in.

I swung around. "You watch out for that Fred Plaiice," Anita said, almost scoldingly.

"You mean, start watching my back, like I never did before? How did I get this far?"

Her frown softened a little. "You don't miss many bets," she said. "Not my Gypper. But this thing of Fred's holding back on the other telepath he picked up last night has all the earmarks of a real slippery move."

"Did Fred tell you anything about it on the way out?"

"Just that he was bringing the telepath from the City Jail right back with him, and that you wanted to see her at once."

"This snake is a woman, aged fifty-eight, Anita," I told her. "She gave the name of Maude Tinker and says she's my mother," I added, without any particular expression.

Anita laughed. "Oh, *no!*" she said. "What they won't think of next!" But her face sobered in an instant, and she bent forward, almost whispering the rest: "Gyp! You mean that Fred Plaiice took her seriously! That he was trying to get *rid* of her?"

"He felt it would be better if I never knew about it," I admitted. "What do you think I should do, Anita?"

Her heart-shaped face grew more solemn. "I think it would be bad to try to cover it up," she decided. "And I'm glad you didn't let Fred do that to you. Some newscast would be sure to get hold of the story and there'd be snide accusations. All this talk recently about the heredity of psi powers is bad, too. That's what she's trying to cash in on. And if the public thought that the man in charge of catching and pulling the fangs of all the snakes was a hereditary telepath, they'd be after your scalp in no time."

"So?"

"Scotch it. See her, face her down, prove her charge is ridiculous, and ship her west."

I smiled a little dimly. "Just one complication."

"Yes, Gyp?"

"This Maude Tinker, says Fred, is a gypsy."

Anita's face did the most abrupt change. I had never seen her furiously angry. She's a typical high echelon Washington secretary, cool, extremely well-mannered, cheerful without being bumptious. But this time she was downright mad.

"I told you," Anita said.

"What?"

"I told you to watch out for Fred Plaiice!"

"It's not his fault," I protested. "Catching telepaths is his job."

"Within limits," she said scornfully. "I thought it was just one more of his screwball ideas! He had his whole Section concentrating on gypsies, for a couple of months. He had a long story to go with it, Gyp! How all the soothsayers and clairvoyants and finders were really short-range telepaths or pre-cogs."

"I don't believe it," I said. "You mean that Fred started with my nickname, and has been on this campaign of looking for telepaths among gypsies just in hopes he could embarrass me?"

"Yes!"

You have to like loyalty, no matter what the circumstances that incite it.

"I can't believe that of one of my boys, Anita," I said. "Fred was all broken up about it."

"I bet I can call the turn," Anita said, starting back for her own desk. "Fred's next move is to tell you that no one can blame you for disqualifying yourself from this case. After all, your own mother!"

Well, the political implications *were* deep. "I think I would agree," I said at length. "Let's see what happens. Send this Maude Tinker in as soon as she gets here."

"Aren't you going to take any precautions, Gyp?" Anita demanded.

"Against what?"

"You're impossible," she snapped. "I'll take care of the precaution department myself. And don't you dare let Fred get that woman in here until I get back."

"No what...?"

"Joseph Tinker!" she cried. "Be quiet!" She stormed out.

In about twenty minutes the buzzer on my pix-box sounded, and I depressed the key. Anita's face was tense on the small screen.

"Just got a flash," she said. "Fred has her in his 'copter and will let down on the roof in about four or five minutes. I'll need a couple minutes more than that. Now don't you let him in with her before I get there, do you hear me?"

I said I heard her. She beat Fred at that. For all I know she had booby-trapped them in getting down from the roof. Anita has drag with everybody in the building, and that could have included the elevator service man, who quite easily could have loused service to the roof enough to delay Fred.

Anita came in. "Mr. Tinker," she said crisply. "Meet Tony Carlucci."

I stood up. Tony was a darned good-looking chap, about my age, with very dark hair, somewhat curly, and a flash of white teeth for a smile. I told him I was pleased to meet him.

"Move over," Anita directed, stepping smartly around my desk and giving my elbow a sharp yank. "You sit behind the desk, Tony. Now try to look like a big wheel, for heaven's sake."

"I *am* a big wheel," Tony protested. "In the used 'copter racket."

Anita was already reaching up to push down on my shoulders. "Won't you sit down?" she demanded. She had me in one of the comfortable chairs I have in my office for callers, rather off to one side. She put herself down in the chair across my desk from Tony Carlucci, as though she were getting instructions.

