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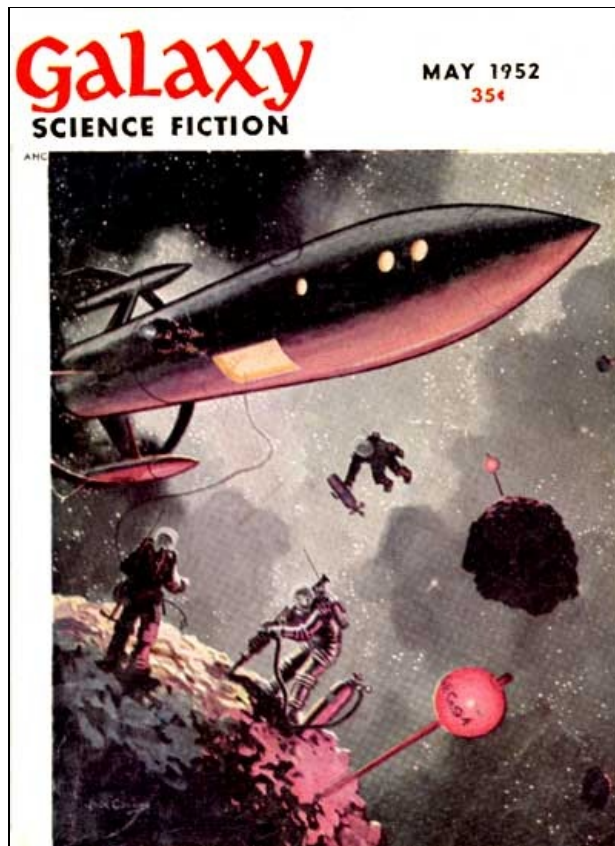
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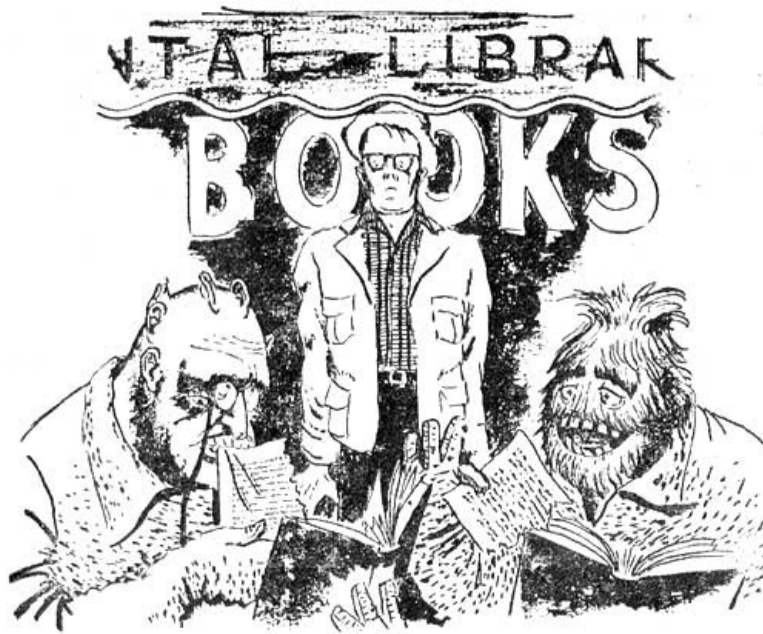
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Freudian Slip

By FRANKLIN ABEL

Illustrated by HARRINGTON

Things are exactly what they seem? Life is real? Life is earnest? Well, that depends.

On the day the Earth vanished, Herman Raye was earnestly fishing for trout, hip-deep in a mountain stream in upstate New York.

Herman was a tall, serious, sensitive, healthy, well-muscled young man with an outsize jaw and a brush of red-brown hair. He wore spectacles to correct a slight hyperopia, and they had heavy black rims because he knew his patients expected it. In his off hours, he was fond of books with titles like *Personality and the Behavior Disorders*, *Self-esteem and Sexuality in Women*, *Juvenile Totem and Taboo: A study of adolescent culture-groups*, and *A New Theory of Economic Cycles*; but he also liked baseball, beer and bebop.

This day, the last of Herman's vacation, was a perfect specimen: sunny and still, the sky dotted with antiseptic tufts of cloud. The trout were biting. Herman had two in his creel, and was casting into the shallow pool across the stream in the confident hope of getting another, when the Universe gave one horrible sliding lurch.

Herman braced himself instinctively, shock pounding through his body, and looked down at the pebbly stream-bed under his feet.

