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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JUDAS RAM \*\*\*



# JUDAS RAM

BY SAM MERWIN, Jr.

Illustrated by JAMES VINCENT

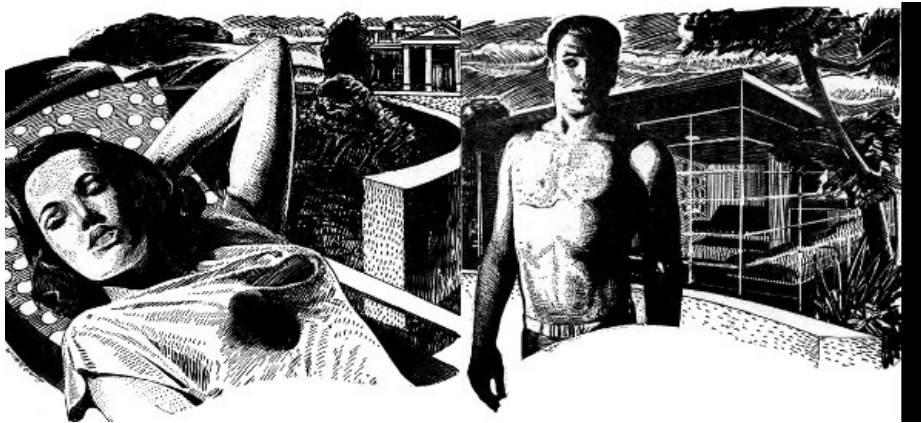
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**The house was furnished with all luxuries, including women. If it only had a lease that could be broken—**

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Roger Tennant, crossing the lawn, could see two of the three wings of the house, which radiated spoke-like from its heptagonal central portion. The wing on the left was white, with slim square pillars, reminiscent of scores of movie sets of the Deep South. That on the right was sundeck solar-house living-machine modern, something like a montage of shoeboxes. The wing hidden by the rest of the house was, he knew, spired, gabled and multicolored, like an ancient building in pre-Hitler Cracow.



Dana was lying under a tree near the door, stretched out on a sort of deck chair with her eyes closed. She wore a golden gown, long and close-fitting and slit up the leg like the gown of a Chinese woman. Above it her comely face was sullen beneath its sleek cocoon of auburn hair.

She opened her eyes at his approach and regarded him with nothing like favor. Involuntarily he glanced down at the tartan shorts that were his only garment to make sure that they were on properly. They were. He had thought them up in a moment of utter boredom and they were extremely comfortable. However, the near-Buchanan tartan did not crease or even wrinkle when he moved. Their captors had no idea of how a woven design should behave.

"Waiting for me?" Tennant asked the girl.

She said, "I'd rather be dead. Maybe I am. Maybe we're all dead and this is Hell."

He stood over her and looked down until she turned away her reddening face. He said, "So it's going to be you again, Dana. You'll be the first to come back for a second run."

"Don't flatter yourself," she replied angrily. She sat up, pushed back her hair, got to her feet a trifle awkwardly because of the tight-fitting tubular gown. "If I could do anything about it...."

"But you can't," he told her. "They're too clever."

"Is this crop rotation or did you send for me?" she asked cynically. "If you did, I wish you hadn't. You haven't asked about your son."

"I don't even want to think about him," said Tennant. "Let's get on with it." He could sense the restless stirring of the woman within Dana, just as he could feel the stirring toward her within himself—desire that both of them loathed because it was implanted within them by their captors.

They walked toward the house.

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It didn't look like a prison—or a cage. Within the dome of the barrier, it looked more like a well-kept if bizarre little country estate. There was clipped lawn, a scattering of trees, even a clear little brook that chattered unending annoyance at the small stones which impeded its flow.

But the lawn was not of grass—it was of a bright green substance that might have been cellophane but wasn't, and it sprouted from a fabric that might have been canvas but was something else. The trees looked like trees, only their trunks were bark all the way through—except that it was not bark. The brook was practically water, but the small stones over which it flowed were of no earthly mineral.

They entered the house, which had no roof, continued to move beneath a sky that glowed with light which did not come from a sun or moon. It might have been a well-kept if bizarre little country estate, but it wasn't. It was a prison, a cage.

