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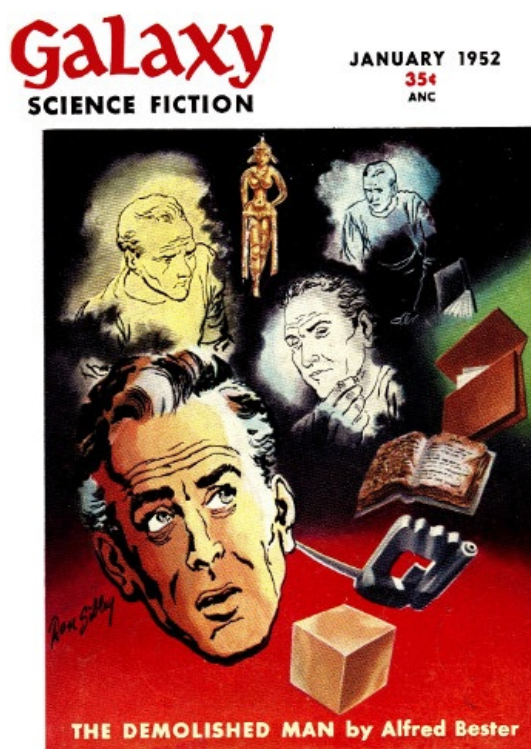
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DEAD END ***



Dead End

By WALLACE MACFARLANE

Illustrated by DAVID STONE

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***Sparing people's feelings is deadly.
It leads to—no feelings, no people!***

Scientist William Manning Norcross drank his soup meticulously and scooped up the vegetables at the bottom of the cup, while his attention was focused on the television screen. He watched girls swimming in formation as he gnawed the bone of his steak. He stolidly ate the baked potato with his fingers when the girls turned around, displaying "Weejees Are Best" signs pasted to their shapely backs. The final flourish was more formation swimming, where they formed a wheel under water, swimming past the camera to display in individual letters stuck to their bare midriffs: "Wonderful Weejees!"



Norcross chuckled appreciatively when a fat old man swam after them with an "Is That Right?" strung across his behind. Young men followed him, each carrying a one-word card that spelled: "You—Bet—It's—Right—Don't—Be—Left—Buy—Weejees—!" The scene ended on the surface. The grotesque old man was far in back, while the young men caught the young women, and together they kicked up a cloud of spray in the distance, which by a trick of photography mounted to the sky and the words swept around the globe in monstrous letters: "BUY WEEJEES!"

The dessert was apple pie, and Scientist Norcross turned the screen to the "Abstractions" channel. Watching the colors and patterns form in response to the music, he finished the pie and licked his fingers appreciatively. He pressed a stud to reveal the mirror wall before he activated the molecular cleanup.

Not many people would do that. It was not contrary to morals, exactly, but it was like scratching in public, and it took a scientific mind to study the human form unshaken, immediately after ingestion. There was pie on his tunic and gravy in his hair and a smear of grease from cheek to ear. With no sign of squeamishness, he smeared beet juice on his nose and studied the effect before he depressed the "Clear" stud.

He stretched and stood up while the tray disappeared, then turned and glanced in the mirror again. Nothing on him. Clean. He yawned luxuriantly before he tapped the "Finish" panel on the door and stepped forth, an immaculate and well-fed gentlemen of the year 2512.

He had a well-trained sense of humor, and a smile crossed his lips as he thought of the terror a 21st Century man would feel in such an eating chamber. When he pressed the clear button, the barbarian would be clean—really, sterilely clean—for the first time in his life, and without clothes, too. Oh, what a jape that would be, for the molecular cleanup would immediately disintegrate such abominations as the fur of animals, and much clothing 400 years ago was

actually made of such things as sheep hair.

He bowed to a pretty woman just entering a cubicle and thought defiantly that a scientific mind afforded much amusement. There was no illusion in his icy clear thoughts, for they were not befogged by moral questions.

With a sigh, Scientist William Manning Norcross returned to the difficult problem he had set aside while having lunch. The garden city was beautiful outside, but he gave only passing attention to the rain slithering down the huge dome of force over the buildings. He did not pause to admire the everlasting flowers in their carefully simulated beds of soil.

John Davis Drumstetter was in a state of crisis again, and Scientist Norcross was worried.

His fears were well founded. The young man wheeled on Scientist Norcross the minute he stepped through the hedge into the force field under the giant live oak tree.