It wasn't there.

He was standing, to all appearances, in three feet of clear water with sheer, black nothing under it: nothing, the abysmal color of a moonless night, pierced by the diamond points of a half-dozen incredible stars.

He had only that single glimpse; then he found himself gazing across at the pool under the far bank, whose waters reflected the tranquil imagery of trees. He raised his casting rod, swung it back over his shoulder, brought it forward again with a practiced flick of his wrist, and watched the lure drop.

Within the range of his vision now, everything was entirely normal; nevertheless, Herman wanted very much to stop fishing and look down to see if that horrifying void was still there. He couldn't do it.

Doggedly, he tried again and again. The result was always the same. It was exactly as if he were

a man who had made up his mind to fling himself over a cliff, or break a window and snatch a loaf of bread, or say in a loud voice to an important person at a party, "I think you stink." Determination was followed by effort, by ghastly, sweating, heart-stopping fear, by relief as he gave up and did something else.

All right, he thought finally, there's no point going on with it. Data established: hallucination, compulsion, inhibition. Where do we go from here?

The obvious first hypothesis was that he was insane. Herman considered that briefly, and left the question open. Three or four selected psychoanalyst jokes paraded through his mind, led by the classic, "You're fine, how am I?"

There was this much truth, he thought, in the popular belief that all analysts were a little cracked themselves: a good proportion of the people who get all the way through the man-killing course that makes an orthodox analyst—a course in which an M.D. degree is only a beginning—are impelled to do so in the first place by a consuming interest in their own neuroses. Herman, for example, from the age of fifteen up until the completion of his own analysis at twenty-six, had been so claustrophobic that he couldn't force himself into a subway car or an elevator.

But was he now insane?

Can a foot-rule measure itself?

Herman finished. At an appropriate hour he waded ashore, cleaned his catch, cooked it and ate it. Where the ground had been bare around his cooking spot, he saw empty darkness, star-studded, rimmed by a tangled webwork of bare rootlets. He tried to go on looking at it when he had finished eating the fish. He couldn't.

After the meal, he tried to take out his notebook and pen. He couldn't.

In fact, it occurred to him, *he was helpless to do anything that he wouldn't normally have done.*

Pondering that discovery, after he had cleaned his utensils and finished his other chores, Herman crawled into his tent and went to sleep.

Burying the garbage had been an unsettling experience. Like a lunatic building a machine nobody else can see, he had lifted successive shovels-full of nothing, dropped the empty cans and rubbish ten inches into nothing, and shoveled nothing carefully over them again....

The light woke him, long before dawn. From where he lay on his back, he could see an incredible pale radiance streaming upward all around him, outlining the shadow of his body at the ridge of the tent, picking out the under-surfaces of the trees against the night sky. He strained, until he was weak and dizzy, to roll over so that he could see its source; but he had to give up and wait another ten minutes until his body turned "naturally," just as if he had still been asleep.

Then he was looking straight down into a milky transparency that started under his nose and continued into unguessable depths. First came the matted clumps of grass, black against the light, every blade and root as clear as if they had been set in transparent plastic. Then longer, writhing roots of trees and shrubs, sprouting thickets of hair-thin rootlets. Between these, and continuing downward level by level, was spread an infinity of tiny specks, seed-shapes, spores. Some of them moved, Herman realized with a shock. Insects burrowing in the emptiness where the Earth should be?

In the morning, when he crawled out of the tent and went to the bottomless stream to wash, he noticed something he had missed the day before. The network of grasses gave springily under his feet—not like turf, but like stretched rubber. Herman conceived an instant dislike for walking, especially when he had to cross bare ground, because when that happened, he felt exactly what he saw: nothing whatever underfoot. "Walking on air," he realized, was not as pleasant an experience as the popular songs would lead you to expect.

Herman shaved, cooked and ate breakfast, washed the dishes, did the chores, and packed up his belongings. With a mighty effort, he pried out the tent stakes, which were bedded in nothing but a loose network of roots. He shouldered the load and carried it a quarter of a mile through pine woods to his car.

The car stood at ground level, but the ground was not there any more. The road was now nothing more than a long, irregular trough formed by the spreading roots of the pines on either side. Shuddering, Herman stowed his gear in the trunk and got in behind the wheel.

When he put the motor into gear, the sedan moved sedately and normally forward. But the motor raced madly, and there was no feeling that it was taking hold. With screaming engine, Herman drove homeward over a nonexistent road. Inwardly and silently, he gibbered.