He didn't need much hinting. "Tell the bulls we're gonna clean up the District," he started, waving his hands around. "No more poker. No more dice. No more Sneaky Pete." I'd never heard of that.

"Shut up!" Anita said. "He'll be here any instant."

Fred was as good as her word. He was holding the door for his telepath within seconds. Tony Carlucci stopped hamming it up and straightened importantly in my chair. I had to admit that Anita had found a guy who, superficially, resembled me more than a little. No one who knew either of us would ever mistake one for the other, but our general descriptions were quite similar.

The woman who came in not only was a gypsy, she was dressed as a gypsy. Her blouse was white, and quite frilly. She had on a billowing red skirt, liberally encrusted with embroidered beads of a darker red. The tattered hem of a petticoat hung below it. Her hair had been dark once, but it was shot with threads of silver. There was a lot of it, and piled up high so that her ears were exposed. They had pierced lobes, and heavy gold rings hung from them.

Instinctively I closed my mind as tight as a clam. The mere sight of a telepath triggers that reaction. Fred closed the door behind him, continuing to stand just behind his captive. She glanced briefly at me and then looked for a longer moment at Tony Carlucci, behind my desk.

"Joe," she said to him. "Joe, don't let them do this to me!"

I don't know how much coaching Anita had given Carlucci, but he knew enough to call her "mother." And I knew enough to watch Fred Plaiice the instant Tony said: "Oh, mother! Why the devil couldn't you keep out of sight!"

Fred was one mighty confused looking boy. The two-bit word is consternation. He had it. Anita had given him the business.

"I'm sorry, madame," I said standing and walking over to where Tony was emoting, with the back of his hand pressed to his eyes. "We threw you a curve. Meet Mr. Tony Carlucci." Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "And I, madame, am Joseph Tinker."

"Joe!" she cried, or wailed is a better word, and threw herself around the desk to seize me in her arms. She smelled faintly of garlic, oregano and some kind of incense, maybe sandalwood. A nice clean gypsy smell. Cleaner than a lot of gypsies I can think of.

Fred pulled her off me, not too gently. I'd say he was a little sore about something. Anita's eyes were slits of fury.

"Thanks, Tony," I said. "See you around."

"Honest Tony Carlucci," he said. "If you need a used 'copter, Joe, jet on down to my dock. Nothing down. Listen, I got one that was never used except in the spring by a little old lady who gave up walking for Lent. I'll tell you what I'll do—"

"Wasting your time," Anita told him. "The Government provides Mr. Tinker with any kind of transportation he needs. A thousand thanks, Tony. I won't forget—" The rest was cut off as she gave him one of the more polite bum's rushes. I think he would have liked to hang around to see the rest of our little amateur theatrical.

Fred had his grin going. "Couldn't get the drift for a minute, Gyp," he said, clapping me on the shoulder. "Nice work! Now I know why I get such a kick out of working for you!" He whirled on Maude Tinker. "And you, you foolish old biddy! How far do you think you would get with an act like this against another telepath?"

She spat a curse at him in Romany. "So smart!" she sneered. "There isn't another telepath in the city of Washington!"

That was a laugh. For its own safety the F.B.I. has its own gang of tame TP's—they are all, of course, exceptionally short-range telepaths, and we practically keep them under lock and key to make sure some important thoughts don't leak in and out of their diseased minds.

"Send in Freeda Sayer," I said, leaning down to press the intercommute. Freeda is a thick-ankled, thick-headed telepath. But stupid or not, she is telepathic, and *is* an acid test in these cases.

"Is this woman a telepath?" I asked Freeda, when she stumped in.

Freeda looked at Maude Tinker, her mouth hanging a little open. She snuffled and walked quite close to the gypsy woman. "Yeah," she said. "She knows I'm thinking her hem is torn." She turned her head with that low-thyroid slowness to me. "Is that all, Mr. Tinker?" she asked.

Fred answered. "Swell, Freeda. That's all."

Freeda wandered out.

Fred said: "O.K., Gyp. What'll I do with her?"

"Sit down, Mrs. ... it is Mrs., isn't it? ... Mrs. Tinker, won't you please?" I said in answer to his question. She took the chair Anita had been using when Tony was pretending to be me, and I sat down in my swivel across the desk from her.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Tinker," I said. "It's bad enough that you have deliberately stayed in the District after all telepaths were most stringently warned to register with us so that we could move them to less sensitive areas. But I take it quite hard that you have tried to embarrass me."

