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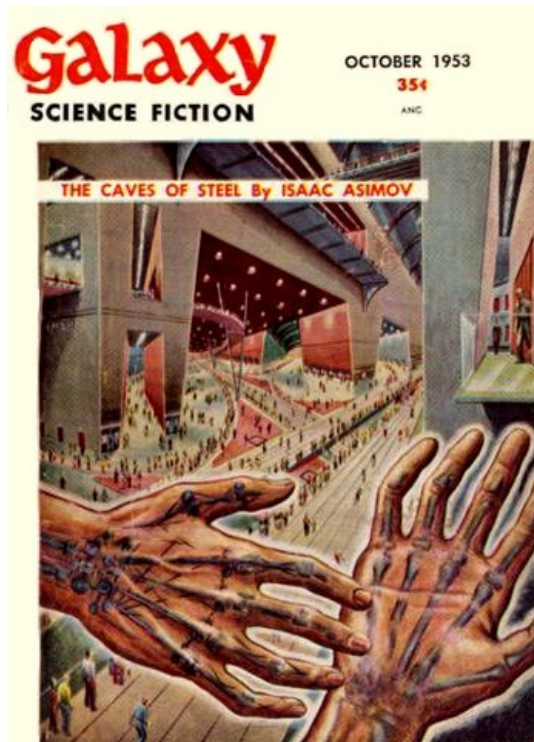
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AT THE POST ***



AT THE POST

By H. L. GOLD

Illustrated by VIDMER

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When Clocker Locke came into the Blue Ribbon, on 49th Street west of Broadway, he saw that nobody had told Doc Hawkins about his misfortune. Doc, a pub-crawling, non-practicing general practitioner who wrote a daily medical column for a local tabloid, was celebrating his release from the alcoholic ward, but his guests at the rear table of the restaurant weren't in any mood for celebration.

"What's the matter with you—have you suddenly become immune to

How does a person come to be scratched from the human race? Psychiatry did not have the answer—perhaps Clocker's turf science did!

liquor?" Clocker heard Doc ask irritably, while Clocker was passing the gem merchants, who, because they needed natural daylight to do business, were traditionally accorded the tables nearest the windows. "I said the drinks were on me, didn't I?" Doc insisted. "Now let us have some bright laughter and sparkling wit, or must we wait until Clocker shows up before there is levity in the house?"

Seeing the others glance toward the door, Doc turned and looked at Clocker. His mouth fell open silently, for the first time in Clocker's memory.

"Good Lord!" he said after a moment. "Clocker's become a *character*!"

Clocker felt embarrassed. He still wasn't used to wearing a business suit of subdued gray, and black oxfords, instead of his usual brilliant sports jacket, slacks and two-tone suede shoes; a tie with timid little figures, whereas he had formerly been an authority on hand-painted cravats; and a plain wristwatch in place of his spectacular chronograph.

By all Broadway standards, he knew, Doc was correct—he'd become strange and eccentric, a character.

"It was Zelda's idea," Clocker explained somberly, sitting down and shaking his head at the waiter who ambled over. "She wanted to make a gentleman out of me."

"*Wanted to?*" Doc repeated, bewildered. "You two kids got married just before they took my snakes away. Don't tell me you phhht already!"

Clocker looked appealingly at the others. They became busy with drinks and paper napkins.

Naturally, Doc Hawkins knew the background: That Clocker was a race handicapper—publisher, if you could call it that, of a tiny tip sheet—for Doc, in need of drinking money, had often consulted him professionally. Also that Clocker had married Zelda, the noted 52nd Street stripteuse, who had social aspirations. What remained to be told had occurred during Doc's inevitably temporary cure.

"Isn't anybody going to tell me?" Doc demanded.

"It was right after you tried to take the warts off a fire hydrant and they came and got you," said Clocker, "that Zelda started hearing voices. It got real bad."

"How bad?"

"She's at Glendale Center in an upholstered room. I just came back from visiting her."

Doc gulped his entire drink, a positive sign that he was upset, or happy, or not feeling anything in particular. Now, however, he was noticeably upset.

"Did the psychiatrists give you a diagnosis?" he asked.

"I got it memorized. Catatonia. Dementia praecox, what they used to call, one of the brain vets told me, and he said it's hopeless."

"Rough," said Doc. "Very rough. The outlook is never good in such cases."

"Maybe they can't help her," Clocker said harshly, "but I will."

"People are not horses," Doc reminded him.

"I've noticed that," said Handy Sam, the armless wonder at the flea circus, drinking beer because he had an ingrown toenail and couldn't hold a shot glass. Now that Clocker had told the grim story, he felt free to talk, which he did enthusiastically. "Clocker's got a giant brain, Doc. Who was it said Warlock'd turn into a dog in his third year? Clocker, the only dopester in the racket. And that's just one—"

"Zelda was my best flesh act," interrupted Arnold Wilson Wyle, a ten-percenter whom video had saved from alimony jail. "A solid boffola in the bop basements. Nobody regrets her sad condition more than me, Clocker, but it's a sure flop, what you got in mind. Think of your public. For instance, what's good at Hialeah? My bar bill is about to be foreclosed and I can use a long shot."

Clocker bounced his fist on the moist table. "Those couch artists don't know what's wrong with Zelda. I do."

"You do?" Doc asked, startled.

"Well, almost. I'm so close, I can hear the finish-line camera clicking."

Buttonhole grasped Doc's lapel and hung on with characteristic avidity; he was perhaps Clocker's most pious subscriber. "Doping races is a science. Clocker maybe never doped the human race, but I got nine to five he can do it. Go on, tell him, Clocker."

Doc Hawkins ran together the rings he had been making with the wet bottom of his tumbler. "I shall be most interested," he said with tabloid irony, clearly feeling that immediate disillusionment was the most humane thing for Clocker. "Perhaps we can collaborate on an article for the psychiatric journals."

"All right, look." Clocker pulled out charts resembling those he worked with when making turf selections. "Zelda's got catatonia, which is the last heat in the schizophrenia parlay. She used to be a hooper before she started undressing for dough, and now she does time-steps all day."

Doc nodded into a fresh glass that the waiter had put before him. "Stereotyped movements are typical of catatonia. They derive from thwarted or repressed instinctual drive; in most instances, the residue of childhood frustrations."

"She dance all day, huh, Clocker?" asked Oil Pocket, the Oklahoma Cherokee who, with the income of several wells, was famed for angeling bareback shows. He had a glass of tequila in one hand, the salted half of a lemon in the other. "She dance good?"

"That's just it," Clocker said. "She does these time-steps, the first thing you learn in hoofing, over and over, ten-fifteen hours a day. And she keeps talking like she's giving lessons to some jerk kid who can't get it straight. And she was the kid with the hot routines, remember."

"The hottest," agreed Arnold Wilson Wyle. "Zelda doing time-steps is like Heifetz fiddling at weddings."

"I still like to put her in show," Oil Pocket grunted. "She stacked like brick tepee. Don't have to dance good."

"You'll have a long wait," observed Doc sympathetically, "in spite of what our young friend here says. Continue, young friend."

Clocker spread his charts. He needed the whole table. The others removed their drinks, Handy Sam putting his on the floor so he could reach it more easily.

"This is what I got out of checking all the screwball factories I could reach personal and by mail," Clocker said. "I went around and talked to the doctors and watched the patients in the places near here, and wrote to the places I couldn't get to. Then I broke everything down like it was a stud and track record."

Buttonhole tugged Doc's lapel. "That ain't scientific, I suppose," he challenged.

"Duplication of effort," Doc replied, patiently allowing Buttonhole to retain his grip. "It was all done in an organized fashion over a period of more than half a century. But let us hear the rest."

"First," said Clocker, "there are more male bats than fillies."

"Females are inherently more stable, perhaps because they have a more balanced chromosome arrangement."

"There are more nuts in the brain rackets than labor chumps."

"Intellectual activity increases the area of conflict."

"There are less in the sticks than in the cities, and practically none among the savages. I mean real savages," Clocker told Handy Sam, "not marks for con merchants."

"I was wondering," Handy Sam admitted.

"Complex civilization creates psychic insecurity," said Doc.

"When these catatonics pull out, they don't remember much or maybe nothing," Clocker went on, referring to his charts.

Doc nodded his shaggy white head. "Protective amnesia."