Six miles down the mountain, he pulled up beside a white-painted fence enclosing a neat yard and a fussy little blue-shuttered house. On the opposite side of the fence stood a middle-aged woman with a floppy hat awry on her head and a gardening trowel in one of her gloved hands. She looked up with an air of vague dismay when he got out of the car.

"Some more eggs today, Dr. Raye?" she asked, and smiled. The smile was like painted china. Her eyes, lost in her fleshy face, were clearly trying not to look downward.

"Not today, Mrs. Richards," Herman said. "I just stopped to say good-by. I'm on my way home."

"Isn't that a shame?" she said mechanically. "Well, come again next year."

Herman wanted to say, "Next year I'll probably be in a strait-jacket." He tried to say it. He stuttered, "N-n-n-n—" and ended, glancing at the ground at her feet, "Transplanting some petunias?"

The woman's mouth worked. She said, "Yes. I thought I might's well put them along here, where they'd get more sun. Aren't they pretty?"

"Very pretty," said Herman helplessly.

The petunias, roots as naked as if they had been scrubbed, were nesting in a bed of stars. Mrs. Richards' gloves and trowel were spotlessly clean.

On Fourth Avenue, below Fourteenth Street, Herman met two frightful little men.

He had expected the city to be better, but it was worse; it was a nightmare. The avenues between the buildings were bottomless troughs of darkness. The bedrock was gone; the concrete was gone; the asphalt was gone.

The buildings themselves were hardly recognizable unless you knew what they were. New York had been a city of stone—built on stone, built of stone, as cold as stone.

Uptown, the city looked half-built, but insanely occupied, a forest of orange-painted girders. In the Village the old brick houses were worse. No brick; no mortar; nothing but the grotesque shells of rooms in lath and a paper-thickness of paint.

The wrought-iron railings were gone, too.

On Fourth Avenue, bookseller's row, you could almost persuade yourself that nothing had happened, provided you did not look down. The buildings had been made of wood, and wood they remained. The second-hand books in their wooden racks would have been comforting except that they were so clean. There was not a spot of dirt anywhere; the air was more than country-pure.

There was an insane selective principle at work here, Herman realized. Everything from bedrock to loam that belonged to the Earth itself had disappeared. So had everything that had a mineral origin and been changed by refinement and mixture: concrete, wrought iron, brick, but steel and glass, porcelain and paint remained. It looked as if the planet had been the joint property of two children, one of whom didn't want to play any more, so they had split up their possessions—this is yours, this is yours, this is *mine*...

The two little men popped into view not six feet in front of Herman as he was passing a sidewalk bookstall. Both were dressed in what looked like workmen's overalls made of lucite chain-mail, or knitted glow-worms. One of them had four eyes, two brown, two blue, with spectacles for the middle pair. Ears grew like cabbages all over his bald head. The other had two eyes, the pupils of which were cross-shaped, and no other discernible features except when he opened his gap-toothed mouth: the rest of his head, face and all, was completely covered by a dense forest of red hair.

As they came forward, Herman's control of his body suddenly returned. He was trying his best to turn around and go away from there, and that was what his body started to do. Moreover, certain sounds of a prayerful character, namely "Oh dear sweet Jesus," which Herman was forming in his mind, involuntarily issued from his lips.

Before he had taken the first step in a rearward direction, however, the hairy little man curved around him in a blur of motion, barring the way with two long, muscular, red-furred arms. Herman turned. The four-eyed little man had closed in. Herman, gasping, backed up against the bookstall.

People who were headed directly for them, although showing no recognition that Herman and the little men were there, moved stiffly aside like dancing automatons, strode past, then made another stiff sidewise motion to bring them back to the original line of march before they went on their way.

"Olaph dzenn Härm Rai gjo glerr-dregnarr?" demanded Hairy.

Herman gulped, half-stunned. "Huh?" he said.

Hairy turned to Four-Eyes. "Grinnr alaz harisi nuya."

"Izzred alph! Meggi erd-halaza riggbörd els kamma gredyik. Lukhhal!"

Hairy turned back to Herman. Blinking his eyes rapidly, for they closed like the shutter of a camera, he made a placating gesture with both huge furry hands. "Kelagg ikri odrum faz," he said, and, reaching out to the bookstall, he plucked out a handful of volumes, fanned them like

playing cards and displayed them to Four-Eyes. A heated discussion ensued, at the end of which Hairy kept *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Four-Eyes took *The Blonde in the Bathtub*, and Hairy threw the rest away.