"That would take a little doing," she said. "You've got a heart like a piece of flint. Let me see your palm!" she demanded, reaching imperatively across my desk. Fred started to protest, but I passed my hand across to her, leaning forward so that she could reach it.

Maude Tinker smoothed out my palm, rubbing her thumb over it as if to clear away a veil of mystery, and bent close over it, her dark face intense. She traced a line or two with her

fingernail, and dropped my hand to the walnut. "You have no mercy," she said. "You will use the excuse that I tried to hinder the work of your department as a reason to punish me severely—and your real reason is that you feel I might have damaged you personally."

Fred was moving around the desk. He spoke softly in my ear while I kept my eye on the gypsy. That was silly. He can't close his mind the way I can. She could read his thoughts just as well as if he were screaming them out loud.



"That's a charge she may repeat, Gyp," he said. "Nobody could blame you, if you disqualified yourself from this decision. I think we could get the newscasts to see it as impeccable public behavior. We'll paint you as the administrator so devoted to pure justice that even potential resentment will be a barrier to your personal decision. How's that sound to you, Gyp?"

"The day you have to start painting a picture for them, I've had it, Fred," I said. I felt sure Anita had overheard his soft words in my ear, but to be sure, I added, "I think it would be suicide to disqualify myself from this case. That's just the first step to disqualifying myself from the job. If there's any hint of telepathic heredity in my case, ducking this decision would be a public admission that I'm sensitive in that area. No. I'll handle it."

Anita nodded slowly to me. Well, she had called it. Maybe she *was* right about Fred. "Tell you what," I said. "Several things about this case interest me. If we are to believe her, this woman has had absolutely no contact with any other telepath in Washington—she thought she was the only one who had escaped our dragnet. Why don't all of you shoo—I want to do a little survey in depth here—a little motivational work. I think I can get more frankness out of her if there are no witnesses. Beat it, kids."

Anita left with Fred. Maude Tinker and I were alone in my office. I looked at her with a smile.

"Hello, Joe," she said.

"Hello, Mother," I said. "You look just wonderful."

Mother smiled at me and reached across the desk again to take both my hands. "*Yosip*," she said in Romany. "What a wonderful long way you have come since you ran away. A lawyer, and now a big man, a *very* big man, in Washington. I am a very proud gypsy."

What I might have said to her was interrupted by a racket outside my office. Voices were raised. I thought I heard what could only be Anita yelling. That's another thing that had never happened before.

Fred burst back into the office, with Anita right on his heels. His face was livid. Mother turned in her chair and looked coldly at him. A gypsy woman can give you the snottiest look in the world, right down her aquiline nose, when she feels like it. It stopped Fred Plaipe in his tracks.

"Yes, Fred?" I said quietly.

"If you don't mind, Tinker," he said brusquely. "I'd like to be present for this interview."

"Tinker?"

"I'm sorry, Gyp," he said. "I'm ... I'm upset."

"I'll bet you are, you sneak," Anita said. "Chief," she told me. "He was fit to be tied when you chased us out. The first thing he wanted to know was whatever had made you decide to get Tony Carlucci in here to trick his gypsy snake. I was so mad that I flipped and told him it was *my* idea."

"Is that why you're back?" I asked him.

"Get this calf-eyed girl Friday of yours off my back," he said stonily. "Our security certainly doesn't permit your confidential assistant to be in love with you. We're supposed to be checking each other constantly."

I hardly knew which of his two ideas to blast the hardest. I looked at Anita first. She simply raised her head and looked me straight in the eye. It could mean almost anything.

I tried Fred: "And you consider it's your job to check on me?"

"Of course. Goes without saying," he said. I shrugged. "At any rate," he added, calming down. "I'm staying. Nothing outside of a direct order, which I will protest to George Kelly, will get me to leave." The last thing I wanted was trouble with the Director.

"Stay, Fred," I said. "But we'll have some things to settle afterwards."

"Maybe," he smiled. "It will depend. Right now I'd like to get a load of this motivational research you've got cooked up."

"Don't bother," Mother said. "I've got more sense than to tie the rope around my own neck. I'm not saying a word." She crossed her arms and sat back in her chair with a granitic finality.

"So much the quicker," Fred said. "You can sentence her right now, Gyp!"