"I seen hundreds of these mental gimps. They work harder and longer at what they're doing, even just laying down and doing nothing, than they ever did when they were regular citizens."

"Concentration of psychic energy, of course."

"And they don't get a damn cent for it."

Doc hesitated, put down his half-filled tumbler. "I beg your pardon?"

"I say they're getting stiffed," Clocker stated. "Anybody who works that hard ought to get paid. I don't mean it's got to be money, although that's the only kind of pay Zelda'd work for. Right, Arnold?"

"Well, sure," said Arnold Wilson Wyle wonderingly. "I never thought of it like that. Zelda doing

time-steps for nothing ten-fifteen hours a day—that ain't Zelda."

"If you ask me, she *likes* her job," Clocker said. "Same with the other catatonics I seen. But for no pay?"

Doc surprisingly pushed his drink away, something that only a serious medical puzzle could ever accomplish. "I don't understand what you're getting at."

"I don't know these other cata-characters, but I do know Zelda," said Arnold Wilson Wyle. "She's got to get something out of all that work. Clocker says it's the same with the others and I take his word. What are they knocking theirself out for if it's for free?"

"They gain some obscure form of emotional release or repetitive gratification," Doc explained.

"Zelda?" exploded Clocker. "You offer her a deal like that for a club date and she'd get ruptured laughing."

"I tell her top billing," Oil Pocket agreed, "plenty ads, plenty publicity, whole show built around her. Wampum, she says; save money on ads and publicity, give it to her. Zelda don't count coups."

Doc Hawkins called over the waiter, ordered five fingers instead of his customary three. "Let us not bicker," he told Clocker. "Continue."

Clocker looked at his charts again. "There ain't a line that ain't represented, even the heavy rackets and short gifts. It's a regular human steeplechase. And these sour apples do mostly whatever they did for a living—draw pictures, sell shoes, do lab experiments, sew clothes, Zelda with her time-steps. By the hour! In the air!"

"In the air?" Handy Sam repeated. "Flying?"

"Imaginary functioning," Doc elaborated for him. "They have nothing in their hands. Pure hallucination. Systematic delusion."

"Sign language?" Oil Pocket suggested.

"That," said Clocker, before Doc Hawkins could reject the notion, "is on the schnoz, Injun. Buttonhole says I'm like doping races. He's right. I'm working out what some numbers-runner tells me is probabilities. I got it all here," he rapped the charts, "and it's the same thing all these flop-ears got in common. Not their age, not their jobs, not their—you should pardon the expression—sex. They're *teaching*."

Buttonhole looked baffled. He almost let go of Doc's lapel.

Handy Sam scratched the back of his neck thoughtfully with a big toe. "Teaching, Clocker? Who? You said they're kept in solitary."

"They are. I don't know who. I'm working on that now."

Doc shoved the charts aside belligerently to make room for his beefy elbows. He leaned forward and glowered at Clocker. "Your theory belongs in the Sunday supplement of the alleged newspaper I write for. Not all catatonics work, as you call it. What about those who stand rigid and those who lie in bed all the time?"

"I guess you think that's easy," Clocker retorted. "You try it sometime. I did. It's work, I tell you." He folded his charts and put them back into the inside pocket of his conservative jacket. He looked sick with longing and loneliness. "Damn, I miss that mouse. I got to save her, Doc! Don't you get that?"

Doc Hawkins put a chunky hand gently on Clocker's arm. "Of course, boy. But how can you succeed when trained men can't?"

"Well, take Zelda. She did time-steps when she was maybe five and going to dancing school—"

"Time-steps have some symbolic significance to her," Doc said with more than his usual tact. "My theory is that she was compelled to go against her will, and this is a form of unconscious rebellion."

"They don't have no significance to her," Clocker argued doggedly. "She can do time-steps blindfolded and on her knees with both ankles tied behind her back." He pried Buttonhole's hand off Doc's lapel, and took hold of both of them himself. "I tell you she's teaching, explaining, breaking in some dummy who can't get the hang of it!"

"But who?" Doc objected. "Psychiatrists? Nurses? You? Admit it, Clocker—she goes on doing time-steps whether she's alone or not. In fact, she never knows if anybody is with her. Isn't that so?"

"Yeah," Clocker said grudgingly. "That's what has me boxed."

Oil Pocket grunted tentatively, "White men not believe in spirits. Injuns do. Maybe Zelda talk to spirits."

"I been thinking of that," confessed Clocker, looking at the red angel unhappily. "Spirits is all I can figure. Ghosts. Spooks. But if Zelda and these other catatonics are teaching ghosts, these ghosts are the dumbest jerks anywhere. They make her and the rest go through time-steps or sewing or selling shoes again and again. If they had half a brain, they'd get it in no time."

"Maybe spirits not hear good," Oil Pocket offered, encouraged by Clocker's willingness to consider the hypothesis.

"Could be," Clocker said with partial conviction. "If we can't see them, it may be just as hard for them to see or hear us."

Oil Pocket anxiously hitched his chair closer. "Old squaw name Dry Ground Never Rainy Season—what you call old maid—hear spirits all the time. She keep telling us what they say. Nobody listen."

"How come?" asked Clocker interestedly.

"She deaf, blind. Not hear thunder. Walk into cactus, yell like hell. She hardly see us, not hear us at all, how come she see and hear spirits? Just talk, talk, talk all the time."

Clocker frowned, thinking. "These catatonics don't see or hear us, but they sure as Citation hear and see *something*."

Doc Hawkins stood up with dignity, hardly weaving, and handed a bill to the waiter. "I was hoping to get a private racing tip from you, Clocker. Freshly sprung from the alcoholic ward, I can use some money. But I see that your objectivity is impaired by emotional considerations. I wouldn't risk a dime on your advice even after a race is run."

"I didn't expect you to believe me," said Clocker despairingly. "None of you pill-pushers ever do."

"I can't say about your psycho-doping," declared Arnold Wilson Wyle, also rising. "But I got faith in your handicapping. I'd still like a long shot at Hialeah if you happen to have one."

"I been too busy trying to help Zelda," Clocker said in apology.

They left, Doc Hawkins pausing at the bar to pick up a credit bottle to see him through his overdue medical column.

Handy Sam slipped on his shoes to go. "Stick with it, Clocker. I said you was a scientist—"

"I said it," contradicted Buttonhole, lifting himself out of the chair on Handy Sam's lapels. "If anybody can lick this caper, Clocker can."

Oil Pocket glumly watched them leave. "Doctors not think spirits real," he said. "I get sick, go to Reservation doctor. He give me medicine. I get sicker. Medicine man see evil spirits make me sick. Shakes rattle. Dances. Evil spirits go. I get better."

"I don't know what in hell to think," confided Clocker, miserable and confused. "If it would help Zelda, I'd cut my throat from head to foot so I could become a spirit and get the others to lay off her."

"Then you spirit, she alive. Making love not very practical."

"Then what do I do—hire a medium?"

"Get medicine man from Reservation. He drive out evil spirits."

Clocker pushed away from the table. "So help me, I'll do it if I can't come up with something cheaper than paying freight from Oklahoma."

"Get Zelda out, I pay and put her in show."

"Then if I haul the guy here and it don't work, I'm in hock to you. Thanks, Oil Pocket, but I'll try my way first."

Back in his hotel room, waiting for the next day so he could visit Zelda, Clocker was like an addict at the track with every cent on a hunch. After weeks of neglecting his tip sheet to study catatonia, he felt close to the payoff.

He spent most of the night smoking and walking around the room, trying not to look at the jars and hairbrushes on the bureau. He missed the bobbypins on the floor, the nylons drying across the shower rack, the toothpaste tubes squeezed from the top. He'd put her perfumes in a drawer, but the smell was so pervasively haunting that it was like having her stand invisibly behind him.

As soon as the sun came up, he hurried out and took a cab. He'd have to wait until visiting hours, but he couldn't stand the slowness of the train. Just being in the same building with her would—almost—be enough.



When he finally was allowed into Zelda's room, he spent all his time watching her silently, taking in every intently mumbled word and movement. Her movements, in spite of their gratingly basic monotony, were particularly something to watch, for Zelda had blue-black hair down to her shapely shoulders, wide-apart blue eyes, sulky mouth, and an astonishing body. She used all her physical equipment with unconscious provocativeness, except her eyes, which were blankly distant.

Clocker stood it as long as he could and then burst out, "Damn it, Zelda, how long can they take to learn a time-step?"