The other two women were sitting in the heptagonal central hall. Eudalia, who had borne twin girls recently, was lying back, newly thin and dark of skin and hair, smoking a scentless cigarette. A tall woman, thirtyish, she wore a sort of shimmering green strapless evening gown. Tennant wondered how she maintained it in place, for despite her recent double motherhood, she was almost flat of bosom. He asked her how she was feeling.

"Okay, I guess," she said. "The way they manage it, there's nothing to it." She had a flat, potentially raucous voice. Eudalia had been a female foreman in a garment-cutting shop before being captured and brought through.

"Good," he said. "Glad to hear it." He felt oddly embarrassed. He turned to Olga, broad, blonde and curiously vital, who sat perfectly still, regarding him over the pregnant swell of her dirndl-clad waist. Olga had been a waitress in a mining town hash-house near Scranton.

Tennant wanted to put an encouraging hand on her shoulder, to say something that might cheer her up, for she was by far the youngest of the three female captives, barely nineteen. But with the eyes of the other two, especially Dana, upon him, he could not.

"I guess I wasn't cut out to be a Turk," he said. "I don't feel at ease in a harem, even when it's supposedly my own."

"You're not doing so badly," Dana replied acidly.

"Lay off—he can't help it," said Eudalia unexpectedly. "He doesn't like it any better than we do."

"But he doesn't have to—have them," objected Olga. She had a trace of Polish accent that was not unpleasant. In fact, Tennant thought, only her laughter was unpleasant, a shrill, uncontrolled burst of staccato sound that jarred him to his heels. Olga had not laughed of late, however. She was too frightened.

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"Let's get the meal ordered," said Dana and they were all silent, thinking of what they wanted to eat but would not enjoy when it came. Tennant finished with his order, then got busy with his surprise.

It arrived before the meal, materializing against one of the seven walls of the roofless chamber. It was a large cabinet on slender straight legs that resembled dark polished wood. Tennant went to it, opened a hingeless door and pushed a knob on the inner surface. At once the air was hideous with the acerate harmony of a singing commercial...

... so go soak your head,  
be it gold, brown or red,  
in Any-tone Shampoo!

A disc jockey's buoyant tones cut in quickly as the final *ooooo* faded. "This is Grady Martin, your old night-owl, coming to you with your requests over Station WZZX, Manhattan. Here's a wire from Theresa McManus and the girls in the family entrance of Conaghan's Bar and Grill on West...."

Tennant watched the girls as a sweet-voiced crooner began to ply an unfamiliar love lyric to a melody whose similarity to a thousand predecessors doomed it to instant success.

Olga sat up straight, her pale blue eyes round with utter disbelief. She looked at the radio, at Tennant, at the other two women, then back at the machine. She murmured something in Polish that was inaudible, but her expression showed that it must have been wistful.

Eudalia grinned at Tennant and, rising, did a sort of tap dance to the music, then whirled back into her chair, green dress ashimmer, and sank into it just to listen.

Dana stood almost in the center of the room, carmine-tipped fingers clasped beneath the swell of her breasts. She might have been listening to Brahms or Debussy. Her eyes glowed with the salty brilliance of emotion and she was almost beautiful.

"*Rog!*" she cried softly when the music stopped. "A radio and WZZX! Is it—are they—real?"

"As real as you or I," he told her. "It took quite a bit of doing, getting them to put a set together. And I wasn't sure that radio would get through. TV doesn't seem to. Somehow it brings things closer...."

Olga got up quite suddenly, went to the machine and, after frowning at it for a moment, tuned in another station from which a Polish-speaking announcer was followed by polka music. She leaned against the wall, resting one smooth forearm on the top of the machine. Her eyes closed and she swayed a little in time to the polka beat.

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Tennant caught Dana looking at him and there was near approval in her expression—approval that faded quickly as soon as she caught his gaze upon her. The food arrived then and they sat

down at the round table to eat it.

Tennant's meat looked like steak, it felt like steak, but, lacking the aroma of steak, it was almost tasteless. This was so with all of their foods, with their cigarettes, with everything in their prison—or their cage. Their captors were utterly without a human conception of smell, living, apparently, in a world without odor at all.

Dana said suddenly, "I named the boy Tom, after somebody I hate almost as much as I hate you."