Then, while Herman gaped and made retching sounds, the two disgusting little men tore pages out of the books and stuffed them in their mouths. When they finished the pages, they ate the bindings. Then there was a rather sick pause while they seemed to digest the contents of the books they had literally devoured. Herman had the wild thought that they were blurb writers whose jobs had gone to their heads.

The one with the four eyes rolled three of them horribly. "That's more like it," he said in nasal but recognizable English. "Let's start over. Are you Herman Raye, the skull doc?"

Herman produced a series of incoherent sounds.

"My brother expresses himself crudely," said Hairy in a rich, fruity baritone. "Please forgive him. He is a man of much heart."

"Uh?" said Herman.

"Truly," said Hairy. "And of much ears," he added with a glance at his companion. "But again, as to this affair—tell me true, are you Herman Raye, the analyst of minds?"

"Suppose I am?" Herman asked cautiously.

Hairy turned to Four-eyes. "Arghraz iktri 'Suppose I am,' Gurh? Olaph iktri erz ogromat, lekh—"

"Talk English, can't you?" Four-eyes broke in. "You know he don't understand that caveman jabber. Anyhow, yeah, yeah, it's him. He just don't want to say so." He reached out and took Herman by the collar. "Come on, boy, the boss is waitin'."

There were two circular hair-lines of glowing crimson where Hairy and Four-eyes had originally appeared. They reached the spot in one jump, Hairy bringing up the rear.

"But tell me truly," he said anxiously. "You *are* that same Herman Raye?"

Herman paid no attention. Below, under the two glowing circles, was the terrifying gulf that had replaced the Earth; and this time, Herman was somehow convinced, it was not going to hold him up.

"Let go!" he shouted, struggling. "Ouch!" He had struck Four-eyes squarely on the flat nose, and it felt as if he had slugged an anvil.

Paying no attention, Four-eyes turned Herman over, pinned his arms to his sides, and dropped him neatly through the larger of the two circles.

Herman shut his eyes tightly and despairingly repeated the multiplication table up to 14 x 14. When he opened them again, he was apparently hanging in mid-space, with Hairy to his left and Four-eyes to his right. The visible globe around them was so curiously tinted and mottled that it took Herman a long time to puzzle it out. Ahead of them was the darkest area—the void he had seen before. This was oval in shape, and in places the stars shone through it clearly. In others, they were blocked off entirely or dimmed by a sort of haze.

Surrounding this, and forming the rest of the sphere, was an area that shaded from gold shot with violet at the borders, to an unbearable blaze of glory at the center, back the way they had come and a little to the right. Within this lighted section were other amorphous areas which were much darker, almost opaque; and still others where the light shone through diluted to a ruddy ghost of itself, like candlelight through parchment.

Gradually Herman realized that the shapes and colors he saw were the lighted and dark hemispheres of Earth. The dark areas were the oceans, deep enough in most places to shut out the light altogether, and those parts of the continents, North and South America behind him, Europe and Asia ahead, Africa down to the right, which were heavily forested.

Herman's earlier conviction returned. Things like this just did not happen. *Physician, heal thyself!*

"You're not real," he said bitterly to Four-eyes.

"Not very," Four-eyes agreed. "I'm twice as real as that jerk, though," he insisted, pointing to Hairy.

Ahead of them, or "below," a point of orange light was slowly swelling. Herman watched it without much interest.

Hairy broke out into a torrent of cursing. "I this and that in the milk of your this!" he said. "I this, that and the other in the this of your that. Your sister! Your cousin! Your grandmother's uncle!"

Four-eyes listened with awed approval. "Them was good books, hah?" he asked happily.

"Better than those scratchings in the caves," Hairy said.

"Something to think about till they haul us out again. Well," said Four-eyes philosophically, "here we are."

The orange spot had enlarged into the semblance of a lighted room, rather like a stage setting. Inside were two enormous Persons, one sitting, one standing. Otherwise, and except for three upholstered chairs, the room was bare. No—as they swooped down toward it, Herman blinked and looked again. A leather couch had appeared against the far wall.

At the last moment, there was a flicker of motion off to Herman's left. Something that looked like a short, pudgy human being accompanied by two little men the size of Hairy and Four-eyes whooshed off into the distance, back toward the surface of the planet.

Herman landed. Hairy and Four-eyes, after bowing low to the standing Person, turned and leaped out of the room. When Herman, feeling abandoned, turned to see where they had gone, he discovered that the room now had four walls and no windows or doors.

The Person said, "How do you do, Doctor Raye?"