She didn't answer. She didn't see him, hear him, or feel him. Even when he kissed her on the back of the neck, her special place, she did not twist her shoulder up with the sudden thrill.

He took out the portable phonograph he'd had permission to bring in, and hopefully played three of her old numbers—a ballet tap, a soft shoe, and, most potent of all, her favorite slinky strip tune. Ordinarily, the beat would have thrown her off, but not any more.

"Dead to this world," muttered Clocker dejectedly.

He shook Zelda. Even when she was off-balance, her feet

tapped out the elementary routine.

"Look, kid," he said, his voice tense and angry, "I don't know who these squares are that you're working for, but tell them if they got you, they got to take me, too."

Whatever he expected—ghostly figures to materialize or a chill wind from nowhere—nothing happened. She went on tapping.

He sat down on her bed. *They* picked people the way he picked horses, except he picked to win and they picked to show. To show? Of course. Zelda was showing them how to dance and also, probably, teaching them about the entertainment business. The others had obviously been selected for what they knew, which they went about doing as singlemindedly as she did.

He had a scheme that he hadn't told Doc because he knew it was crazy. At any rate, he hoped it was. The weeks without her had been a hell of loneliness—for him, not for her; she wasn't even aware of the awful loss. He'd settle for that, but even better would be freeing her somehow. The only way he could do it would be to find out who controlled her and what they were after. Even with that information, he couldn't be sure of succeeding, and there was a good chance that he might also be caught, but that didn't matter.

The idea was to interest *them* in what he knew so *they* would want to have him explain all he knew about racing. After that—well, he'd make his plans when he knew the setup.

Clocker came close to the automatic time-step machine that had been his wife. He began talking to her, very loudly, about the detailed knowledge needed to select winners, based on stud records, past performances of mounts and jockeys, condition of track and the influence of the weather—always, however, leaving out the data that would make sense of the whole complicated industry. It was like roping a patsy and holding back the buzzer until the dough was down. He knew he risked being cold-decked, but it was worth the gamble. His only worry was that hoarseness would stop him before he hooked *their* interest.

An orderly, passing in the corridor, heard his voice, opened the door and asked with ponderous humor, "What you doing, Clocker—trying to take out a membership card in this country club?"

Clocker leaped slightly. "Uh, working on a private theory," he said, collected his things with a little more haste than he would have liked to show, kissed Zelda without getting any response whatever, and left for the day.

But he kept coming back every morning. He was about to give up when the first feelings of unreality dazed and dazzled him. He carefully suppressed his excitement and talked more loudly about racing. The world seemed to be slipping away from him. He could have hung onto it if he had wanted. He didn't. He let the voices come, vague and far away, distorted, not quite meaningless, but not adding up to much, either.

And then, one day, he didn't notice the orderly come in to tell him that visiting hours were over. Clocker was explaining the fundamentals of horse racing ... meticulously, with immense patience, over and over and over ... and didn't hear him.

It had been so easy that Clocker was disappointed. The first voices had argued gently and reasonably over him, each claiming priority for one reason or another, until one either was assigned or pulled rank. That was the voice that Clocker eventually kept hearing—a quiet, calm voice that constantly faded and grew stronger, as if it came from a great distance and had trouble with static. Clocker remembered the crystal set his father had bought when radio was still a toy. It was like that.

Then the unreality vanished and was replaced by a dramatic new reality. He was somewhere far away. He knew it wasn't on Earth, for this was like nothing except, perhaps, a World's Fair. The buildings were low and attractively designed, impressive in spite of their softly blended spectrum of pastel colors. He was in a huge square that was grass-covered and tree-shaded and decorated with classical sculpture. Hundreds of people stood with him, and they all looked shaken and scared. Clocker felt nothing but elation; he'd arrived. It made no difference that he didn't know where he was or anything about the setup. He was where Zelda was.

"How did I get here?" asked a little man with bifocals and a vest that had pins and threaded needles stuck in it. "I can't take time for pleasure trips. Mrs. Jacobs is coming in for her fitting tomorrow and she'll positively murder me if her dress ain't ready."

"She can't," Clocker said. "Not any more."

"You mean we're dead?" someone else asked, awed. It was a softly pudgy woman with excessively blonde hair, a greasily red-lipped smile and a flowered housecoat. She looked around with great approval. "Hey, this ain't bad! Like I always said, either I'm no worse than anybody else or they're no better'n me. How about that, dearie?"

"Don't ask me," Clocker evaded. "I think somebody's going to get an earful, but you ain't dead. That much I can tell you."

The woman looked disappointed.

Some people in the crowd were complaining that they had families to take care of while others were worried about leaving their businesses. They all grew silent, however, when a man climbed up on a sort of marble rostrum in front of them. He was very tall and dignified and wore formal clothes and had a white beard parted in the center.

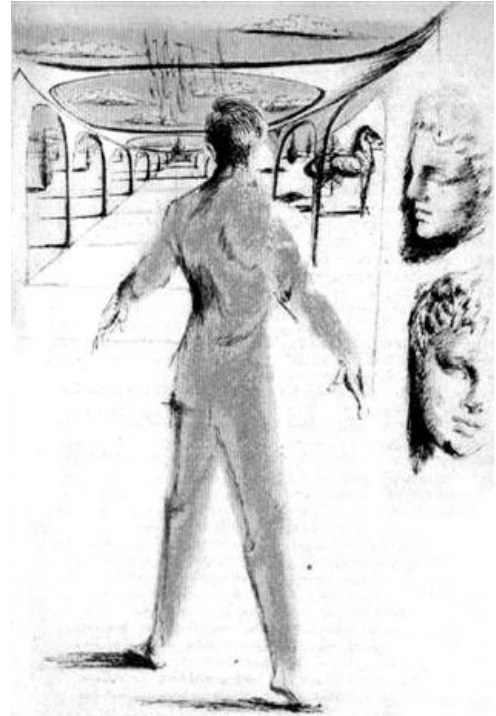
"Please feel at ease," he said in a big, deep, soothing voice, like a radio announcer for a symphony broadcast. "You are not in any danger. No harm will come to you."

"You *sure* we ain't dead, sweetie?" the woman in the flowered housecoat asked Clocker. "Isn't that—"

"No," said Clocker. "He'd have a halo, wouldn't he?"

"Yeah, I guess so," she agreed doubtfully.

The white-bearded man went on, "If you will listen carefully to this orientation lecture, you will know where you are and why. May I introduce Gerald W. Harding? Dr. Harding is in charge of this reception center. Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Harding."



A number of people applauded out of habit ... probably lecture fans or semi-pro TV studio audiences. The rest, including Clocker, waited as an aging man in a white lab smock, heavy-rimmed eyeglasses and smooth pink cheeks, looking like a benevolent doctor in a mouthwash ad, stood up and faced the crowd. He put his hands behind his back, rocked on his toes a few times, and smiled benevolently.

"Thank you, Mr. Calhoun," he said to the bearded man who was seating himself on a marble bench. "Friends—and I trust you will soon regard us *as* your friends—I know you are puzzled at all this." He waved a white hand at the buildings around them. "Let me explain. You have been chosen—yes, carefully screened and selected—to help us in undoubtedly the greatest cause of all history. I can see that you are asking yourselves *why* you were selected and what this cause is. I shall describe it briefly. You'll learn more about it as we work together in this vast and noble experiment."

The woman in the flowered housecoat looked enormously flattered. The little tailor was nodding to show he understood the points covered thus far. Glancing at the rest of the crowd, Crocker realized that he was the only one who had this speech pegged. It was a pitch. These men were out for something.

He wished Doc Hawkins and Oil Pocket were there. Doc doubtless would have searched his unconscious for symbols of childhood traumas to explain the whole thing; he would never have accepted it as *some* kind of reality. Oil Pocket, on the other hand, would somehow have tried to equate the substantial Mr. Calhoun and Dr. Harding with tribal spirits. Of the two, Clocker felt that Oil Pocket would have been closer.

Or maybe he was in his own corner of psychosis, while Oil Pocket would have been in another, more suited to Indians. Spirits or figments? Whatever they were, they looked as real as anybody he'd ever known, but perhaps that was the naturalness of the supernatural or the logic of insanity.

Clocker shivered, aware that he had to wait for the answer. The one thing he did know, as an authority on cons, was that this had the smell of one, supernatural or otherwise. He watched and listened like a detective shadowing an escape artist.