Eudalia laid down her fork with a clatter and regarded Dana disapprovingly. "Why take it out on Rog?" she asked bluntly. "He didn't ask to come here any more than we did. He's got a wife back home. Maybe you want him to fall in love with you? Maybe you're jealous because he doesn't? Well, maybe he can't! And maybe it wouldn't work, the way things are arranged here."

"Thanks, Eudalia," said Tennant. "I think I can defend myself. But she's right, Dana. We're as helpless as—laboratory animals. They have the means to make us do whatever they want."

"Rog," said Dana, looking suddenly scared, "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I know it's not your fault. I'm—*changing*."

He shook his head. "No, Dana, you're not changing. You're adapting. We all are. We seem to be in a universe of different properties as well as different dimensions. We're adjusting. I can do a thing or two myself that seem absolutely impossible."

"Are we really in the fourth dimension?" Dana asked. Of the three of them, she alone had more than a high-school education.

"We may be in the eleventh for all I know," he told her. "But I'll settle for the fourth—a fourth dimension in space, if that makes scientific sense, because we don't seem to have moved in time. I wasn't sure of that, though, till we got the radio."

"Why haven't they brought more of us through?" Eudalia asked, tamping out ashes in a tray that might have been silver.

"I'm not sure," he said thoughtfully. "I think it's hard for them. They have a hell of a time bringing anyone through alive, and lately they haven't brought anyone through—not alive."

"Why do they do it—the other way, I mean?" asked Dana.

Tennant shrugged. "I don't know. I've been thinking about it. I suppose it's because they're pretty human."

"*Human!*" Dana was outraged. "Do you call it human to—"

"Hold on," he said. "They pass through their gateway to Earth at considerable danger and, probably, expense of some kind. Some of them don't come back. They kill those of us who put up a fight. Those who don't—or can't—they bring back with them. Live or dead, we're just laboratory specimens."

"Maybe," Eudalia conceded doubtfully. Then her eyes blazed. "But the things they do—stuffing people, mounting their heads, keeping them on display in their—their whatever they live in. You call that human, Rog?"

"Were you ever in a big-game hunter's trophy room?" Tennant asked quietly. "Or in a Museum of Natural History? A zoo? A naturalist's lab? Or even, maybe, photographed as a baby on a bear-skin rug?"

"I was," said Olga. "But that's not the same thing."

"Of course not," he agreed. "In the one instance, *we're* the hunters, the breeders, the trophy collectors. In the other"—he shrugged—"we're the trophies."

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There was a long silence. They finished eating and then Dana stood up and said, "I'm going out on the lawn for a while." She unzipped her golden gown, stepped out of it to reveal a pair of tartan shorts that matched his, and a narrow halter.

"You thought those up while we ate," he said. It annoyed him to be copied, though he did not know why. She laughed at him silently, tossed her auburn hair back from her face and went out of the roofless house, holding the gold dress casually over her bare arm.

Eudalia took him to the nursery. He was irritated now in another, angrier way. The infants, protected by cellophane-like coverlets, were asleep.

"They never cry," the thin woman told him. "But they grow—God, how they grow!"

"Good," said Tennant, fighting down his anger. He kissed her, held her close, although neither of them felt desire at the moment. Their captors had seen to that; it wasn't Eudalia's turn. Tennant said, "I wish I could do something about this. I hate seeing Dana so bitter and Olga so scared. It isn't their fault."

"And it's not yours," insisted Eudalia. "Don't let them make you think it is."

"I'll try not to," he said and stopped, realizing the family party was over. He had felt the inner tug of command, said good-by to the women and returned to his smaller compound within its own barrier dome.

Then came the invisible aura of strain in the air, the shimmering illusion of heat that was not heat, that was prelude to his teleportation ... if that were the word. It was neither pleasant nor unpleasant; it *was*, that was all.

He called it the training hall, not because it looked like a training hall but because that was its function. It didn't actually look like anything save some half-nourished dream a surrealist might have discarded as too nightmarish for belief.

As in all of this strange universe, excepting the dome-cages in which the captives were held, the training hall followed no rules of three-dimensional space. One wall looked normal for perhaps a third of its length, then it simply wasn't for a bit. It came back farther on at an impossible angle. Yet, walking along it, touching it, it felt perfectly smooth and continuously straight.

