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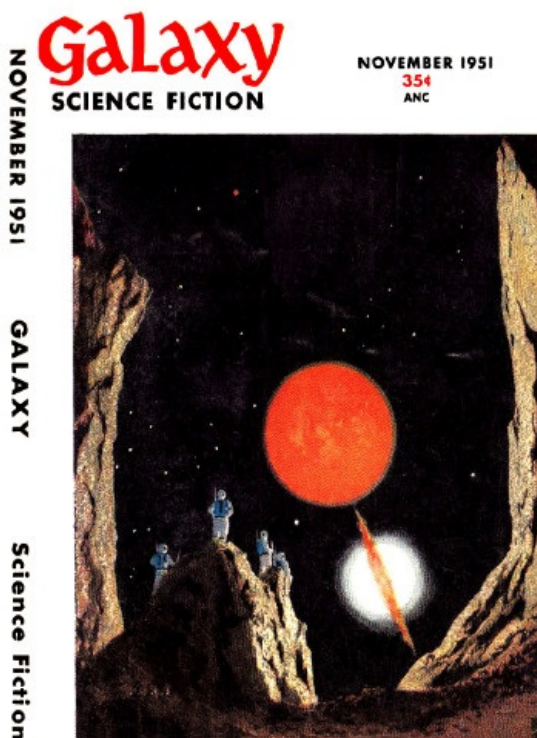
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PSYCHOTENNIS, ANYONE? ***



PSYCHOTENNIS, ANYONE?

By LLOYD WILLIAMS

Illustrated by DAVID STONE

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If scientific advance changes our forms of courtship, can other sports be far behind? Not when telekinesis is finally perfected!

Before them the ball took a savage turn toward the player in white. Around Grant the crowd stood up and roared, and he felt suddenly tense and doubting. Then the player ducked, the ball shot through above him to smash against the court wall, and he controlled the rebound to send the sphere once more into erratic, darting flight.

"Again!" Grant felt his muscles suddenly relax with release of anxiety. He turned to the girl. "Bee, I'm worried. It's not like Tony—does he want to get killed? He should stop those shots, not dodge them. Are you sure he's all right?"

"Now, Granny." The girl kept her eyes fixed on the court. "Remember, Tony took this match for charity. He wants the crowd to have a show, that's all. He is in splendid shape."

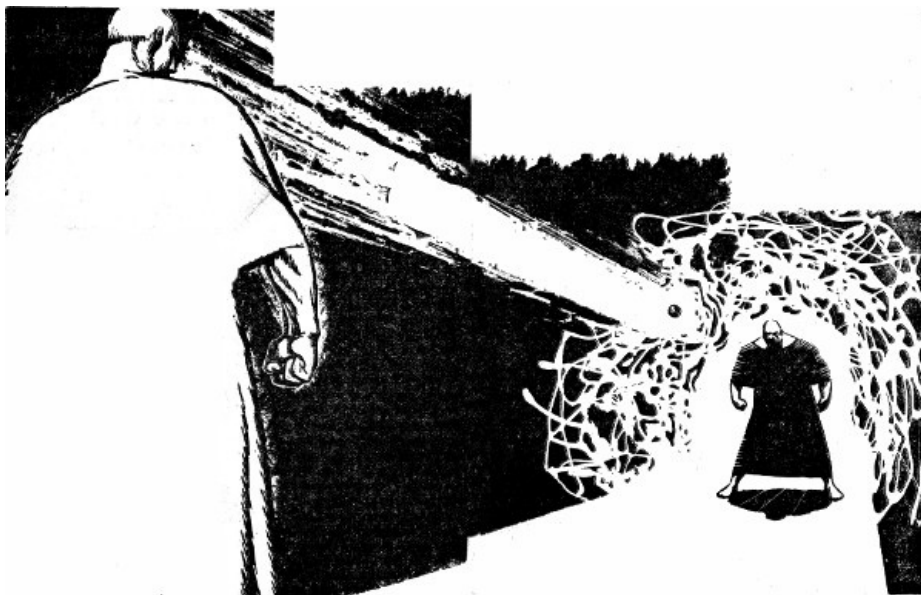
"No sleep," Grant went on worriedly. "I'm sure it must be that. If his brain were alert, he'd control that ball until Slag went crazy. Without sleep, you can't focus prop—"

"Please, Granny, *stop!*" In that instant her throbbing mind touched his, and he caught a glimpse of the alarm in her face. She, too, felt that something was wrong. But she tugged at his sleeve and pointed through the screen at the oval below. "Look!"