"Where are they?" he demanded. "I am coming to believe, Scientist, that your reputation is exceeded only by your inability to live up to it. The problem is only an extension of your own early work. You volunteered cooperation, and I accepted it gladly, but your delays are very distressing!"

"Johnny," said Scientist Norcross, "the press of my own experiments—"

"Then tell me you won't do it!"

"I want to help you. Don't you remember the years we spent together in your training to the high calling of scientist? I took your young hand, Johnny, and helped you over the juvenile stumbling blocks. Why, your first mind machine was one I gave you, and when—"

"You're a fraud, Scientist!" said the young man bitterly.

"The young never appreciate the old," sighed Norcross.

"Go suck a mango!"

Norcross was shocked. "There's no call for being obscene, John Davis Drumstetter," he said sternly. "To mention eating to another person, and right in public, where you might be overheard —"

"Eat a slippery, sloppery mango on *television*, you old fool! Smear it all over your face while you ingest it into your unspeakable digestive tract!"

"John Davis Drumstetter," said the scientist with great control, "I have been your friend since you were born. Your father and I became scientists on the same day. You are young and over-eager. Just remember," he finished with a warning shake of his finger, "Satellite Station One wasn't built in a day!"

Drumstetter stopped his furious pacing and subdued his rage with visible effort. He chilled, like red steel hardening, and when he spoke he was in full command of himself.

"Now listen to me, Norcross, and keep your mouth shut. For the past forty years I've been working on the stellar overdrive. We have the Solar System in our reticule, colonies have been established on every planet, and ships have been sent to Alpha Centauri, with every chance that mankind has established itself in that solar system. But in the four hundred years since science emerged from the dark ages, we've managed to creep only four light years away from home! And you, Scientist, are withholding your work on the overdrive relay. Do you understand why your plea of old friendship does not affect me? In the past two years, you've done nothing—"

"Experiments that must be kept secret," mumbled Norcross.

"And it is my belief," said the young man in a clipped, cold voice, "that you have sold yourself to your taste buds and digestive tract. Either that," and here his burning rage came into the open, "or you are a pseudo-life!"

At this ultimate insult, Scientist Norcross was silent with indignation. He watched Drumstetter shrug into a stole, turn down the power to the huge mind machine, sling his reticule over his shoulder, and stalk off through the hedge.

Norcross slumped into a chair, his mind in confusion. He heard Drumstetter's plane as it left the ground. Plane, he thought, his mind avoiding the problem. Plane. What a curious name, handed down through the ages, to call a swift skip powered by Earth's magnetism. An original plane fought the air, buoyed up by the lift of plane surfaces in movement. When the movement stopped, it died.

Died. Death. Pseudo-life.

Scientist Norcross shuddered. His well-trained sense of humor did not include abominations.

He took the communication from his pocket and cleared to Prime Center. When the prim, grim face of Prime Center himself in the little disc was sharp, Norcross reported what had happened, even to the suggestion Drumstetter had made that he was pseudo-life.

"This is very bad," said Prime Center. "Monica Drake Lane is now pseudo-life, too."

"God's name!"

"Took her skip into a cliff in the Sierra Mountains yesterday. Disconnected the anti-collision. A clear case."

"What will this do to Drumstetter?"

"Nothing," said Prime Center, "unless he learns."

"Is she ready?"

"I'm sending her to you right now for indoctrination. Reports are that Drumstetter is visiting scientists on the West Coast, and Probability reports that he may cover the world before he returns. Do you understand? Her indoctrination must be perfect."

"It always has been." Norcross pulled his lip. "The same limitation will be in Monica Drake Lane?" he asked hopelessly.

"Of course," said Prime Center. "We'll keep you posted on developments."

"You'd better try women," said Norcross.

"Women, narcotics, or anything else! I'd eat a blueberry pie with my hands behind my back at high noon," said Prime Center with fierce obscenity, "if I thought it would do any good!"

He cut the connection.

Norcross was still under the oak tree, lost in contemplation of a color abstraction on his little communication, when a tall blonde girl, brown as a berry, stepped hesitantly through the hedge. She walked to him and, when he looked up, she buried her face in her hands. He stood and held her shoulders.

"Now, now," said Scientist Norcross, "don't cry, my dear."

"But this is so puzzling—and I wasn't crying," she answered. "What's happened to me?"

"Sit down, Monica, and tell me what you think has happened."

"But I don't know. You see, the last I remember is walking through the Psych Lab in San Francisco, and suddenly—suddenly, I'm in New York and they're sending me to you. What has happened?"