"Sure," I said. "Sure I can." I wish I could say that my mind raced to a quick decision. No—I *couldn't* think. Or almost couldn't. One idea percolated through. Mother had made no "mistake" in calling Tony by my name. She had read Fred's mind in the 'copter on the way from the jail, and Anita's as she was ushered in. Her "mistake" could only mean one thing—*Fred Plaike was not sure she was my mother.*

This much thought took time. Fred knew I was stalling. "Come on," he snapped in a tone he had never dared to use to me before. "Let's have the sentence!"

He was right in one thing. He had me over a barrel. I squeezed my eyelids shut and did something I hadn't done since that day twenty years before when I had run away from home. I opened my mind to my mother.

Unless you have had the experience, you can't imagine what it is like to live with a telepath. It is disquieting in the extreme. One of the concomitants of consciousness is that it is *private* consciousness. And when this isn't true, when someone, even a loved one, can creep into your mind and know what you think, your insides writhe. Caterpillars course around under your skin. And you resent. Sooner or later you will hate. I ran away from home because I couldn't stand Mother in my mind, and couldn't bear the thought of hating her.

But now I *had* to know what I should do to her. I let her into my thoughts. *Give me some sign, I thought, as I waved a hand at Fred for quiet. Mother, tell me what to do!*

Poor Joe, she thought. He loves me in spite of it all. He can't bear to do what he has to do. Joe! her mind shrieked at me. *You read my mind!*

I snapped upright in my chair and grabbed its arms until I could hear my knuckles crack. My mind snapped shut with an almost audible crack. *I was a damned snake!*

I could dimly hear Fred yammering at me. With a sick fear I slowly opened my mind again. His thoughts surged into it. Well, Anita had been right. And Anita!

Yes, Mother thought. She does love you, Joe. A lovely girl. You lucky man.

Fred had me by the shoulder, yelling at me, shaking me, trying to get me to speak. He was almost slaving in his greed. I paid him no heed. *All right, I thought. What's to be done, Mother?*

Throw the book at me, Mother thought.

"Shut up, Fred. And sit down." He kept his tight grip on my shoulder. "Sit down!" I yelled at him. "Three strikes and out, Fred. This is the third order you've resisted today!"

"Now hear this," I said. "Under the powers vested in me ..." I sentenced Mother to indefinite detention in Oklahoma. I threatened her with worse—face it, the only worse thing was death—if she were found in a restricted area again.

"Take her out, Fred," I said. He hadn't counted on my being able to do it, and it left him without a plan. "Four times?" I asked him.

"No. No, Gyp. On my way," he said, taking Mother by the arm.

Anita started to follow him. I stopped her and waited until the door had closed behind Fred and Mother.

"You were right about Fred, Anita," I said. "Thank you for saving my life."

"Oh, Gyp," she said, tears trying to brim over her eyelids. "He's such a cutthroat!"

"Sure," I said. "But now we know it. Get me an appointment with George Kelly, will you, Anita?"

She compressed her lips. "That's more like it!" she said angrily. "Get Fred kicked clear out of the Bureau. George Kelly is a great Director, Gyp, and he'll do it if you insist."

"Maybe," I said. I stewed over what to tell the boss until Anita came back in.

"Mr. Kelly can see you now, Mr. Tinker," she said, all calmed down again.

I got up and came around the desk and took her by the elbow, standing at my door. "Just in case," I said, leaning down to kiss her lightly on the lips. "I love you, too."

"Too?" she said.

I froze. It was the kind of slip that sooner or later trips up every snake. My grin was a sick one. I walked out without another word.

The Director's office is on the fourth floor, I climbed the single flight, and his girl let me in. George affects long slim cigars. I say affects. He seldom lights them, but he waves them like batons, conducting some kind of a symphony of words and ideas all day.

"Welcome, stranger," he said, calling on the fiddles for a little pizzicato. "What's up, Gyp?"

I sat down across from him at his desk and tried to put a smile on my face. "I want to submit my resignation, George," I said. "Effective immediately."

"Not accepted," he said, without a second thought. Then his face grew solemn. "What's this about?" he demanded. "I can't lose *you*, Gyp. My right bower!"

"One favor," I said, not answering him. "Don't move Fred Plaice up to my old spot. Any of the other Section Chiefs, but not Fred."

"Well, well," George said, whipping up the brasses with his cigar. "This begins to sound like cause and effect." He hushed the whole orchestra to a whisper. "I thought Fred was your fair-haired boy, Gyp. You two get in a hassle?"