Slag's feet were set wide apart, and his black-robed body stood square. But his head had begun a sort of slow wobble, from side to side, as the ball lanced in perihedral swings about the court.

"Praise Allah!" whispered Grant. "A beautiful dance! Tony's thinking that gangster, into a coma."

The white player was in concentration, using his eyes only rarely in shifting ever more complex movements to the sphere. Then the rhythmic pattern had become a wild *corondo*, with Slag as its center, and the dark figure stood hypnotized, with only spasmodic jerks of his brutal features to mark the fear in his mind.



"Now," said Grant. His voice seemed loud in the awed silence of the spectators. "Now, Tony! Call it a day!"

"Just touch him," whispered Bee. "Don't hurt him, Tony."

It was as if they had signaled the player, even through the tele-proof screen. Gradually the wild swings of the ball slowed. It circled Slag gently, dropped closer, and poised above him. Tony's mind was clearly in full control of the sensitive sphere.

In a seat behind Grant, an excited man suddenly yelled, "Thumbs down, hard!" Obviously the crowd was ready to sacrifice its erstwhile hero.

Then—the ball moved, a small movement, and there was a roar. Uninfluenced, the ball dropped and rolled to the center court, and Tony stood in bewilderment as Slag shook himself awake.

Grant leaped up and tried to push through to the box exit. Behind him, Bee clung. "Granny, what will you do? What can you...."

He shook her off and answered her with his mind as he struggled on. "Stop them, that's what! End the match."

"How? You know you cannot!"

But he felt her mind cling at the hope, and sent back reassurance. "*I can. They may not like it, but I can stop these matches. Don't worry, I'll get your brother safely out of there.*"

She was relieved. Knowledge of his position—his relation to the sport—he felt her memory produce the reasons. *Sport, thought Grant. I invented a sport. Oh, Allah! What has my sport become?*

And then her mind shrieked at him, stabbed at his brain: "Tony—Tony darling!"

Dazedly he heard the moan and fought a path to the transparent screen. Out on the court lay a white figure, outspread, and the ball rolled slowly past the dripping head.

"Too late!" sobbed Bee. "Too late! Tony...."

Somehow she was down there before Grant. He saw her, huddled over Tony's body, as he finally reached an open gate in the domed screen. On the opposite edge of the court, Psycho-sport Commissioner Woods was in conversation with the referee, Harmon. A flash bulb glowed. Three reporters looked at the fallen player and spoke casually to each other. Towering above the group was Slag, staring down as if surprised.

Grant went first to the Commissioner, who adopted a defensive attitude immediately, throwing up his hands.

"Don't jump on *me*, now. It seems I am helpless. Ask Harmon yourself. There was nothing wrong that he could see."

"That's nonsense," said Grant, "and you know it. No matter who it is, a ball will not smash into an awake player. It simply cannot be done. Even a novice can overcontrol his opponent at that range."

"Right. It couldn't have happened." Sarcasm indicated the worry felt by Woods. "Damn it, Lane, that's the way it is. Harmon watched like a hawk in his bubble. The dome was sealed; not a single leak. Slag's second crouched behind the shield and never moved. I personally supervised Anthony's examination. He was in perfect condition. The only thing yet to check is the ball, but the ball...."

"You have it? Never mind, no ball invented could do that alone. Tony could handle any ball, even without the new sensitive core. And in a hundred games every day, they don't ever have this sort of accident."

"Just when Slag plays." The Commissioner touched Grant's arm helplessly. "The force of the man's mind must be terrible, Lane. He must be a superman. But what am I going to do? If I outlaw him without legal grounds...." He stopped, gulped nervously.

"There may be no grounds from your point of view and theirs." Grant gestured at the crowd struggling through the exits. "But there are from mine. If I'm to remain Honorary President of the Association, Slag has got to go. That's final!"

Woods said, "Lane, you could stop this another way. If you don't, and you put Slag out, they will think...." But Grant was already hurrying over to Bee Anthony.

More people joined the group and talk died away as uniformed men bent down to the prone figure. Bee sobbed in Grant's arms. Her mind was withdrawn, grieving, and he patted her awkwardly while he thought of how much these young twins had come to mean to him in the years since he began his research in metaphysics. Just children, they had seemed at first. He had been young. Doctor Lane, graduate of '52 on fellowship, and they were the kids he had worked with, who had shown remarkable powers of the mind.