Herman looked at him. Although his figure had a disquieting tendency to quiver and flow, so that it was hard to judge, he seemed to be about eight feet tall. He was dressed in what would have seemed an ordinary dark-blue business suit, with an equally ordinary white shirt and blue tie, except that all three garments had the sheen of polished metal. His face was bony and severe, but not repellently so; he looked absent-minded rather than stern.

The other Person, whose suit was brown, had a broad, kindly and rather stupid face; his hair was white. He sat quietly, not looking at Herman, or, apparently, at anything else.

Herman sat down in one of the upholstered chairs. "All right," he said with helpless defiance. "What's it all about?"

"I'm glad we can come to the point at once," said the Person. He paused, moving his lips silently. "Ah, excuse me. I'm sorry." A second head, with identical features, popped into view next to the first. His eyes were closed. "It's necessary, I'm afraid," said head number one apologetically. "I have so much to remember, you know."

Herman took a deep breath and said nothing.

"You may call me Secundus, if you like," resumed the Person, "and this gentleman Primus, since it is with him that you will have principally to deal. Now, our problem here is one of amnesia, and I will confess to you frankly that we ourselves are totally inadequate to cope with it. In theory, we are not subject to disorders of the mind, and that's what makes us so vulnerable now that it has happened. Do you see?"

A fantastic suspicion crept into Herman's mind. "Just a moment," he said carefully. "If you don't mind telling me, what is it that you have to remember?"

"Well, Doctor, my field is human beings; that's why it became my duty to search you out and consult with you. And there *is* a great deal for me to carry in my mind, you know, especially under these abnormal conditions. I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say it is a full-time job."

"Are you going to tell me," asked Herman, more carefully still, "that this—gentleman—is the one who is supposed to remember the Earth itself? The rocks and minerals and so on?"

"Yes, exactly. I was about to tell you—"

"And that the planet has disappeared because he has amnesia?" Herman demanded on a rising note.

Secundus beamed. "Concisely expressed. I myself, being, so to speak, saturated with the thoughts and habits of human beings, who are, you must admit, a garrulous race, could not—"

"Oh, no!" said Herman.

"Oh, yes," Secundus corrected. "I can understand that the idea is difficult for you to accept, since you naturally believe that you yourself have a real existence, or, to be more precise, that you belong to the world of phenomena as opposed to that of noumena." He beamed. "Now I will be silent, a considerable task for me, and let you ask questions."

Herman fought a successful battle with his impulse to stand Up and shout "To hell with it!" He had been through a great deal, but he was a serious and realistic young man. He set himself to think the problem through logically. If, as seemed more than probable, Secundus, Primus, Hairy, Four-eyes, and this whole Alice-in-Wonderland situation existed only as his hallucinations, then it did not matter much whether he took them seriously or not. If they were real, then he wasn't, and vice versa. It didn't make any difference which was which.

He relaxed deliberately and folded his hands against his abdomen. "Let me see if I can get this clear," he said. "I'm a noumenon, not a phenomenon. In cruder terms, I exist only in your mind. Is that true?"

Secundus beamed. "Correct."

"If *you* got amnesia, I and the rest of the human race would disappear."

Secundus looked worried, "That is also correct, and if that should happen, you will readily

understand that we *would* be in difficulty. The situation is extremely—But pardon me. I had promised to be silent except when answering questions."

"This is the part I fail to understand, Mr. Secundus. I gather that you brought me here to treat Mr. Primus. Now, if I exist as a thought in your mind, you necessarily know everything I know. Why don't you treat him yourself?"

Secundus shook his head disapprovingly. "Oh, no, Dr. Raye, that is not the case at all. It cannot be said that I *know* everything that you know; rather we should say that I *remember* you. In other words, that I maintain your existence by an act of memory. The two functions, knowledge and memory, are not identical, although, of course, the second cannot be considered to exist without the first. But before we become entangled in our own terms, I should perhaps remind you that when I employ the word 'memory' I am only making use of a convenient approximation. Perhaps it would be helpful to say that my memory is comparable to the structure-memory of a living organism, although that, too, has certain semantic disadvantages. Were you about to make a remark, Doctor?"

"It still seems to me," Herman said stubbornly, "that if you remember me, structurally or otherwise, that includes everything I remember. If you're going to tell me that you remember human knowledge, including Freudian theory and practice, but are unable to manipulate it, that seems to me to be contradicted by internal evidence in what you've already said. For example, it's clear that in the field of epistemology—the knowledge of knowledge, you might say—you have the knowledge *and* manipulate it."