"This may be something of a shock," Dr. Harding continued with a humorous, sympathetic smile. "I hope it will not be for long. Let me state it in its simplest terms. You know that there are billions of stars in the Universe, and that stars have planets as naturally as cats have kittens. A good many of these planets are inhabited. Some life-forms are intelligent, very much so, while others are not. In almost all instances, the dominant form of life is quite different from—yours."

Unable to see the direction of the con, Clocker felt irritated.

"Why do I say *yours*, not *ours*?" asked Dr. Harding. "Because, dear friends, Mr. Calhoun and I are not of your planet or solar system. No commotion, please!" he urged, raising his hands as the crowd stirred bewilderedly. "Our names are not Calhoun and Harding; we adopted those because our own are so alien that you would be unable to pronounce them. We are not formed as you see us, but this is how we *might* look if we were human beings, which, of course, we are not. Our true appearance seems to be—ah—rather confusing to human eyes."

Nuts, Clocker thought irreverently. Get to the point.

"I don't think this is the time for detailed explanations," Dr. Harding hurried on before there were any questions. "We are friendly, even altruistic inhabitants of a planet 10,000 light-years from Earth. Quite a distance, you are thinking; how did we get here? The truth is that we are not 'here' and neither are you. 'Here' is a projection of thought, a hypothetical point in space, a place that exists only by mental force. Our physical appearances and yours are telepathic representations. Actually, our bodies are on our own respective planets."

"Very confusing," complained a man who looked like a banker. "Do you have any idea of what he's trying to tell us?"

"Not yet," Clocker replied with patient cynicism. "He'll give us the convincer after the buildup."

The man who looked like a banker stared sharply at Clocker and moved away. Clocker shrugged. He was more concerned with why he didn't feel tired or bored just standing there and listening. There was not even an overpowering sense of urgency and annoyance, although he wanted to find Zelda and this lecture was keeping him from looking for her. It was as if his emotions were somehow being reduced in intensity. They existed, but lacked the strength they should have had.

So he stood almost patiently and listened to Dr. Harding say, "Our civilization is considerably older than yours. For many of your centuries, we have explored the Universe, both physically and telepathically. During this exploration, we discovered your planet. We tried to establish communication, but there were grave difficulties. It was the time of your Dark Ages, and I'm sorry to report that those people we made contact with were generally burned at the stake." He shook his head regretfully. "Although your civilization has made many advances in some ways, communication is still hampered—as much by false knowledge as by real ignorance. You'll see in a moment why it is very unfortunate."

"Here it comes," Clocker said to those around him. "He's getting ready finally to slip us the sting."

The woman in the housecoat looked indignant. "The nerve of a crumb like you making a crack about such a fine, decent gentleman!"

"A blind man could see he's sincere," argued the tailor. "Just think of it—*me*, in a big experiment! Will Molly be surprised when she finds out!"

"She won't find out and I'll bet she's surprised right now," Clocker assured him.

"The human body is an unbelievably complicated organism," Dr. Harding was saying. The statement halted the private discussion and seemed to please his listeners for some reason. "We learned that when we tried to assume control of individuals for the purpose of communication. Billions of neural relays, thousands of unvolitional functions—it is no exaggeration to compare our efforts with those of a monkey in a power plant. At our direction, for example, several writers produced books that were fearfully garbled. Our attempts with artists were no more successful. The static of interstellar space was partly responsible, but mostly it was the fact that we simply couldn't work our way through the maze that is the human mind and body."

The crowd was sympathetic. Clocker was neither weary nor bored, merely longing for Zelda and, as a student of grifts, dimly irritated. Why hold back when the chumps were set up?

"I don't want to make a long story of our problems," smiled Dr. Harding. "If we could visit your planet in person, there would be no difficulty. But 10,000 light-years is an impossible barrier to all except thought waves, which, of course, travel at infinite speed. And this, as I said before, is very unfortunate, because the human race is doomed."

The tailor stiffened. "Doomed? Molly? My kids? All my customers?"

"*Your* customers?" yelped the woman in the housecoat. "How about mine? What's gonna happen, the world should be doomed?"

Clocker found admiration for Dr. Harding's approach. It was a line tried habitually by politicians, but they didn't have the same kind of captive audience, the control, the contrived background. A cosmic pitch like this could bring a galactic payoff, whatever it might be. But it didn't take his mind off Zelda.

"I see you are somewhat aghast," Dr. Harding observed. "But is my statement *really* so unexpected? You know the history of your own race—a record of incessant war, each more devastating than the last. Now, finally, Man has achieved the power of worldwide destruction. The next war, or the one after that, will unquestionably be the end not only of civilization, but of humanity—perhaps even your entire planet. Our peaceful, altruistic civilization might help avert catastrophe, but that would require our physical landing on Earth, which is not possible. Even if it were, there is not enough time. Armageddon draws near.

"Then why have we brought you here?" asked Dr. Harding. "Because Man, in spite of his suicidal blunders, is a magnificent race. He must not vanish without leaving a *complete record* of his achievements."

The crowd nodded soberly. Clocker wished he had a cigarette and his wife. In her right mind, Zelda was unswervingly practical and she would have had some noteworthy comments to make.

"This is the task we must work together on," said Dr. Harding forcefully. "Each of you has a skill, a talent, a special knowledge we need for the immense record we are compiling. Every area of human society must be covered. We need you—urgently! Your data will become part of an imperishable social document that shall exist untold eons after mankind has perished."

Visibly, the woman in the housecoat was stunned. "They want to put down what *I* can tell them?"

"And tailoring?" asked the little man with the pin-cushion vest. "How to make buttonholes and press clothes?"

The man who looked like a banker had his chin up and a pleased expression on his pudgy face.

"I always knew I'd be appreciated some day," he stated smugly. "I can tell them things about finance that those idiots in the main office can't even guess at."

Mr. Calhoun stood up beside Dr. Harding on the rostrum. He seemed infinitely benign as he raised his hands and his deep voice.

"Friends, we need *your* help, *your* knowledge. I *know* you don't want the human race to vanish without a *trace*, as though it had never existed. I'm *sure* it thrills you to realize that some researcher, *far* in the *future*, will one day use the very knowledge that *you* gave. Think what it means to leave *your* personal imprint indelibly on cosmic history!" He paused and leaned forward. "Will you help us?"

The faces glowed, the hands went up, the voices cried that they would.

Dazzled by the success of the sell, Clocker watched the people happily and flatteredly follow their frock-coated guides toward the various buildings, which appeared to have been laid out according to very broad categories of human occupation.

He found himself impelled along with the chattering, excited woman in the housecoat toward a cerise structure marked SPORTS AND RACKETS. It seemed that she had been angry at not having been interviewed for a recent epic survey, and this was her chance to decant the experiences of twenty years.

Clocker stopped listening to her gabble and looked for the building that Zelda would probably be in. He saw ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT, but when he tried to go there, he felt some compulsion keep him heading toward his own destination.

Looking back helplessly, he went inside.

He found that he was in a cubicle with a fatherly kind of man who had thin gray hair, kindly eyes and a firm jaw, and who introduced himself as Eric Barnes. He took Clocker's name, age, specific trade, and gave him a serial number which, he explained, would go on file at the central archives on his home planet, cross-indexed in multiple ways for instant reference.

"Now," said Barnes, "here is our problem, Mr. Locke. We are making two kinds of perpetual records. One is written; more precisely, microscribed. The other is a wonderfully exact duplicate of your cerebral pattern—in more durable material than brain matter, of course."

"Of course," Clocker said, nodding like an obedient patsy.

"The verbal record is difficult enough, since much of the data you give us must be, by its nature, foreign to us. The duplication of your cerebral pattern, however, is even more troublesome. Besides the inevitable distortion caused by a distance of 10,000 light-years and the fields of gravitation and radiation of all types intervening, the substance we use in place of brain cells absorbs memory quite slowly." Barnes smiled reassuringly. "But you'll be happy to know that the impression, once made, can *never* be lost or erased!"

"Delighted," Clocker said flatly. "Tickled to pieces."

"I knew you would be. Well, let us proceed. First, a basic description of horse racing."



Clocker began to give it. Barnes held him down to a single sentence—"To check reception and retention," he said.