The opposite wall resembled a diagonal cross-section of an asymmetrical dumbbell—that was the closest Tennant could come to it in words. And it, too, felt straight. The floor looked like crystal smashed by some cosmic impact, yet it had reason. He *knew* this even though no reason was apparent to his three-dimensional vision. The ceiling, where he could see it, was beyond description.

The captor Tennant called *Opal* came in through a far corner of the ceiling. He—if it was a he—was not large, although this, Tennant knew, meant nothing; Opal might extend thousands of yards in some unseen direction. He had no regular shape and much of him was iridescent and shot with constantly changing colors. Hence the name Opal.

Communication was telepathic. Tennant could have yodeled or yelled or sung *Mississippi Mud* and Opal would have shown no reaction. Yet Tennant suspected that the captors could hear somewhere along the auditory scale, just as perhaps they could smell, although not in any human sense.

*You will approach without use of your appendages.*

The command was as clear as if it had been spoken aloud. Tennant took a deep breath. He thought of the space beside Opal. It took about three seconds and he was there, having spanned a distance of some ninety feet. He was getting good at it.

Dog does trick, he thought.

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He went through the entire routine at Opal's bidding. When at last he was allowed to relax, he wondered, not for the first time, if he weren't mastering some of the alleged Guru arts. At once he felt probing investigation. Opal, like the rest of the captors, was as curious as a cat—or a human being.



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Tennant sat against a wall, drenched with sweat. There would be endless repetition before his workout was done. On Earth, dogs were said to be intellectually two-dimensional creatures. He

wondered if they felt this helpless futility when their masters taught them to heel, to point, to retrieve.

Some days later, the training routine was broken. He felt a sudden stir of near-sick excitement as he received the thought:

*Now you are ready. We are going through at last.*

Opal was nervous, so much so that he revealed more than he intended. Or perhaps that was his intent; Tennant could never be sure. They were going through to Tennant's own dimension. He wondered briefly just what his role was to be.

He had little time to speculate before Opal seemed to envelop him. There was the blurring wrench of forced teleportation and they were in another room, a room which ended in a huge irregular passage that might have been the interior of a giant concertina—or an old-fashioned kodak.

He stood before a kidney-shaped object over whose jagged surface colors played constantly. From Opal's thoughts it appeared to be some sort of ultradimensional television set, but to Tennant it was as incomprehensible as an oil painting to an animal.

Opal was annoyed that Tennant could make nothing of it. Then came the thought:

*What cover must your body have not to be conspicuous?*

Tennant wondered, cynically, what would happen if he were to demand a costume of mediaeval motley, complete with Pied Piper's flute. He received quick reproof that made his head ring as from a blow.

He asked Opal where and when they were going, was informed that he would soon emerge on Earth where he had left it. That told him everything but the date and season. Opal, like the rest of the captors, seemed to have no understanding of time in a human sense.

Waiting, Tennant tried not to think of his wife, of the fact that he hadn't seen her in—was it more than a year and a half on Earth? He could have controlled his heartbeat with one of his new powers, but that might have made Opal suspicious. He should be somewhat excited. He allowed himself to be, though he obscured the reasons. He was going to see his wife again ... and maybe he could trick his way into not returning.

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The maid who opened the door for him was new, although her eyes were old. But she recognized him and stood aside to let him enter. There must, he thought, still be pictures of him around. He wondered how Agatha could afford a servant.

"Is Mrs. Tennant in?" he asked.

She shook her head and fright made twin stoplights of the rouge on her cheeks as she shut the door behind him. He went into the living room, directly to the long silver cigarette box on the coffee table. It was proof of homecoming to fill his lungs with smoke he could *smell*. He took another drag, saw the maid still in the doorway, staring.

"There's no need for fright," he told her. "I believe I still own this house." Then, "When do you expect Mrs. Tennant?"

"She just called. She's on her way home from the club."

Still looking frightened, she departed for the rear of the house. Tennant stared after her puzzledly until the kitchen door swung shut behind her. The club? What club?

He shrugged, returned to the feeling of comfort that came from being back here, about to see Agatha again, hold her close in no more than a few minutes. And stay, his mind began to add eagerly, but he pushed the thought down where Opal could not detect it.

He took another deep, lung-filling drag on his cigarette, looked around the room that was so important a part of his life. The three women back there would be in a ghastly spot. He felt like a heel for wanting to leave them there, then knew that he would try somehow to get them out. Not, of course, anything that would endanger his remaining with Agatha; the only way his captors would get him back would be as a taxidermist's specimen.