"Ah," said Secundus, smiling shyly, "but, you see, that happens to be my line. Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, being specializations, are not. As I mentioned previously, persons of our order are theoretically not capable of psychic deterioration. That is why we come to you, Dr. Raye. We are unable to help ourselves; we ask your help. We place ourselves unreservedly in your hands."

The question, "How was I chosen?" occurred to Herman, but he left it unasked. He knew that the answer was much likelier to be, "At random," than, "Because we wanted the most brilliant and talented psychoanalyst on the planet."

"I gather that I'm not the first person you've tried," he said.

"Oh, you saw Dr. Buddolphson departing? Yes, it is true that in our ignorance of the subject we did not immediately turn to practitioners of your psychological orientation. In fact, if you will not be offended, I may say that you are practically our last hope. We have already had one eminent gentleman whose method was simply to talk over Mr. Primus's problems with him and endeavor to help him reach an adjustment; he failed because Mr. Primus, so far as he is aware, has no problems except that he has lost his memory. Then we had another whose system, as he explained it to me, was simply to repeat, in a sympathetic manner, everything that the patient said to him; Mr. Primus was not sufficiently prolix for this method to be of avail.

"Then there was another who wished to treat Mr. Primus by encouraging him to relive his past experiences: 'taking him back along the time-track,' as he called it; but—" Secundus looked mournful—"Mr. Primus has actually *had* no experiences in the usual sense of the term, though he very obligingly made up a number of them. Our ontogeny, Dr. Raye, is so simple that it can scarcely be said to exist at all. Each of us normally has only one function, the one I have already mentioned, and, until this occurrence, it has always been fulfilled successfully.

"We also had a man who proposed to reawaken Mr. Primus's memory by electric shock, but Mr. Primus is quite impervious to currents of electricity and we were unable to hit upon an acceptable substitute. In short, Dr. Raye, if you should prove unable to help us, we will have no one left to fall back upon except, possibly, the Yogi."

"They might do you more good, at that," Herman said, looking at Mr. Primus. "Well, I'll do what I can, though the function of analysis is to get the patient to accept reality, and this is the opposite. What can you tell me, to begin with, about Mr. Primus's personality, the onset of the disturbance, and so on—and, in particular, what are you two? Who's your boss? What's it all for and how does it work?"

Secundus said, "I can give you very little assistance, I am afraid. I would characterize Primus as a very steady person, extremely accurate in his work, but not very imaginative. His memory loss occurred abruptly, as you yourself witnessed yesterday afternoon. As to your other questions—forgive me, Dr. Raye, but it is to your own advantage if I fail to answer them. I am, of course, the merest amateur in psychology, but I sincerely feel that your own psyche might be damaged if you were to learn the fragment of the truth which I could give you."

He paused. A sheaf of papers, which Herman had not noticed before, lay on a small table that he had not noticed, either. Secundus picked them up and handed them over.

"Here are testing materials," he said. "If you need anything else, you have only to call on me. But I trust you will find these complete."

He turned to go. "And one more thing, Dr. Raye," he said with an apologetic smile. "*Hurry*, if you possibly can."

Primus, looking rather like a sarcophagus ornament, lay limply supine on the ten-foot couch, arms at his sides, eyes closed. When Herman had first told him to relax, Primus had had to have the word carefully explained to him; from then on he had done it—or seemed to do it—perfectly.

In his preliminary tests, the Binet, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Index and the Berneuter P.I., he had drawn almost a complete blank. Standard testing methods did not work on Mr. Primus, and the reason was obvious enough. Mr. Primus simply was not a human being.

This room, no doubt, was an illusion, and so was Mr. Primus's anthropomorphic appearance....

Herman felt like a surgeon trying to operate blindfolded while wearing a catcher's mitt on each hand. But he kept trying; he was getting results, though whether or not they meant anything, he was unable to guess.

On the Rorschach they had done a little better, at least in volume of response. "That looks like a cliff," Primus would say eagerly. "That looks like a—piece of sandstone. This part looks like two volcanoes and a cave." Of course, Herman realized, the poor old gentleman was only trying to please him. He had no more idea than a goldfish what a volcano or a rock looked like, but he wanted desperately to help.

Even so, it was possible to score the results. According to Herman's interpretation, Primus was a case of arrested infantile sexualism, with traces of conversion hysteria and a strong Oedipus complex. Herman entered the protocol solemnly in his notes and kept going.

Next came free association, and, after that, recounting of dreams. Feeling that he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, Herman carefully explained to Primus what "sleep" and "dreams" were.

Primus had promised to do his best; he had been lying there now, without moving, for—how long? Startled, Herman looked at his watch. It had stopped.