The communication box on the desk lit up when Clocker repeated the sentence a few times, and a voice from the box said, "Increase output. Initial impression weak. Also wave distortion. Correct and continue."

Barnes carefully adjusted the dials and Clocker went on repeating the sentence, slowing down to the speed Barnes requested. He did it automatically after a while, which gave him a chance to think.

He had no plan to get Zelda out of here; he was improvising and he didn't like it. The setup still had him puzzled. He knew he wasn't dreaming all this, for there were details his imagination could never have supplied, and the notion of spirits with scientific devices would baffle even Oil Pocket.

Everybody else appeared to accept these men as the aliens they claimed to be, but Clocker, fearing a con he couldn't understand, refused to. He had no other explanation, though, no evidence of any kind except deep suspicion of any noble-sounding enterprise. In his harsh experience, they always had a profit angle hidden somewhere.

Until he knew more, he had to go along with the routine, hoping he would eventually find a way out for Zelda and himself. While he was repeating his monotonous sentence, he wondered what his body was doing back on Earth. Lying in a bed, probably, since he wasn't being asked to perform any physical jobs like Zelda's endless time-step.

That reminded him of Doc Hawkins and the psychiatrists. There must be some here; he wished vengefully that he could meet them and see what they thought of their theories now.

Then came the end of what was apparently the work day.

"We're making splendid progress," Barnes told him. "I know how tiresome it is to keep saying the same thing over and over, but the distance is *such* a great obstacle. I think it's amazing that we can even *bridge* it, don't you? Just imagine—the light that's reaching Earth at this very minute left our star when mammoths were roaming your western states and mankind lived in caves! And yet, with our thought-wave boosters, we are in instantaneous communication!"

The soap, Clocker thought, to make him feel he was doing something important.

"Well, you are doing something important," Barnes said, as though Clocker had spoken.

Clocker would have turned red if he had been able to. As it was, he felt dismay and embarrassment.

"Do you realize the size and value of this project?" Barnes went on. "We have a more detailed record of human society than Man himself ever had! There will be not even the most insignificant corner of your civilization left unrecorded! Your life, my life—the life of this Zelda whom you came here to rescue—all are trivial, for we must die eventually, but the project will last

eternally!"

Clocker stood up, his eyes hard and worried. "You're telling me you know what I'm here for?"

"To secure the return of your wife. I would naturally be aware that you had submitted yourself to our control voluntarily. It was in your file, which was sent to me by Admissions."

"Then why did you let me in?"

"Because, my dear friend—"

"Leave out the 'friend' pitch. I'm here on business."

Barnes shrugged. "As you wish. We let you in, as you express it, because you have knowledge that we should include in our archives. We hoped you would recognize the merit and scope of our undertaking. Most people do, once they are told."

"Zelda, too?"

"Oh, yes," Barnes said emphatically. "I had that checked by Statistics. She is extremely cooperative, quite convinced—"

"Don't hand me that!"

Barnes rose. Straightening the papers on his desk, he said, "You want to speak to her and see for yourself? Fair enough."

He led Clocker out of the building. They crossed the great square to a vast, low structure that Barnes referred to as the Education and Recreation Center.

"Unless there are special problems," Barnes said, "our human associates work twelve or fourteen of your hours, and the rest of the time is their own. Sleep isn't necessary to the psychic projection, of course, though it is to the body on Earth. And what, Mr. Locke, would you imagine they choose as their main amusements?"

"Pinball machines?" Clocker suggested ironically. "Crap games?"

"Lectures," said Barnes with pride. "They are eager to learn everything possible about our project. We've actually had the director himself address them! Oh, it was inspiring, Mr. Locke—color films in three dimensions, showing the great extent of our archives, the many millions of synthetic brains, each with indestructible memories of skills and crafts and professions and experiences that soon will be no more—"

"Save it. Find Zelda for me and then blow. I want to talk to her alone."

Barnes checked with the equivalent of a box office at the Center, where, he told Clocker, members of the audience and staff were required to report before entering, in case of emergency.

"Like what?" Clocker asked.

"You have a suspicious mind," said Barnes patiently. "Faulty neuron circuit in a synthetic duplicate brain, for example. Photon storms interfering with reception. Things of that sort."

"So where's the emergency?"

"We have so little time. We ask the human associate in question to record again whatever was not received. The percentage of refusal is actually *zero*! Isn't that splendid?"

"Best third degree I ever heard of," Clocker admitted through clamped teeth. "The cops on Earth would sell out every guy they get graft from to buy a thing like this."

They found Zelda in a small lecture hall, where a matronly woman from the other planet was urging her listeners to conceal nothing, however intimate, while recording—"Because," she said, "this must be a psychological as well as a cultural and sociological history."

Seeing Zelda, Clocker rushed to her chair, hauled her upright, kissed her, squeezed her.

"Baby!" he said, more choked up than he thought his control would allow. "Let's get out of here!"

She looked at him without surprise. "Oh, hello, Clocker. Later. I want to hear the rest of this lecture."

"Ain't you glad to see me?" he asked, hurt. "I spend months and shoot every dime I got just to find you—"

"Sure I'm glad to see you, hon," she said, trying to look past him at the speaker. "But this is so important—"

Barnes came up, bowed politely. "If you don't mind, Miss Zelda, I think you ought to talk to your husband."

"But what about the lecture?" asked Zelda anxiously.

"I can get a transcription for you to study later."

"Well, all right," she agreed reluctantly.

Barnes left them on a strangely warm stone bench in the great square, after asking them to report back to work at the usual time. Zelda, instead of looking at Clocker, watched Barnes walk away. Her eyes were bright; she almost radiated.

"Isn't he wonderful, Clocker?" she said. "Aren't they all wonderful? Regular scientists, every one of them, devoting their whole life to this terrific cause!"

"What's so wonderful about that?" he all but snarled.

She turned and gazed at him in mild astonishment. "They could let the Earth go boom. It wouldn't mean a thing to them. Everybody wiped out just like there never were any people. Not even as much record of us as the dinosaurs! Wouldn't that make you feel simply awful?"

"I wouldn't feel a thing." He took her unresponsive hand. "All I'm worried about is us, baby. Who cares about the rest of the world doing a disappearing act?"

"I do. And so do they. They aren't selfish like some people I could mention."

"Selfish? You're damned right I am!"

He pulled her to him, kissed her neck in her favorite place. It got a reaction—restrained annoyance.

"I'm selfish," he said, "because I got a wife I'm nuts about and I want her back. They got you wrapped, baby. Can't you see that? You belong with me in some fancy apartment, the minute I can afford it, like one I saw over on Riverside Drive—seven big rooms, three baths, one of them with a stall shower like you always wanted, the Hudson River and Jersey for our front lawn—"

"That's all in the past, hon," she said with quiet dignity. "I have to help out on this project. It's the least I can do for history."

"The hell with history! What did history ever do for us?" He put his mouth near her ear, breathing gently in the way that once used to make her squirm in his arms like a tickled doe. "Go turn in your time-card, baby. Tell them you got a date with me back on Earth."

She pulled away and jumped up. "No! This is my job as much as theirs. More, even. They don't keep anybody here against their will. I'm staying because I want to, Clocker."

Furious, he snatched her off her feet. "I say you're coming back with me! If you don't want to, I'll drag you, see?"

"How?" she asked calmly.

He put her down again slowly, frustratedly. "Ask them to let you go, baby. Oil Pocket said he'd put you in a musical. You always did want to hit the big time—"

"Not any more." She smoothed down her dress and patted up her hair. "Well, I want to catch the rest of that lecture, hon. See you around if you decide to stay."

He sat down morosely and watched her snake-hip toward the Center, realizing that her seductive walk was no more than professional conditioning. She had grown in some mysterious way, become more serene—at peace.

He had wondered what catatonics got for their work. He knew now—the slickest job of hypnotic flattery ever invented. That was *their* pay.

But what did the pitchmen get in return?

Clocker put in a call for Barnes at the box office of the Center. Barnes left a lecture for researchers from his planet and joined Clocker with no more than polite curiosity on his paternal face. Clocker told him briefly and bitterly about his talk with Zelda, and asked bluntly what was in it for the aliens.

"I think you can answer that," said Barnes. "You're a scientist of a sort. You determine the probable performance of a group of horses by their heredity, previous races and other factors. A very laborious computation, calling for considerable aptitude and skill. With that same expenditure of energy, couldn't you earn more in other fields?"