Tony and himself—they had formulated the methods which still governed the cultivation of telekinesis. Grant had discovered—the principles, but it was the successful results of the Anthony boy's training which paved the way for others to learn. Yet Bee was different. No amount of tutoring could help her influence an object with her mind. Different, but not inferior, for Bee was a telepath. With intimates her conversation was most strange—much of it understood, yet left unspoken.

Grant was one of the intimates. Her silent sorrow would have found him at any distance, but now he tried to evade it, because Tony was gone and Woods had come over to face the reporters—and Slag.

"Mister Woods," began one of the men, but the Commissioner raised a hand and turned to the giant player.

"You have had my personal warning, Slag. Do you think I will allow you to carry on your ugly career? Why, man, you're lucky the courts have not ruled you a murderer!"

"It's not my fault," Slag said. "I didn't *try* to smash him, honest. I don't know my own strength, I guess."

Bee's reddened eyes stared at the man, and Grant whispered, "Darling, can you tell?"

"You know their minds are closed to me. I just feel ... something *evil*. I must get out of here. Please, Grant, take me away."

Behind Slag the little blond man Teagle, manager and second of the professional, spoke up. "Like Slag says, Commissioner, it isn't his fault. These fast-thinking players match him, get him all excited in the court, and then wonder why they get knocked down. They just don't have the stuff to match a champ."

"Slag is the only man ever warned to pull his shots," agreed a reporter who was taking notes.

"Gentlemen!" Woods turned to Grant. "All of us here respect the opinion of Dr. Lane, who brought this sport into being and who is, in my estimation, its greatest exponent. I have consulted with him. If he is to retain any connection whatever with the game, he informs me, Slag must get out."

There was silence. The men stared first at the florid-faced Commissioner, then at Grant.

"More than personal considerations are involved," added Woods. "Slag's brutal style of play, according to Dr. Lane, endangers the entire future of this grand sport."

The black-robed player looked around for support. Little Teagle pushed in front of the Commissioner. "You mean that has-been," he pointed at Grant, "is trying to get rid of my boy? It ain't fair, I say. Even when he tries to take it easy, Slag has it tough. They're scared, and won't match us—even these amateurs. And yet look what we've done to pep the game up!"

"You may be right, Mister Teagle. All things considered, however, I feel the merit of Dr. Lane's suggest—"

"Who is this Lane?" The little man's face was fierce. "So he starts the game, and invents the ball, so what? They used to call him a champ, the *master*, but that's a long time ago. Now that he's out, he don't like Slag coming up so strong. It kills him that he ain't the best any more."

"That will be all for tonight. In the morning I'll have an official release ready." The reporters were tense, anxious to miss nothing. "And, gentlemen, you have a good idea of the nature of that statement."

"Wait! I'm telling you," said Teagle. "We've tried to get a match with this Lane. Here it is, boys, the real truth. The guy wants Slag out because he's scared to meet him. Right here and now we challenge him! And I bet he hasn't got the guts to take us up."

"I feel," said Woods, "that a scientist like Dr. Lane should not be subjected to this ... this insolence."

The reporters ran toward the exit, eager to call in this news break.

Grant said nothing. Aware of Bee's feelings, he shot a look of contempt at Teagle and turned. Yet he knew, as they walked slowly away, that behind him were no feelings of good will. At best, the men awaited his next move—and until then suspended judgment.

In three days the city became for Grant Lane a savage jungle. The papers shrieked at him Teagle's endless insults, Slag's boastful challenge. Each statement by the Commissioner cleverly shifted more responsibility from Woods to himself, and the tragic end of yet another match was played down until it appeared that Slag, and not his opponent, was the injured party.

After all, was his crowd-convincing argument, did they jail professional fighters in the old days when one was killed? Just a little accident in the heat of fair contest; it was no more than that. Yet there *was* more, this time. People appeared unsatisfied, disapproving of Grant, as if he should offer himself as a sacrifice to their sympathy with Slag. The one time he went restlessly into the streets, they watched him sullenly, waiting....

He kept to his apartment after that, and studied furiously. No man *could* overcontrol an awake opponent in a direct shot—if the ball was all right. As the ball closed in, the approached player's influence grew proportionately stronger, while his opponent's lessened in inverse ratio. That was the reason Grant had originally declared the sport to be safe.