Scoring the Rorschach alone, Herman realized suddenly, should have taken him nearly a full day, even considering the fact that he hadn't eaten anything, or taken time out to rest, or—Herman bewilderedly felt his jaw. There was only the slightest stubble. He didn't feel hungry or tired, or cramped from sitting....

"Secundus!" he called.

A door opened in the wall to his right, and Secundus stepped through. The door disappeared.

"Yes, Dr. Raye? Is anything wrong?"

"How long have I been here?"

Secundus' right-hand head looked embarrassed. "Well, Doctor, without bringing in the difficult questions of absolute versus relative duration, and the definition of an arbitrary position—"

"Don't stall. How long have I been here in my own subjective time?"

"Well, I was about to say, without being unnecessarily inclusive, the question is still very difficult. However, bearing in mind that the answer is only a rough approximation—about one hundred hours."

Herman rubbed his chin. "I don't like your tampering with me," he said slowly. "You've speeded me up—is that it? And at the same time inhibited my fatigue reactions, and God knows what else, so that I didn't even notice I'd been working longer than I normally could until just now?"

Secundus looked distressed. "I'm afraid I have made rather a botch of it, Dr. Raye. I should not have allowed you to notice at all, but it is growing increasingly difficult to restrain your fellow-creatures to their ordinary routines. My attention strayed, I am sorry to say." He glanced at the recumbent form of Primus. "My word! What is Mr. Primus doing, Dr. Raye?"

"Sleeping," Herman answered curtly.

"Remarkable! I hope he does not make a habit of it. Will he awaken soon, do you think, Doctor?"

"I have no idea," said Herman helplessly; but at that moment Primus stirred, opened his eyes, and sat up with his usual vague, kindly smile.

"Did you dream?" Herman asked him.

Primus blinked slowly. "Yes. Yes, I did," he said in his profoundly heavy voice.

"Tell me all you can remember about it."

"Well," said Primus, sinking back onto the couch, "I dreamed I was in a room with a large bed. It had heavy wooden posts and a big bolster. I wanted to lie down and rest in the bed, but the bolster made me uncomfortable. It was too dark to see, to rearrange the bed, so I tried to light a candle, but the matches kept going out...."

Herman took it all down, word for word, with growing excitement and growing dismay. The dream was too good. It might have come out of Dr. Freud's original case histories. When Primus had finished, Herman searched back through his notes. Did Primus *know* what a bed was, or

what a bolster was, or a candle? How much had Herman told him?

"Bed" was there, of course. Primus: "What are 'dreams?'" Herman: "Well, when a human being goes to bed, and sleeps...." "Bolster" was there, too, but not in the same sense. Herman: "To bolster its argument, the unconscious—what we call the id—frequently alters the person's likes and dislikes on what seem to be petty and commonplace subjects...." And "candle?" Herman: "I want you to understand that I don't know all about this subject myself, Mr. Primus. Nobody does; our knowledge is just a candle in the darkness...."

Herman gave up. He glanced at Secundus, who was watching him expectantly. "May I talk to you privately?"

"Of course." Secundus nodded to Primus, who stood up awkwardly and then vanished with a *pop*. Secundus tut-tutted regretfully.

Herman took a firm grip on himself. "Look," he said, "the data I have now suggest that Primus had some traumatic experience in his infancy which arrested his development in various ways and also strengthened his Oedipus complex—that is, intensified his feelings of fear, hatred and rivalry toward his father. Now, that may sound to you as if we're making some progress. I would feel that way myself—if I had the slightest reason for believing that Primus ever had a father."

Secundus started to speak; but Herman cut him off. "Wait, let me finish. I can go ahead on that basis, but as far as I'm concerned I might just as well be counting the angels on the head of a pin. You've got to give me more information, Secundus. I want to know who you are, and who Primus is, and whether there's any other being with whom Primus could possibly have a filial relationship. And if you can't tell me all that without giving me the Secret of the Universe, then you'd better give it to me whether it's good for me or not. I can't work in the dark."

Secundus pursed his lips. "There is justice in what you say, Doctor. Very well, I shall be entirely frank with you—in so far as it is possible for me to do so of course. Let's see, where can I begin?"

"First question," retorted Herman. "Who are you?"

"We are—" Secundus thought a moment, then spread his hands with a helpless smile. "There are no words, Doctor. To put the case in negatives, we are not evolved organisms, we are not mortal, we are not, speaking in the usual sense, alive, although, of course—I hope you will not be offended—neither are you."

Herman's brow wrinkled. "Are you *real*?" he demanded finally.