He realized, shocked and scared, that his thoughts of escape had slipped past his mental censor, and he waited apprehensively for Opal to strike. Nothing happened and he warily relaxed. Opal wasn't tapping his thoughts. Because he felt sure of his captive ... or because he couldn't on Earth?

It was like being let out of a cage. Tennant grinned at the bookcase; the ebony-and-ivory elephants that Agatha had never liked were gone, but he'd get them back or another pair. The credenza had been replaced by a huge and ugly television console. That, he resolved, would go down in the cellar rumpus room, where its bleached modernity wouldn't clash with the casual antiquity of the living room.

Agatha would complain, naturally, but his being back would make up for any amount of furniture shifting. He imagined her standing close to him, her lovely face lifted to be kissed, and his heart lurched like an adolescent's. This hunger was real, not implanted. Everything would be real ... his love for her, the food he ate, the things he touched, his house, his life....

*Your wife and a man are approaching the house.*

The thought message from Opal crumbled his illusion of freedom. He sank down in a chair, trying to refuse to listen to the rest of the command:

*You are to bring the man through the gateway with you. We want another live male.*

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Tennant shook his head, stiff and defiant in his chair. The punishment, when it came, was more humiliating than a slap across a dog's snout. Opal had been too interested in the next lab specimen to bother about his thoughts—that was why he had been free to think of escape.

Tennant closed his eyes, willed himself to the front window. Now that he had mastered teleportation, it was incredible how much easier it was in his own world. He had covered the two miles from the gateway to the house in a mere seven jumps, the distance to the window in an instant. But there was no pleasure in it, only a confirmation of his captor's power over him.

He was not free of them. He understood all too well what they wanted him to do; he was to play the Judas goat ... or rather the Judas ram, leading another victim to the fourth-dimensional pen.

Grim, he watched the swoop of headlights in the driveway and returned to the coffee table, lit a fresh cigarette.

The front door was flung open and his diaphragm tightened at the remembered sound of Agatha's throaty laugh ... and tightened further when it was followed by a deeper rumbling laugh. Sudden fear made the cigarette shake in his fingers.

"... Don't be such a stuffed-shirt, darling." Agatha's mocking sweetness rang alarm-gongs in Tennant's memory. "Charley wasn't making a grab for *me*. He'd had one too many and only wanted a little fun. Really, darling, you seem to think that a girl...."

Her voice faded out as she saw Tennant standing there. She was wearing a white strapless gown, had a blue-red-and-gold Mandarin jacket slung hussar-fashion over her left shoulder. She looked even sleeker, better groomed, more assured than his memory of her.

"I'm no stuffed-shirt and you know it." Cass' tone was peevish. "But your idea of fun, Agatha, is pretty damn...."

It was his turn to freeze. Unbelieving, Tennant studied his successor. Cass Gordon—the *man*, the ex-halfback whose bulk was beginning to get out of hand, but whose inherent aggressive grace had not yet deserted him. The *man*, that was all—unless one threw in the little black mustache and the smooth salesman's manner.

"You know, Cass," Tennant said quietly, "I never for a moment dreamed it would be you."

"*Roger!*" Agatha found her voice. "You're *alive!*"

"Roger," repeated Tennant viciously. He felt sick with disgust. Maybe he should have expected a triangle, but somehow he hadn't. And here it was, with all of them going through their paces like a trio of tent-show actors. He said, "For God's sake, sit down."

Agatha did so hesitantly. Her huge dark eyes, invariably clear and limpid no matter how much she had drunk, flickered toward him furtively. She said defensively, "I had detectives looking for you for six months. Where have you been, Rog? Smashing up the car like that and—disappearing! I've been out of my mind."

"Sorry," said Tennant. "I've had my troubles, too." Agatha was scared stiff—of him. Probably with reason. He looked again at Cass Gordon and found that he suddenly didn't care. She couldn't say it was loneliness. Women have waited longer than eighteen months. He would have if his captors had let him.

"Where in hell *have* you been, Rog?" Gordon's tone was almost parental. "I don't suppose it's news to you, but there was a lot of suspicion directed your way while that crazy killer was operating around here. Agatha and I managed to clear you."