He interrupted his work only briefly for Tony's funeral, and felt an obscure shame in facing Bee Anthony. Then the cellular organism of the sphere used in the game absorbed his attention again. It was an artificially nurtured nerve-center, a growth devised by himself, and seemed to offer the only possible answer. *Perhaps this sub-life had acquired learning ability—the ability to act independently.* It seemed absurd, and yet how much was really known of this highly irritable stuff called living matter?

Bee found him at his apartment the fourth morning. She seemed much more relaxed. "Tony hated useless grief," she said. "I had to come here, Granny. I had to know that we might see the end of all this."

"Yes." Grant still felt a vague shame. "We'll have to stop Slag short, before he adds any more victims."

"Oh, it's more than that! It's the people, too, and the knowledge that more Slags may appear. If all the matches suddenly..." She broke off, frowning, as if uncertain whether to continue. "You see, Granny, Tony decided to play because of that. It wasn't even the charities, really. The people distrust you. Not just because you were wrong, but because they are suspicious of any probing

into the powers of mind. They prefer fantasy to scientific hypothesis, and now Slag's triumphs...." She faltered, and unhappily twisted her face away.

"But Tony could have crushed Slag, too."

"You know that was different. He had Slag hypnotized first. But Tony was awake when the ball struck!"

"You're right, Bee. Frankly, I don't know what the answer could be. I'm working on the core of the ball. There is a chance—"

"I'm sure it was something else! Granny, have you thought of the screen? There must have been a leak, or a failure. Think of that crowd, hoping for their hero. Suppose they subconsciously influenced the sphere, directed it at Tony."

He thought of the mob's reaction when Slag was helpless, and kept silent. It would be cruel to blast her one hope with nothing to offer in exchange.

"You think I'm wrong, but what else would it be? The ball couldn't kill Tony by itself." Then she was in tears. "I should have been there to stop it. He wouldn't take a second—I begged him to let me—and I would have *sensed* any outside influence!"

Grant recognized the guilt feelings she was suffering from. He tried to give comfort, but suddenly she was a woman, proud and independent, and would not stay. Only at the door for one moment did she turn appealingly to him.

"Granny, you're not going to play Slag!"

"Do you want me to? Should I obey the roar of the mob? And look!" He gestured at one of the papers, where a center-page box proclaimed, 'Commissioner Rules Out Lane-Slag Match.' "At thirty-seven they say I'm too old to play."

"Don't do it, Grant." He felt her conflicting, torn emotions. "Yet, the funny thing is, I don't think I could live if they allow Slag to go on and on."

Grant's apartment was ill-equipped for working with micro-organisms. So, although preliminary study opened up no encouraging line of experimentation, next day he transferred his work to the university laboratories. He found his colleagues friendly—one had cheerfully handled Grant's lectures during his absence—but reserved, as if they suspected him to be guilty of some terrible sin, yet hoped he might prove himself innocent.

Barker, the bio-chemist, listened to his theory of the probability of change in the nerve center of the ball. "I have not worked with these cultures," he said. "You claim they are artificially produced solely to provide a focal receptor for the controlling minds. Are the cells non-reproductive?"

"Yes. You see, the structure must be stable. Any mind can provide the necessary power to move light objects short distances, but focusing that power is the difficulty. Hence the sensitive core. The operator can *sense* where to direct his will."

Barker reflected a moment. "So the culture is purely static—doesn't even amplify the influence. In that case, I can only visualize such changes as natural radiation might bring about. No hope there for a recurrent pattern of change."

"Learning ability—acquisition of power to act voluntarily—I thought the answer might be in that."

"We'll see. Might as well begin there, anyway. Get us a few of the balls, Lane, and I'm sure the staff will gladly try to help out."

That evening Grant walked onto the court of the Coliseum and was made certain of the city's anger toward him. Bee's idea was worth testing, and he had brought with him some student telepaths, but the instant he appeared the crowd rose in a storm of fury. When the announcer requested spectators to direct the ball at Grant, their wrath gave way to cheers, and they concentrated hopefully on crushing him. But the screen held, the telepaths sensed no invading influence as Grant whirled the ball about the court, until in disgust he signaled for the screen to be deactivated.

Instantly the will of the crowd took hold. The sphere jerked erratically until concerted influence steadied it opposite Grant. Then it flashed into motion, a heavy, deadly missile, with all the mind power of a mob driving it murderously across the court at him.

He stopped it easily, six inches away.

Barker said, "No use seeking further. We may not know everything living organisms can do, but we can certainly tell what is beyond their power. The tests are conclusive."