Secundus looked embarrassed. "You have found me out, Dr. Raye. I endeavored to give you that impression—through vanity, I am ashamed to say—but, unhappily, it is not true. I, too, belong to the realm of noumena."

"Then, blast it all, what *is* real? This planet isn't. You're not. What's it all for?" He paused a moment reflectively. "We're getting on to my second question, about Primus's attitude toward his 'father.' Perhaps I should have asked just now, 'Who is real?' Who remembers you, Secundus?"

"This question, unfortunately, is the one I cannot answer with complete frankness, Doctor. I assure you that it is not because I do not wish to; I have no option in the matter. I can tell you only that there is a Person of whom it might be said that He stands in the parental relationship to Primus, to me, and all the rest of our order."

"God?" Herman inquired. "Jahweh? Allah?"

"Please, no names, Doctor." Secundus looked apprehensive.

"Then, damn it, tell me the rest!" Herman realized vaguely that he was soothing his own hurt vanity at Secundus's expense, but he was enjoying himself too much to stop. "You're afraid of something; that's been obvious right along. And there must be a time limit on it, or you wouldn't be rushing me. Why? Are you afraid that if this unnamable Person finds out you've botched your job, He'll wipe you out of existence and start over with a new bunch?"

A cold wind blew down Herman's back. "Not us alone, Dr. Raye," said Secundus gravely. "If the Inspector discovers this blunder—and the time is coming soon when He must—no corrections will be attempted. When a mistake occurs, it is—painted out."

"Oh," said Herman after a moment. He sat down again, weakly. "How long have we got?"

"Approximately one and a quarter days have gone by at the Earth's normal rate since Primus lost his memory," Secundus said. "I have not been able to 'speed you up,' as you termed it, by more than a twenty-to-one ratio. The deadline will have arrived, by my calculation, in fifteen minutes of normal time, or five hours at your present accelerated rate."

Primus stepped into the room, crossed to the couch and lay down placidly. Secundus turned to go, then paused.

"As for your final question, Doctor—you might think of the Universe as a Pointillist painting, in which this planet is one infinitesimally small dot of color. The work is wholly imaginary, of course, since neither the canvas nor the pigment has what you would term an independent existence. Nevertheless, the artist takes it seriously. He would not care to find, so to speak, mustaches daubed on it."

Herman sat limply, staring after him as he moved to the door. Secundus turned once more.

"I hope you will not think that I am displeased with you, Doctor," he said. "On the contrary, I feel that you are accomplishing more than anyone else has. However, should you succeed, as I devoutly hope, there may not be sufficient time to congratulate you as you deserve. I shall have to replace you immediately in your normal world-line, for your absence would constitute as noticeable a flaw as that of the planet. In that event, my present thanks and congratulations will have to serve."

With a friendly smile, he disappeared.

Herman wound his watch.

Two hours later, Primus's answers to his questions began to show a touch of resentment and surly defiance. *Transference*, Herman thought, with a constriction of his throat, and kept working desperately.

Three hours. "What does the bolster remind you of?"

"I seem to see a big cylinder rolling through space, sweeping the stars out of its way...."

Four hours. Only three minutes left now, in the normal world. *I can't wait to get any deeper*, Herman thought. *It's got to be now or never.*

"You must understand that these feelings of resentment and hatred are normal," he said, trying to keep the strain out of his voice, "but, at the same time, you have outgrown them—you can rise above them now. You are an individual in your own right, Primus. You have a job to do that only you can fill, and it's an important job. That's what matters, not all this infantile emotional clutter...."

He talked on, not daring to look at his watch.

Primus looked up, and a huge smile broke over his face. He began, "Why, of—"

Herman found himself walking along Forty-second Street, heading toward the Hudson. The pavement was solid under his feet; the canyon between the buildings was filled with the soft violet-orange glow of a summer evening in New York. In the eyes of the people he passed, he saw the same incredulous relief he felt. It was over. He'd done it.

He'd broken all the rules, but, incredibly, he'd got results.

Then he looked up and a chill spread over him. No one who knew the city would accept that ithyphallic parody as the Empire State Building, or those huge fleshy curves, as wanton as the mountains in which Mr. Maugham's "Sadie Thompson" had her lusty existence, as the prosaic hills of New Jersey.

Psychoanalysis had certainly removed Mr. Primus's inhibitions. The world was like a fence scrawled on by a naughty little boy. Mr. Primus would outgrow it in time, but life until then might be somewhat disconcerting.

Those two clouds, for instance....

—FRANKLIN ABEL

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