"I guess so," Clocker said. "But I like the track."

"Well, there you are. The only human form of gain we share is desire for knowledge. You devote your skill to predicting a race that is about to be run; we devote ours to recording a race that is about to destroy itself."

Clocker grabbed the alien's coat, pushed his face grimly close. "There, that's the hook! Take away the doom push and this racket folds."

Barnes looked bewildered. "I don't comprehend—"

"Listen, suppose everything's square. Let's say you guys really are leveling, these marks aren't being roped, you're knocking yourself out because your guess is that we're going to commit suicide."

"Oh." Barnes nodded somberly. "Is there any doubt of it? Do you honestly believe the holocaust can be averted?"

"I think it can be stopped, yeah. But you birds act like you don't want it to be. You're just laying back, letting us bunch up, collecting the insurance before the spill happens."

"What else can we do? We're scientists, not politicians. Besides, we've tried repeatedly to spread the warning and never once succeeded in transmitting it."

Clocker released his grip on the front of Barnes's jacket. "You take me to the president or commissioner or whoever runs this club. Maybe we can work something out."

"We have a board of directors," Barnes said doubtfully. "But I can't see—"

"Don't rupture yourself trying. Just take me there and let me do the talking."

Barnes moved his shoulders resignedly. He led Clocker to the Administration Building and inside to a large room with paneled walls, a long, solid table and heavy, carved chairs. The men who sat around the table appeared as solid and respectable as the furniture. Clocker's guess was that they had been chosen deliberately, along with the decorations, to inspire confidence in the customer. He had been in rigged horse parlors and bond stores and he knew the approach.

Mr. Calhoun, the character with the white beard, was chairman of the board. He looked unhappily at Clocker.

"I was afraid there would be trouble," he said. "I voted against accepting you, you know. My colleagues, however, thought that you, as our first voluntary associate, might indicate new methods, but I fear my judgment has been vindicated."

"Still, if he knows how extinction can be prevented—" began Dr. Harding, the one who had given the orientation lecture.

"He knows no such thing," a man with several chins said in an emphatic basso voice. "Man is the most destructive dominant race we have ever encountered. He despoiled his own planet, exterminated lower species that were important to his own existence, oppressed, suppressed, brutalized, corrupted—it's the saddest chronicle in the Universe."

"Therefore his achievements," said Dr. Harding, "deserve all the more recognition!"

Clocker broke in: "If you'll lay off the gab, I'd like to get my bet down."

"Sorry," said Mr. Calhoun. "Please proceed, Mr. Locke."

Clocker rested his knuckles on the table and leaned over them. "I have to take your word you ain't human, but you don't have to take mine. I never worried about anybody but Zelda and myself; that makes me human. All I want is to get along and not hurt anybody if I can help it; that makes me what some people call the common man. Some of my best friends are common men. Come to think of it, they all are. They wouldn't want to get extinct. If we do, it won't be our fault."

Several of the men nodded sympathetic agreement.

"I don't read much except the sport sheets, but I got an idea what's coming up," Clocker continued, "and it's a long shot that any country can finish in the money. We'd like to stop war for good, all of us. Little guys who do the fighting and the dying. Yeah, and lots of big guys, too. But we can't do it alone."

"That's precisely our point," said Calhoun.

"I mean us back on Earth. People are afraid, but they just don't know for sure that we can knock ourself off. Between these catatonics and me, we could tell them what it's all about. I notice you got people from all over the world here, all getting along fine because they have a job to do and no time to hate each other. Well, it could be like that on Earth. You let us go back and you'll see a selling job on making it like up here like you never saw before."

Mr. Calhoun and Dr. Harding looked at each other and around the table. Nobody seemed willing to answer.

Mr. Calhoun finally sighed and got out of his big chair. "Mr. Locke, besides striving for

international understanding, we have experimented in the manner you suggest. We released many of our human associates to tell what our science predicts on the basis of probability. A human psychological mechanism defeated us."

"Yeah?" Clocker asked warily. "What was that?"

"Protective amnesia. They completely and absolutely forgot everything they had learned here."

Clocker slumped a bit. "I know. I talked to some of these 'cured' catatonics—people you probably sprung because you got all you wanted from them. They didn't remember anything." He braced again. "Look, there has to be a way out. Maybe if you snatch these politicians in all the countries, yank them up here, they couldn't stumble us into a war."

"Examine your history," said Dr. Harding sadly, "and you will find that we have done this experimentally. It doesn't work. There are always others, often more unthinking, ignorant, stupid or vicious, ready to take their places."

Clocker looked challengingly at every member of the board of directors before demanding, "What are the odds on me remembering?"

"You are our first volunteer," said a little man at the side of the table. "Any answer we give would be a guess."

"All right, guess."

"We have a theory that your psychic censor might not operate. Of course, you realize that's only a theory—"

"That ain't all I don't realize. What's it mean?"

"Our control, regrettably, is a wrench to the mind. Lifting it results in amnesia, which is a psychological defense against disturbing memories."

"I walked into this, don't forget," Clocker reminded him. "I didn't know what I was getting into, but I was ready to take anything."

"That," said the little man, "is the unknown factor. Yes, you did submit voluntarily and you were ready to take anything—but were you psychologically prepared for this? We don't know. We *think* there may be no characteristic wrench—"

"Meaning I won't have amnesia?"

"Meaning that you *may* not. We cannot be certain until a test has been made."

"Then," said Clocker, "I want a deal. It's Zelda I want; you know that, at any rate. You say you're after a record of us in case we bump ourself off, but you also say you'd like us not to. I'll buy that. I don't want us to, either, and there's a chance that we can stop it together."

"An extremely remote one," Mr. Calhoun stated.

"Maybe, but a chance. Now if you let me out and I'm the first case that don't get amnesia, I can tell the world about all this. I might be able to steer other guys, scientists and decent politicians, into coming here to get the dope straighter than I could. Maybe that'd give Earth a chance to cop a pardon on getting extinct. Even if it don't work, it's better than hanging around the radio waiting for the results."

Dr. Harding hissed on his glasses and wiped them thoughtfully, an adopted mannerism, obviously, because he seemed to see as well without them. "You have a point, Mr. Locke, but it would mean losing your contribution to our archives."

"Well, which is more important?" Clocker argued. "Would you rather have my record than have us save ourself?"

"Both," said Mr. Calhoun. "We see very little hope of your success, while we regard your knowledge as having important sociological significance. A very desirable contribution."

The others agreed.

"Look, I'll come back if I lame out," Clocker desperately offered. "You can pick me up any time you want. But if I make headway, you got to let Zelda go, too."

"A reasonable proposition," said Dr. Harding. "I call for a vote."

They took one. The best Clocker could get was a compromise.

"We will lift our control," Mr. Calhoun said, "for a suitable time. If you can arouse a measurable opposition to racial suicide—*measurable*, mind you; we're not requiring that you reverse the lemming march alone—we agree to release your wife and revise our policy completely. If, on the

other hand, as seems more likely—"

"I come back here and go on giving you the inside on racing," Clocker finished for him. "How much time do I get?"

Dr. Harding turned his hands palm up on the table. "We do not wish to be arbitrary. We earnestly hope you gain your objective and we shall give you every opportunity to do so. If you fail, you will know it. So shall we."

"You're pretty sure I'll get scratched, aren't you?" Clocker asked angrily. "It's like me telling a jockey he don't stand a chance—he's whammied before he even gets to the paddock. Anybody'd think do-gooders like you claim you are would wish me luck."

"But we do!" exclaimed Mr. Calhoun. He shook Clocker's hand warmly and sincerely. "Haven't we consented to release you? Doesn't this prove our honest concern? If releasing *all* our human associates would save humanity, we would do so instantly. But we have tried again and again. And so, to use your own professional terminology, we are hedging our bets by continuing to make our anthropological record until you demonstrate another method ... if you do."

"Good enough," approved Clocker. "Thanks for the kind word."

The other board members followed and shook Clocker's hand and wished him well.

Barnes, being last, did the same and added, "You may see your wife, if you care to, before you leave."

"If I care to?" Clocker repeated. "What in hell do you think I came here for in the first place?"

Zelda was brought to him and they were left alone in a pleasant reading room. Soft music came from the walls, which glowed with enough light to read by. Zelda's lovely face was warm with emotion when she sat down beside him and put her hands in his.