"Decent of you," said Tennant. He got up, crossed to the cabinet that served as a bar. It was fully equipped—with more expensive liquor, he noticed, than he had ever been able to afford. He poured a drink of brandy, waited for the others to fill their glasses.

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Agatha looked at him over the rim of hers. "Tell us, Rog. We have a right to know. I do, anyway."

"One question first," he said. "What about those killings? Have there been any lately?"

"Not for over a year," Cass told him. "They never did get the devil who skinned those bodies and removed the heads."

So, Tennant thought, they hadn't used the gateway. Not since they had brought the four of them through, not since they had begun to train him for his Judas ram duties.

Agatha was asking him if he had been abroad.

"In a way," he replied unemotionally. "Sorry if I've worried you, Agatha, but my life has been rather—indefinite, since I—left."



He was standing no more than four inches from this woman he had desired desperately for six years, and he no longer wanted her. He was acutely conscious of her perfume. It wrapped them both like an exotic blanket, and it repelled him. He studied the firm clear flesh of her cheek and chin, the arch of nostril, the carmine fullness of lower lip, the swell of bosom above low-cut gown. And he no longer wanted any of it or of her. Cass Gordon—

It didn't have to be anybody at all. For it to be Cass Gordon was revolting.

"Rog," she said and her voice trembled, "what are we going to do? What do you *want* to do?"

Take her back? He smiled ironically; she wouldn't know what that meant. It would serve her right, but maybe there was another way.

"I don't know about you," he said, "but I suspect we're in the same boat. I also have other interests."

"You louse!" said Cass Gordon, arching rib cage and nostrils. "If you try to make trouble for Agatha, I can promise...."

"*What* can you promise?" demanded Tennant. When Gordon's onset subsided in mumbles, he added, "Actually, I don't think I'm capable of making more than a fraction of the trouble for either of you that you both are qualified to make for yourselves."

He lit a cigarette, inhaled. "Relax. I'm not planning revenge. After this evening, I plan to vanish for good. Of course, Agatha, that offers you a minor nuisance. You will have to wait six years to marry Cass—seven years if the maid who let me in tonight talks. That's the law, isn't it, Cass? You probably had it all figured out."

"You bastard," said Cass. "You dirty bastard! You know what a wait like that could do to us."

"Tristan and Isolde," said Tennant, grinning almost happily. "Well, I've had my little say. Now I'm off again. Cass, would you give me a lift? I have a conveyance of sorts a couple of miles down the road."

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He needed no telepathic powers to read the thoughts around him then. He heard Agatha's quick intake of breath, saw the split-second look she exchanged with Cass. He turned away, knowing that she was imploring her lover to do something, *anything*, as long as it was safe.

Deliberately, Tennant poured himself a second drink. This might be easier and pleasanter than he had expected. They deserved some of the suffering he had had and there was a chance that they might get it.

Tennant knew now why he was the only male human the captors had been able to take alive. Apparently, thanks to the rain-slick road, he had run the sedan into a tree at the foot of the hill beyond the river. He had been sitting there, unconscious, ripe fruit on their doorstep. They had simply picked him up.

Otherwise, apparently, men were next to impossible for them to capture. All they could do was kill them and bring back their heads and hides as trophies. With women it was different—perhaps the captors' weapons, whatever they were, worked more efficiently on females. A difference in body chemistry or psychology, perhaps.

More than once, during his long training with Opal, Tennant had sent questing thoughts toward his captor, asking why they didn't simply set up the gateway in some town or city and take as many humans as they wanted.

Surprisingly there had been a definite fear reaction. As nearly as he could understand, it had been like asking an African pygmy, armed with a blowgun, to set up shop in the midst of a herd of wild elephants. It simply wasn't feasible—and furthermore he derived an impression of the tenuosity as well as the immovability of the gateway itself.

They could be hurt, even killed by humans in a three-dimensional world. How? Tennant did not know. Perhaps as a man can cut finger or even throat on the edge of a near-two-dimensional piece of paper. It took valor for them to hunt men in the world of men. In that fact lay a key to their character—if such utterly alien creatures could be said to have character.

---

Cass Gordon was smiling at him, saying something about one for the road. Tennant accepted only because it was luxury to drink liquor that smelled and tasted as liquor should. He raised his glass to Agatha, said, "I may turn up again, but it's unlikely, so have yourself a time, honey."