Lorms, the behaviorist, nodded his head.

For just an instant Grant felt confused, helpless. His original arguments for psychosport were proved valid, but the killings became even more inexplicable—they were logically impossible! And, somehow, that made *him* the criminal.

That left him only one thing to do.

It was humiliating to accept such a solution to his personal problem. He thought of Bee Anthony and nearly turned back. Only since the tragedy had he realized how changed was their relationship—and how important she was to him. Would she scorn his action, think him a slave to public pressure? Probably, but Grant forced his steps onward.

In the lobby of the Page-Horton, Bee caught him by the arm. "Since when," she asked, "do you walk grimly past your friends?... No, Grant. Don't bother to think up a story. I know where you are going."

He wanted to chase her away—and to pull her close to him. But she glanced up and laughed. "You look *so* perplexed and silly. Professor Lorms called me, and of course I knew what you'd do."

"Do you think," said Grant, "that I should, Bee? Is it right?"

"Darling, fighting results from frustration and breeds even more frustration and anger. But somehow men get cornered until—well, they *have* to. Not Tony. He was a gay fool, tilting at windmills. Oh, Grant! I know you're wrong, but you're right, too, and inside I'm so glad!"

He wanted to erase the worry behind her gladness, to smother it with reassurance. They went up together to Slag's suite. Teagle was at the door. "Glad to see you, Mahomet," he said to Grant. "The contract's all ready to sign. I guess you'll want *your* cut for charity, eh?"

"You won't, I suppose."

"Not on your life. Excuse the double meaning, Miss." He smirked at Bee. "I ask you, who's going to match us after we knock this one off?"

Slag stared glumly from a chair, not even removing his hand from the glass beside him. "Practicing," he said. "Getting into shape for our tussle, Doc. Like Teagle said, you had to come across."

Grant took the papers from the manager, filled in the blanks and signed.

"Don't talk much, this Doc Lane," said Slag. "Should I show him, Teagle?"

"Sure thing. Watch this practice, Doc."

The big man concentrated on the amber bottle beside him. Slowly, jerkily, it lifted—one inch, then two. Slag relaxed, and watched it ring as it fell to the table. "My job when I retire," he said. "Got to pour it right into the glass. Pretty hot, eh?"

Grant gave no warning. The man's trousers were deluged as the glass shattered in his hand. He leaped up cursing, and then moved quickly and with ugly purpose toward his visitors.

"Careful, boy," warned Teagle. "There's a dame present."

For fifteen seconds Grant's eyes were locked with Slag's. He looked into their red-rimmed hatred, fought to see the depths of the man. Then, just before the other turned away, an unreasoning, unexpected emotion surged in Grant. It swept over and left him shaken, all in that instant.

The emotion was fear.

Out on the court it was anger he felt, anger at Slag, who stood opposite and bowed to the noisy throng, anger at Teagle, who chanted insults until ordered behind the second's shield, at the spectators, packing the Colliseum in hopes of seeing a player maimed or killed—and Bee Anthony, even at Bee.

She had defied him, bribed her way in to act as his second, and had slipped behind the shield at his side of the court. In front of those jeering faces, it was out of the question to make her leave.

There was a roar as the ball dropped from the referee's overhead bubble. Grant left it to Slag, let the man shoot crudely several times, and fought to calm himself. The shots were forceful, but easily stopped and returned. It was like Tony's match, almost too slow at first. Until the players became absorbed, it was hopeless to attempt any kind of hypnotic effects with the ball.

Slag swung the sphere into rapid circles about the court. The crowd watched silently, as if impressed by the player's control. To Grant it was absurd—he knew that any trained child could execute the movements. And yet, Tony must have felt so, too. But that was before—

The ball dropped on him like a hawk, and he almost laughed. To give the gasping crowd a thrill, he barely deflected the shot, and feigned amazement. Slag retrieved control.

Beneath the sudden amusement, Grant was uneasy. Slag had never won a *real* victory—never dazed or hypnotized an opponent before striking. All his triumphs rested on single, smashing thrusts. How was it possible? With such clumsy control, the professional could never set up a victory—yet the record stood. Grant could not fathom the problem. If the match went on forever, he could see no way for Slag to drop him. And if he quickly whirled Slag into dazed defeat, the real mystery might never be solved. His opponent would merely have suffered defeat in a match not even recognized by the Commission.