"They tell me you're leaving, hon," she said.

"I made a deal, baby. If it works—well, it'll be like it was before, only better."

"I hate to see you leave. Not just for me," she added as he lit up hopefully. "I still love you, hon, but it's different now. I used to want you near me every minute. Now it's loving you without starving for you. You know what I mean?"

"That's just the control they got on you. It's like that with me, too, only I know what it is and you don't."

"But the big thing is the project. Why, we're footnotes in history! Stay here, hon. I'd feel so much better knowing you were here, making your contribution like they say."

He kissed her lips. They were soft and warm and clinging, and so were her arms around his neck. This was more like the Zelda he had been missing.

"They gave you a hypo, sweetheart," he told her. "You're hooked; I'm not. Maybe being a footnote is more important than doing something to save our skin, but I don't think so. If I can do anything about it, I want to do it."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I'm hoping I get an idea when I'm paroled."

She nuzzled under his chin. "Hon, I want you and me to be footnotes. I want it awful bad."

"That's not what really counts, baby. Don't you see that? It's having you and stopping us humans from being just a bunch of old footnotes. Once we do that, we can always come back here and make the record, if it means that much to you."

"Oh, it does!"

He stood and drew her up so he could hold her more tightly. "You do want to go on being my wife, don't you, baby?"

"Of course! Only I was hoping it could be here."

"Well, it can't. But that's all I wanted to know. The rest is just details."

He kissed her again, including the side of her neck, which produced a subdued wriggle of



pleasure, and then he went back to the Administration Building for his release.

Awakening was no more complicated than opening his eyes, except for a bit of fogginess and fatigue that wore off quickly, and Clocker saw he was in a white room with a doctor, a nurse and an orderly around his bed.

"Reflexes normal," the doctor said. He told Clocker, "You see and hear us. You know what I'm saying."

"Sure," Clocker replied. "Why shouldn't I?"

"That's right," the doctor evaded. "How do you feel?"

Clocker thought about it. He was a little thirsty and the idea of a steak interested him, but otherwise he felt no pain or confusion. He remembered that he had not been hungry or thirsty for a long time, and that made him recall going over the border after Zelda.

There were no gaps in his recollection.

He didn't have protective amnesia.

"You know what it's like there?" he asked the doctor eagerly. "A big place where everybody from all over the world tell these aliens about their job or racket." He frowned. "I just remembered something funny. Wonder why I didn't notice it at the time. Everybody talks the same language. Maybe that's because there's only one language for thinking." He shrugged off the problem. "The guys who run the shop take it all down as a record for whoever wants to know about us a zillion years from now. That's on account of us humans are about to close down the track and go home."

The doctor bent close intently. "Is that what you believe *now* or—while you were—disturbed?"

Clocker's impulse to blurt the whole story was stopped at the gate. The doctor was staring too studiously at him. He didn't have his story set yet; he needed time to think, and that meant getting out of this hospital and talking it over with himself.

"You kidding?" he asked, using the same grin that he met complainers with when his turf predictions went sour. "While my head was out of the stirrups, of course."

The doctor, the nurse and the orderly relaxed.

"I ought to write a book," Clocker went on, being doggedly humorous. "What screwball ideas I got! How'd I act?"

"Not bad," said the orderly. "When I found you yakking in your wife's room, I thought maybe it was catching and I'd better go find another job. But Doc here told me I was too stable to go psychotic."

"I wasn't any trouble?"

"Nah. All you did was talk about how to handicap races. I got quite a few pointers. Hell, you went over them often enough for anybody to get them straight!"

"I'm glad somebody made a profit," said Clocker. He asked the doctor, "When do I get out of here?"

"We'll have to give you a few tests first."

"Bring them on," Clocker said confidently.

They were clever tests, designed to trip him into revealing whether he still believed in his delusions. But once he realized that, he meticulously joked about them.

"Well?" he asked when the tests were finished.

"You're all right," said the doctor. "Just try not to worry about your wife, avoid overworking, get plenty of rest—"

Before Clocker left, he went to see Zelda. She had evidently recorded the time-step satisfactorily, because she was on a soft-shoe routine that she must have known cold by the time she'd been ten.

He kissed her unresponsive mouth, knowing that she was far away in space and could not feel, see or hear him. But that didn't matter. He felt his own good, honest, genuine longing for her, unchecked by the aliens' control of emotions.

"I'll spring you yet, baby," he said. "And what I told you about that big apartment on Riverside Drive still goes. We'll have a time together that ought to be a footnote in history all by itself. I'll see you ... after I get the real job done."

He heard the soft-shoe rhythm all the way down the corridor, out of the hospital, and clear back to the city.

Clocker's bank balance was sick, the circulation of his tip sheet gone. But he didn't worry about it; there were bigger problems.

He studied the newspapers before even giving himself time to think. The news was as bad as usual. He could feel the heat of fission, close his eyes and see all the cities and farms in the world going up in a blinding cloud. As far as he was concerned, Barnes and Harding and the rest weren't working fast enough; he could see doom sprinting in half a field ahead of the completion of the record.

The first thing he should have done was recapture the circulation of the tip sheet. The first thing he actually did do was write the story of his experience just as it had happened, and send it to a magazine.

When he finally went to work on his sheet, it was to cut down the racing data to a few columns and fill the rest of it with warnings.

"This is what you want?" the typesetter asked, staring at the copy Clocker turned in. "You *sure* this is what you want?"

"Sure I'm sure. Set it and let's get the edition out early. I'm doubling the print order."

"Doubling?"

"You heard me."

When the issue was out, Clocker waited around the main newsstands on Broadway. He watched the customers buy, study unbelievably, and wander off looking as if all the tracks in the country had burned down simultaneously.

Doc Hawkins found him there.

"Clocker, my boy! You have no idea how anxious we were about you. But you're looking fit, I'm glad to say."

"Thanks," Clocker said abstractedly. "I wish I could say the same about you and the rest of the world."

Doc laughed. "No need to worry about us. We'll muddle along somehow."

"You think so, huh?"

"Well, if the end is approaching, let us greet it at the Blue Ribbon. I believe we can still find the lads there."

They were, and they greeted Clocker with gladness and drinks. Diplomatically, they made only the most delicate references to the revamping job Clocker had done on his tip sheet.

"It's just like opening night, that's all," comforted Arnold Wilson Wyle. "You'll get back into your routine pretty soon."

"I don't want to," said Clocker pugnaciously. "Handicapping is only a way to get people to read what I *really* want to tell them."

"Took me many minutes to find horses," Oil Pocket put in. "See one I want to bet on, but rest of paper make me too worried to bother betting. Okay with Injun, though—horse lost. And soon you get happy again, stick to handicapping, let others worry about world."

Buttonhole tightened his grip on Clocker's lapel. "Sure, boy. As long as the bobtails run, who cares what happens to anything else?"

"Maybe I went too easy," said Clocker tensely. "I didn't print the whole thing, just a little part of it. Here's the rest."

They were silent while he talked, seeming stunned with the terrible significance of his story.

"Did you explain all this to the doctors?" Doc Hawkins asked.

"You think I'm crazy?" Clocker retorted. "They'd have kept me packed away and I'd never get a crack at telling anybody."

"Don't let it trouble you," said Doc. "Some vestiges of delusion can be expected to persist for a while, but you'll get rid of them. I have faith in your ability to distinguish between the real and unreal."

"But it all *happened!* If you guys don't believe me, who will? And you've *got* to so I can get Zelda

back!"

"Of course, of course," said Doc hastily. "We'll discuss it further some other time. Right now I really must start putting my medical column together for the paper."

"What about you, Handy Sam?" Clocker challenged.

Handy Sam, with one foot up on the table and a pencil between his toes, was doodling self-consciously on a paper napkin. "We all get these ideas, Clocker. I used to dream about having arms and I'd wake up still thinking so, till I didn't know if I did or didn't. But like Doc says, then you figure out what's real and it don't mix you up any more."

"All right," Clocker said belligerently to Oil Pocket. "You think my story's batty, too?"

"Can savvy evil spirits, good spirits," Oil Pocket replied with stolid tact. "Injun spirits, though, not white ones."

"But I keep telling you they ain't spirits. They ain't even human. They're from some world way across the Universe—"

Oil Pocket shook his head. "Can savvy Injun spirits, Clocker. No spirits, no savvy."