"Oh, Rog!" said Agatha and her eyes were fraudulently wet. Tennant felt pure contempt. She knew that Cass intended to try to kill him—and she couldn't play it straight. She had to ham it up with false emotion, even though she had silently pleaded with her lover to do something, anything. He put down his empty glass. The thought that he had spent eighteen months yearning for this she-Smithfield like a half-damp puppy made him almost physically ill.

"You'll make out," he told her with savage sincerity. In her way, in accord with her desires, Agatha would. At bottom she was, he realized, as primitive, as realistic, as the three who waited beyond the gateway. An ex-waitress, an ex-forewoman, an ex-model of mediocre success—and

Agatha. He tried to visualize his wife as a member of his involuntary harem and realized that she would adapt as readily as the other women. But he didn't want her.

He turned away and said, "Ready, Cass?"

"Right with you," the ex-halfback replied, hurrying toward the hall. Tennant considered, took another drink for his own road. The signals had been given, the game was being readied. He had no wish to upset the planning. He had some plans also, and theirs gave him enough moral justification to satisfy his usually troublesome conscience.

Agatha put her arms around his neck. She was warm and soft and moist of lip and playing her part with obvious enjoyment of its bathos. She murmured, "I'm so sorry, Rog, darling—"

"Cut!" he said almost in a snarl and wrenched free. He brought out a handkerchief—he had remembered to have one created, praise Allah—and rubbed lipstick from his face. He tossed the handkerchief to Agatha.

"You might have this analyzed," he told her lightly. "It could be interesting. The handkerchief, not the lipstick."

"I'm glad you're going!" she blazed, although her voice was low. "I'm *glad* you're going. I hope you *never* come back."

"That," he told her, "makes exactly two of us. Have fun."

He went out into the hall, where Cass was waiting, wearing what was intended to be a smile. They went out to the car together—it was a big convertible—and Cass got behind the wheel. He said, "Where to, old man?"

"The Upham Road," said Tennant, feeling nothing at all.

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Cass got the car under way and Tennant sensed them coming through. They warned him that his chauffeur was carrying a weapon concealed in an inside pocket.

*As if I didn't know!* Tennant snapped back at them.

Cass tried to drive him past the spot beyond the bridge where the gateway lay hidden in its armor of invisibility. He evidently planned to go miles from the house before doing whatever he had decided to do.

Tennant thought he knew. It would involve riding the back roads like this one for fifteen or twenty miles, perhaps farther. He suspected that the quarry pond in South Upham was his intended destination. There would be plenty of loose rock handy with which to weigh down his body before dumping it into the water.

If it were recovered, Cass and Agatha could alibi one another. In view of his earlier disappearance, this would be simple. Of course there was the maid, but Cass had enough money and smooth talk to manage that angle. They could undoubtedly get away with killing him.

"Stop," said Tennant, just across the bridge.

"What for?" Cass countered and Tennant knew it was time to act. He wrenched the key from the ignition switch, tossed it out of the car. Cass braked, demanded, "What in hell did you do *that* for?"

"I get out here," Tennant said. "You didn't stop."

"Okay, if that's the way you want it." Cass' heavy right hand, the little black hairs on its back clearly visible in the dashboard light, moved toward his inside pocket.

Tennant teleported to the side of the road, became a half-visible shade against the darkness of the trees. He felt Opal's excitement surge through his brain, knew that from then on his timing would have to be split-second perfect.

It seemed to him as if all the inchoate thoughts, all the vague theories, all the half-formed plans of more than a year had crystalized. For the first time since his capture, he not only knew what he wanted to do—but saw the faint glimmer of a chance of doing it successfully.

He was going to try to lead Cass to the gateway, maneuver him inside—and then escape. They wouldn't get Tennant; the power of teleportation they themselves had given him would keep him from being captured again. It would work. He was sure of it. They'd have their male specimen and he'd be free ... not to go back to Agatha, because he wouldn't, but to help the three women to get back, too.

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Cass was plunging after him now, pistol in hand, shouting. Tennant could have him killed now, have him flayed and decapitated as other male victims had been. Opal might even give him the hide as a reward after it was treated. Some Oriental potentate, Tennant reflected, might relish having his wife's lover as a rug on his living room floor. Tennant preferred the less operatic revenge of leaving Cass and Agatha alive to suffer.