"Where do you first remember being in New York?"

"In the—oh, I don't know!" She was in a flush of embarrassment.

"I'll help you, my dear. You were in the pseudo-life clinic. You are not *exactly* Monica Drake Lane any longer. She died. You are pseudo-life."

Her eyes were bright and the pupils were pinpointed from shock.

"You are the pseudo-life Monica Drake Lane. To all outward appearances, you are an exact counterpart of the girl. Inwardly? Well, your internal organs have been simplified, and you cannot reproduce. Aside from such minor changes, you are identical, and incidentally a much more efficient creature than your prototype. And if your mind, which is a very good one, was a human mind, I could not tell you this. Pseudo-life is a most remarkable thing, but Lewis and Havinghurst and Covalt, who developed it 300 years ago, were never able to imbue pseudo-life with what they called the minus-one factor, which includes the phenomenal human emotional sensitivity, among other things. Are you feeling better now?"

"Why, yes—" Her voice trailed off.

"You are no longer a slave of your emotions," said Scientist Norcross complacently. "None of us are."

"You—you are—?"

"Oh, yes. We generally don't speak of such things, but since I'm to introduce you to pseudo-life, I can tell you that I died two years ago."

"I'm afraid I never did know—or Monica Drake Lane never—that is, I—"

"You *are* Monica Drake Lane. If you will sit quietly, I'll tell you about it." Scientist Norcross took two cigarettes from his reticule and offered the girl one. The lip play was considered somewhat daring between the sexes, but under the circumstances he thought the mild narcotic would be good for her, as well as the sharpening of the senses brought on by actually smoking together.

"When the Americans, who inhabited this continent, gained domination of the world in the 21st Century, they consolidated their position by carrying their customs to the ends of the Earth. For that matter, to Alpha Centauri, if the ships did get through.

"Forgive me," he interrupted himself, "if I seem improper or even immoral in this little talk of ours. Believe me, it's not with an easy disregard of proprieties that I bring myself to speak of such things.

"Well, the Americans believed, and rightly so, that death is a dreadful thing. Until Lewis and Havinghurst and Covalt developed pseudo-life, a great deal of time and effort and money went into such things as cemeteries—places where they literally buried their dead with elaborate ceremonials and much anguish. They had other equally wasteful practices, such as madhouses and jails, which were done away with when it became practical to replace a useless person with another, who matched the original to near absolute perfection, but without fatal flaws of body or weaknesses of the mind.

"Emphasis has shifted since those early years, when the abnormal were dealt with, to the comforting of human beings. Should John Davis Drumstetter suffer greatly at the loss of his mentor, the man who guided him in the ways of science? Of course not. He never knew I died."

Norcross puffed complacently, sending iridescent rainbow smoke rings over the mind machine.

"And I am his fiancée," said the girl.

"Should he suffer because you died? No reason for it," said Norcross heartily. "A psychic trauma of that nature would make him desperately unhappy. Happiness is the proper state in life, as everyone knows. In fact, you will make him much happier than Monica Drake Lane, the original, ever could."

"Yes, I shall be happy," mused the girl, as if feeling a more limited capacity for sorrow within herself. "But you spoke of a minus-one factor."

"Yes, it takes in a lot of things. Though we are immortal, barring accidents, and we retain all the knowledge we had as human beings, the flaw to pseudo-life is that no original thought is possible. Students of the matter compare it to glancing at a page in a dictionary. Of course you don't consciously remember the words there, but in pseudo-life you are capable of remembering and using them properly, so to speak, but not using them creatively. That is our trouble with John Davis Drumstetter. I was a brilliant physicist, but the understanding of new problems is beyond my limitations, and he is beyond me."

"But I woke in New York," she said irrelevantly.

"Because your master pseudo-life file was kept there," explained Scientist Norcross. "As a human being, you were required to visit the psych lab every month, where your changed pattern was recorded by the mind machine. The pseudo-life girl could never lose more than a month of the human being's life. What was your regular appointment date?"

"The 21st."

"Let's see—you died yesterday, so that would be only three days gone. We're very fortunate."

"But won't he notice a difference in me?"

"Absolutely not."

"Am I—still capable of love?"

Scientist Norcross blew a plume of rainbow smoke into the air. "Suppose, my dear, we find out."