"Look, you see the mess we're all in, don't you?" Clocker appealed to the whole group. "Do you mean to tell me you can't feel we're getting set to blow the joint? Wouldn't you want to stop it?"

"If we could, my boy, gladly," Doc said. "However, there's not much that any individual or group of individuals can do."

"But how in hell does anything get started? With one guy, two guys—before you know it, you got a crowd, a political party, a country—"

"What about the other countries, though?" asked Buttonhole. "So we're sold on your story in America, let's say. What do we do—let the rest of the world walk in and take us over?"

"We educate them," Clocker explained despairingly. "We start it here and it spreads to there. It doesn't have to be everybody. Mr. Calhoun said I just have to convince a few people and that'll show them it can be done and then I get Zelda back."

Doc stood up and glanced around the table. "I believe I speak for all of us, Clocker, when I state that we shall do all within our power to aid you."

"Like telling other people?" Clocker asked eagerly.

"Well, that's going pretty—"

"Forget it, then. Go write your column. I'll see you chumps around—around ten miles up, shaped like a mushroom."

He stamped out, so angry that he untypically let the others settle his bill.

Clocker's experiment with the newspaper failed so badly that it was not worth the expense of putting it out; people refused to buy. Clocker had three-sheets printed and hired sandwich men to parade them through the city. He made violent speeches in Columbus Circle, where he lost his audience to revivalist orators; Union Square, where he was told heatedly to bring his message to Wall Street; and Times Square, where the police made him move along so he wouldn't block traffic. He obeyed, shouting his message as he walked, until he remembered how amusedly he used to listen to those who cried that Doomsday was near. He wondered if they were catatonics under imperfect control. It didn't matter; nobody paid serious attention to his or their warnings.

The next step, logically, was a barrage of letters to the heads of nations, to the U.N., to editors of newspapers. Only a few of his letters were printed. The ones in Doc's tabloid did best, drawing such comments as:

"Who does this jerk think he is, telling us everybody's going to get killed off? Maybe they will, but not in Brooklyn!"

"When I was a young girl, some fifty years ago, I had a similar experience to Mr. Locke's. But my explanation is quite simple. The persons I saw proved to be my ancestors. Mr. Locke's new-found friends will, I am sure, prove to be the same. The World Beyond knows all and tells all, and my Control, with whom I am in daily communication Over There, assures me that mankind is in no danger whatever, except from the evil effects of tobacco and alcohol and the disrespect of youth for their elders."

"The guy's nuts! He ought to go back to Russia. He's nothing but a nut or a Communist and in my book that's the same thing."

"He isn't telling us anything new. We all know who the enemy is. The only way to protect ourselves is to build TWO GUNS FOR ONE!"

"Is this Locke character selling us the idea that we all ought to go batty to save the world?"

Saddened and defeated, Clocker went through his accumulated mail. There were politely non-committal acknowledgments from embassies and the U.N. There was also a check for his article from the magazine he'd sent it to; the amount was astonishingly large.

He used part of it to buy radio time, the balance for ads in rural newspapers and magazines. City people, he figured, were hardened by publicity gags, and he might stir up the less suspicious and sophisticated hinterland. The replies he received, though, advised him to buy some farmland and let the metropolises be destroyed, which, he was assured, would be a mighty good thing all around.

The magazine came out the same day he tried to get into the U.N. to shout a speech from the balcony. He was quietly surrounded by a uniformed guard and moved, rather than forced, outside.

He went dejectedly to his hotel. He stayed there for several days, dialing numbers he selected randomly from the telephone book, and getting the brushoff from business offices, housewives and maids. They were all very busy or the boss wasn't in or they expected important calls.

That was when he was warmly invited by letter to see the editor of the magazine that had bought his article.

Elated for actually the first time since his discharge from the hospital, Clocker took a cab to a handsome building, showed his invitation to a pretty and courteous receptionist, and was escorted into an elaborate office where a smiling man came around a wide bleached-mahogany desk and shook hands with him.

"Mr. Locke," said the editor, "I'm happy to tell you that we've had a wonderful response to your story."

"Article," Clocker corrected.

The editor smiled. "Do you produce so much that you can't remember what you sold us? It was about—"

"I know," Clocker cut in. "But it wasn't a story. It was an article. It really—"

"Now, now. The first thing a writer must learn is not to take his ideas too seriously. Very dangerous, especially in a piece of fiction like yours."

"But the whole thing is true!"

"Certainly—while you were writing it." The editor shoved a pile of mail across the desk toward him. "Here are some of the comments that have come in. I think you'll enjoy seeing the reaction."

Clocker went through them, hoping anxiously for no more than a single note that would show his message had come through to somebody. He finished and looked up blankly.

"You see?" the editor asked proudly. "You're a find."

"The new Mark Twain or Jonathan Swift. A comic."

"A satirist," the editor amended. He leaned across the desk on his crossed forearms. "A mail response like this indicates a talent worth developing. We would like to discuss a series of stories —"

"Articles."

"Whatever you choose to call them. We're prepared to—"

"You ever been off your rocker?" Clocker asked abruptly.

The editor sat back, smiling with polite puzzlement. "Why, no."

"You ought to try it some time." Clocker lifted himself out of the chair and went to the door. "That's what I want, what I was trying to sell in my article. We all ought to go to hospitals and get ourself let in and have these aliens take over and show us where we're going."

"You think that would be an improvement?"

"What wouldn't?" asked Clocker, opening the door.

"But about the series—"

"I've got your name and address. I'll let you know if anything turns up. Don't call me; I'll call you."

Clocker closed the door behind him, went out of the handsome building and called a taxi. All through the long ride, he stared at the thinning out of the city, the huddled suburban communities, the stretches of grass and well-behaved woods that were permitted to survive.

He climbed out at Glendale Center Hospital, paid the hackie, and went to the admitting desk. The nurse gave him a smile.

"We were wondering when you'd come visit your wife," she said. "Been away?"

"Sort of," he answered, with as little emotion as he had felt while he was being controlled. "I'll be seeing plenty of her from now on. I want my old room back."

"But you're perfectly normal!"

"That depends on how you look at it. Give me ten minutes alone and any brain vet will be glad to give me a cushioned room."

Hands in his pockets, Clocker went into the elevator, walked down the corridor to his old room without pausing to visit Zelda. It was the live Zelda he wanted to see, not the tapping automaton.

He went in and shut the door.

"Okay, you were right and I was wrong," Clocker told the board of directors. "Turn me over to Barnes and I'll give him the rest of the dope on racing. Just let me see Zelda once in a while and you won't have any trouble with me."

"Then you are convinced that you have failed," said Mr. Calhoun.

"I'm no dummy. I know when I'm licked. I also pay anything I owe."

Mr. Calhoun leaned back. "And so do we, Mr. Locke. Naturally, you have no way of detecting the effect you've had. We do. The result is that, because of your experiment, we are gladly revising our policy."

"Huh?" Clocker looked around at the comfortable aliens in their comfortable chairs. Solid and respectable, every one of them. "Is this a rib?"

"Visits to catatonics have increased considerably," explained Dr. Harding. "When the visitors are alone with our human associates, they tentatively follow the directions you gave in your article. Not all do, to be sure; only those who feel as strongly about being with their loved ones as you do about your wife."

"We have accepted four voluntary applicants," said Mr. Calhoun.

Clocker's mouth seemed to be filled with cracker crumbs that wouldn't go down and allow him to speak.

"And now," Dr. Harding went on, "we are setting up an Information Section to teach the applicants what you have learned and make the same arrangement we made with you. We are certain that we shall, before long, have to increase our staff as the number of voluntary applicants increases geometrically, after we release the first few to continue the work you have so admirably begun."

"You mean I *made* it?" Clocker croaked unbelievably.

"Perhaps this will prove it to you," said Mr. Calhoun.

He motioned and the door opened and Zelda came in.

"Hello, hon," she said. "I'm glad you're back. I missed you."

"Not like I missed you, baby! There wasn't anybody controlling *my* feelings."

Mr. Calhoun put his hands on their shoulders. "Whenever you care to, Mr. Locke, you and your wife are free to leave."

Clocker held Zelda's hands and her calmly fond gaze. "We owe these guys plenty, baby," he said to her. "We'll help make the record before we take off. Ain't that what you want?"

"Oh, it is, hon! And then I want you."

"Then let's get started," he said. "The quicker we do, the quicker we get back."

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