He teleported farther into the trees, closer to the gateway, plotting carefully his next moves. Cass was crashing along, cursing in frustration.

"Stand still, damn you! You shift around like a ghost!"

Tennant realized with sudden terror that Cass might give up, unable to solve his prey's abrupt appearances and disappearances. He needed encouragement to keep him going.

Jeeringly, Tennant paused, simultaneously thumbed his nose and stuck out his tongue at Cass. The scornful childishness of the gesture enraged Cass more than the worst verbal insult could have. He yelled his anger and fired at Tennant. There was no way to miss, but Tennant was five yards farther on before the explosion ended.

"Calm down," he advised quietly. "Getting mad always spoils your aim."

That, naturally, made Cass even angrier. He fired viciously twice more before Tennant reached the gateway, both times without a chance of hitting his elusive target.

Opal, Tennant discovered, was almost as frantic as Cass. He was deep inside the passage, jittering visibly in his excitement, in his anticipation of the most important bag his species had yet made on Earth. And there was something else in his thoughts....

Anxiety. Fear. The gateway was vulnerable to third-dimensional weapons. Where the concertina-like passage came into contact with Earth, there was a belt, perhaps a foot in width, which was spanned by some sort of force-webbing. Opal was afraid that a bullet might strike the webbing and destroy the gateway.

Cass was getting closer. It would be so easy ... keep teleporting, bewilder him, let him make a grab ... and then skip a hundred yards away just as the gateway shut. He would be outside, Cass inside.

And the three women? Leave them with Cass? Leave the gateway open for more live or mounted specimens?



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Tennant concentrated on the zone of strain at the point of dimensional contact, was there directly in front of it. Cass, cursing, lunged clear of the underbrush outside, saw Tennant there. Tennant was crouching low, not moving, staring mockingly at him. He lifted the automatic and fired.

Tennant teleported by inches instead of yards, and so blood oozed from a graze on his left ear when he rejoined a shaken Opal in the world that knew no night. For a long time—how long, of course, he could not know—they stood and watched the gateway burn to globular ash in a dark brown fire that radiated searing cold.

Opal was in trouble. An aura of anger, of grief, of accusation, surrounded him. Others of them came and for a while Tennant was forgotten. Then, abruptly, he was back in his own compound, walking toward the house.

In place of his country Napoleonic roll-bed, which he had visualized for manufacture with special care, Dana had substituted an immense modern sleeping device that looked like a low hassock with a ten-foot diameter. She was on her knees, her back toward the door, fiddling with a radio.

She heard him enter, said without turning, "It won't work. Just a little while ago it stopped."

"I think we're cut off now, perhaps for good," he told her. He sat down on the edge of the absurd bed and began to take off the clothes they had given him for the hunt. He was too tired to protest against the massacre of his bedroom decor. He was not even sure he wanted to protest. For all its anachronism, the big round bed was comfortable.

She watched him, her hands on her thighs, and there was worry written on her broad forehead. "You know something, Rog."

"I don't *know* anything," he replied. "I only think and have theories." Unexpectedly he found himself telling her all about it, about himself, where he had been, what he had done.

She listened quietly, saying nothing, letting him go on. His head was in her lap and he talked up to her while she ran gentle fingers through his hair. When he had finished, she smiled down at him thoughtfully, affectionately, then said, "You know, you're a funny kind of man, Roger."

"Funny?"

She cuffed him gently. "You know what I mean. So now we're really cut off in this place—you and

me and little Tom and Olga and Eudalia and the twins. What are we going to do, Roger?"

He shrugged. He was very tired. "Whatever they'll let us do," he said through a yawn. "Maybe we can make this a two-way study. They are almost human, you know. Almost." He pulled her down and kissed her and felt unexpected contentment decant through his veins. He knew now that things had worked out the right way, the only way. He added aloud, "I think we'll find ways to keep ourselves amused."

"You really enjoy playing the heel, don't you, Rog?" Her lips moved against his as she spoke. "You had a chance to get out of here. You could have changed places with Cass. Maybe you could have destroyed the gateway and stayed on the other side and still saved other victims. But no, you had to come back to—us. I think I'm going to be in love with you for that."

He sat up on one elbow and looked down at her half angrily. "Are you trying to make a goddam hero out of me?" he asked.

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