I shook my head. "Not directly, George," I told him. "I want you to know two things. They'll explain why I'm quitting. My mother is a telepath. We arrested her early this morning, here in the District. I just sentenced her to transportation and detention in Oklahoma."

"Good heavens," he gasped. "Your own mother! Gyp, no wonder you're upset. Didn't you know she was a snake?"

My smile was a little tired. "Of course I knew," I told him. "I ran away from home at thirteen to get away from having her inside my head all the time. That's how I learned to close my mind—closing her out as much as I could. The power got stronger as I grew older."

"It's embarrassing," George said, turning away from me to look out the window. "To have you, of all people, Gyp, with telepathic heredity. Still, if no one knows, and since you've never had the slightest manifestation of psi powers yourself, there may be some way we can preserve your usefulness."

"Today, within the last half hour, George, my latent telepathic ability became manifest. George, I'm a snake."

His face froze. Then the batonlike cigar stopped its movement. He was like a statue. The pose broke, and he pressed a button.

"Send Carol Lundgren in," he ordered. I knew Carol, another short-range telepath that George used as his private lie-detector.

Carol was at my elbow in a moment or so. George wasted no words. "Carol, is there a telepath in this room?" he asked.

Carol grinned. "Yep," he said to the enforced silence. "There is." George Kelly's face fell. "His name is Carol Lundgren," the kid went on. "Next question?"

George looked as though he could have brained him. "All right, you Philadelphia lawyer," he grumbled. "Besides yourself, Carol, is there a telepath in this room?"

"No, Mr. Kelly, there is not."

"Get out, and don't scare me like that again." George told him.

I didn't get it. I said so: "George, I don't get it. I read my mother's thoughts, and for that matter, Fred Plaice's thoughts, too. That's why I asked you not to give him my job. I swear to you I can read thoughts."

"So?"

"If I *know* I'm a telepath, Carol should be able to read the thought that I know it," I protested.

"You're like me," George Kelly said. "You automatically close your mind in the presence of a telepath. It's pure reflex now. Carol couldn't read a thing because you clammed your thoughts the instant he walked in."

"That was *then*!" I yelled at him. "*Before* my psi powers became manifest. You know that a telepath can't close his mind! Why couldn't Carol read my thoughts?"

Well, George thought, he couldn't read mine either, could he?

No, I thought. *He couldn't. He ... George!* my mind shrieked at him.

Somebody kicked the props out from under my world. *George Kelly was a snake!*

Don't be silly, he thought. *I'm no more a snake than you are, Gyp.*

But you're a telepath!

So are you, Gyp, he thought. *The only kind of telepath that really counts. You can read minds, but others can't read yours.*

I fell back on words, closing my mind—it was rattling so I didn't want George to read my thoughts: "But a telepath *can't* close his mind!" I protested.

"I hope the Russians are as sure of that as you are, Gyp," George grinned. "The only agents we have in Russia are closed-mind telepaths—telepaths who don't automatically give themselves away. Now *that* kind of a telepath really *is* a usable espionage agent or a safe link in a communications net."

"How long has this been going on?"

"About three years, Gyp. When we discovered that certain training could make some telepaths closed-mind operators, we got the President to promulgate the Executive Orders that Congress later made into law. We got all ordinary telepaths out of circulation and put to work those that we could train to closed-mind operation. Now you know why I won't take your resignation."

I sputtered. "George, how can I conscientiously crack down on these poor people, if I'm a TP myself?"

He grinned. "You won't. You'll still be doing just what you've always been doing, except now you'll *know* that you're doing it. You'll be recruiting telepaths for us. Where do you think we train them?"

"Oklahoma? The Detention area?"

"Sure. Where else? Now relax. But for heaven's sake, don't ever leak this. We feel sure the Russians haven't discovered this business of closed-mind telepaths yet. Some day, I suppose, they will. It may take a long time. The self-realized closed-mind telepath like you, Gyp, is a rarity. Mostly we have to train people rigorously for it. It took your mother over two years to learn it."

"My mother!"

"Sure. Why did you think she was in Washington? She's part of the Sevastopol, Teheran and Cairo communications network."

"George," I insisted. "Something is shaky. If she's on the inside, how did she ever get picked up?"

He laughed. "Just part of her cover. Fred Plaice got too close. We know what he is, Gyp. But we didn't dare to have him guess what your mother was. She's on her way to a nice California vacation. New assignment after that. Maybe middle Europe. After all, she *is* a gypsy. Ought to go well, say, in Bulgaria!"

THE END

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