Now he could guess why Tony had played carelessly. It was not only victory that was sought. He had deluded himself in accepting such an irresponsible way out. The whole affair depressed him, knotted itself into mind-snaring tangles. The ball blurred again and he hardly cared, only ducking

to let it splat against the shield behind him. A spurt of rage sent the sphere spinning back at Slag, but the other diverted it easily into a screen-hugging orbit.

Tony, Slag, Woods and Teagle—they seemed to merge confusedly in his mind. They stood, each in turn, at the door of an iron-barred cell. For Grant, there was no way out. Win or lose, live or die, he was doomed. The light dimmed in the cell. Just for an instant Bee appeared, her hair throwing off sparks of brilliance. She, too, faded out. Neither Bee the child, whom he did not love, nor Bee the woman, who did not love him, could save him. Before him gaped the bottomless pit of shame and penance. He had unloosed a monster on the world. He had to pay for that.

But first Grant had another debt to pay. He tried to throw off the depression, imagining as he did so a sob of joy in the disembodied Bee. He wrested the sweeping ball from Slag, even from the opposite end of the court. He spun it in wild orbits and compensated for the other's furious thrusts. Faster and faster he circled it. Slag's mind could not keep up the pace. The even swings acquired a jogging pattern, edged farther out—to within ten feet of Slag. A quick break lanced behind the man, out again, and then the sphere fell into helical loops, thrice differentiated by harmonic variations, and swept wide around the court.

Somehow Slag's distress gave Grant no pleasure. Defeat seemed to face him everywhere; he read it in his opponent's twisted features, even in the futile effort to withdraw attention from the ball. *It's no good, he thought. I have failed all along.*

Savagely he worked the sphere. He would do it quickly. There was no use expecting Tony's fate. The ball darted again for Slag and this time there could be no interference. It became pure mathematics, the motion, complicated far beyond Tony's simple *corondo*, a flashing three-dimensional blur of color. He could not keep it up. The concentration brought an invading blackness to his mind. Somewhere there was a dull roar, and he felt as if his own mind were cracking. His nerves quivered to put an end to it, to touch Slag with the ball. Slowly, cautiously, he brought the sphere down....

Slag was not there!

He gaped. His eyes suddenly found the crumpled heap across the court, and relief swept over him. The man was beaten, in a state of collapse, and there was nothing more Grant could do.

"Grant!" Bee screamed. "Oh, no! Grant darling, look up!"

Her radiance was almost blinding. He half-twisted to reach her, and then his eyes caught it—the ugly sheen of the fast-growing ball. Desperately he turned, and it shifted in unison. Then she shrieked once more, despairingly, and he threw himself flat, arms outstretched, toward her.

The ball's speed was so great that it shattered to pieces against the shield behind him.

From back of the barrier ran Bee. She crouched beside him, and her enveloping warmth lifted the evil spell from his mind. The loud confusion of the crowd burst upon him, he saw the referee's swiftly lowering bubble. He was in control of himself, thanks to Bee's interference, and could act on the knowledge so dangerously gained.

"The murderer!" Grant pulled Bee up with him. "We've got him!"

Opposite them, Slag still lay on the court.

"I don't see how he did it," Grant said bewilderedly.

"Not Slag—*him!*" She pointed out the small, running figure.

Teagle battered vainly at a gate. The still-active screen held him back, and the man's face was a despairing white grimace. Then Grant was upon him, and took him by the throat.

Woods paced the dressing room, still confused. "I begin to see," he said, "but what can I do with the two of them?"

"Stop worrying." Grant was curt. "You can do nothing. The law will take Teagle, and without him Slag is just another bum."

"He never knew," marveled Bee. "Slag never knew how he won."

"I am to blame." Grant thought of the surging fear Teagle had directed in him at Slag's hotel. "I should have known that telepsychical phenomena could be used as a weapon. The man is a freak. He couldn't influence the ball, but communicated overpowering emotion—without even seeing his subjects—from behind his shield. The victims committed suicide, just as I nearly did before Bee...."

"What did you feel—a so-called called death wish?" asked Woods. "No matter. Not seeing Slag collapse, he overplayed his hand."

"Slag's being unconscious merely provided an anti-climax," said Grant. "There was a more important factor added this time. And if you don't mind, Woods, I have an apology to make in private to my one and only second."

"Not just the only one, darling," said Bee. "But your permanent, till-death-do-us-part second! Right?"

"Right!" Grant said.

"That's the only thing tonight," said Woods, "of which I officially approve."

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