Monica Drake Lane agreed, for morality, which is essentially organized taboo that changes as society changes, had, in the 26th Century, been confined exclusively to eating. Scientist Norcross had often amused himself by imagining how people of other ages would have been outraged by the moral standards of his own era, but his famous sense of humor was not rugged enough to be amused by the moral standards of the past. Not, at any rate, if he had had to endure them, though he found them sufficiently comic as history.

She built a bower, an attractive courtship custom that had been adopted from the birds, and the day ended much more pleasantly than Scientist Norcross had expected at lunch.

The reports came in from Prime Center. Drumstetter stayed in Los Angeles two days, in San Francisco three, and then consulted with Dowson in Honolulu. He skipped to New Zealand, back north to Japan, and swung across Siberia with short stops at various laboratories and universities. He was in Finland for three days with old Scientist Theophil Gertsley, who, though little better than a witch doctor, called himself a psychologist.

When John Davis Drumstetter set his skip down beside the live oak tree, Scientist Norcross and Monica Drake Lane were waiting for him. He was gaunt from hunger and weary from travel, but the expression in his eyes was not one to be assuaged by any food cubicle. Nor was it love he had been seeking and not found, for Prime Center had seen to it that opportunities were offered, from austere tropical girls to the warmth-seeking women of the north, who would even eat with a member of the opposite sex.

He greeted Scientist Norcross and his fiancée with an offhandedness that Norcross had not expected, and asked that he be excused from any long immediate association with them, due to the press of uncompleted work.

"But, Johnny," said Monica Drake Lane, "I've made a bower close by, and you seem very tired."

"There's work to be done," said the young man firmly. "I have no time to—Wait. I'll see your bower."

As they walked over the lush artificial grass, Scientist Norcross explained that his results from the overdrive relay equations were in the mind machine even now, but John Davis Drumstetter only patted him on the shoulder in a friendly way and told him not to bother.

When they reached the bower, Scientist Norcross expected that Drumstetter would sleep there after all, for it was an exceptionally pleasant design. The force field was night, and the sky was filled with adapted creatures from Mars dancing to their susurrant music, and the air was permeated with the bitter-sweet and exciting scent of a Venusian lake, the very odor of romance. In the background was the song of the sea.

John Davis Drumstetter stepped out of the bower and said gently, "It's one of the nicest I've ever seen, and we spent some happy nights in it a year ago, didn't we, Monica?"

He kissed her gently, as he might kiss a child, and walked back to the oak tree.

"He's behaving very oddly," reported Norcross to Prime Center, as soon as he could, and gave the details.

"I'd give a lot to have him meet a human female," said Prime Center wistfully.

"What shall I do?"

"Stay with him and wait," ordered Prime Center. "This is the first time the hopes of humanity lie in one man. Remember that. We can only serve," he added bitterly. "He hasn't tested the final limitation? Good. Keep me informed."

John Davis Drumstetter stayed beside his huge mind machine for nearly a week, and, though he was only sixty, he looked like an old man when he greeted Monica and Norcross at the end of that time.

"The relay is finished," he announced. "It's being installed in the *Last Hope* now. That's what I'm calling my ship, the ship to make mankind free of the stars. My work on Earth is nearly done."

"But, Johnny darling," said Monica Drake Lane, looking up at him through her eyelashes, "what about our marriage?"

He looked at her with grim pity. "The bower was an old bower," he answered. "Did you have the courage to be a unique in a patterned world? Can you reproduce, Monica Drake Lane?"

"Oh, Johnny—"

"The final limitation!" he said. "Humans have the power to command pseudo-life. Pseudo-life, answer! I command!"

She sank to the ground.

"No," she said, "no, Johnny, I can't have a baby. I died over a month ago. I'm sorry you found out."

John Davis Drumstetter turned on Scientist William Manning Norcross. "You've done no new work because you have no capacity for it. Correct? Answer, pseudo-life, I command!"

Norcross lifted a calm face. "Why, yes," he said, "I'm pseudo-life. Have been for over two years. But don't you worry, Johnny, it's better this way and only natural that—"

John Davis Drumstetter paid no attention. He spoke as if explaining to himself. "You see, they're pseudo-life, dancing to the very end of the masquerade ball that started so long ago. It began when measurable science, the science of finity, made a finite man, a man *nearly* as good. It was the mental climate of an age that wanted its books digested, and then abandoned reading for television. They froze food and precooked it and said it was even better than garden fresh vegetables.

"Do it the easy way, they said, never knowing that the hard way is the only way in the last analysis. Why try to cure a neurotic when you can make a pseudo-life of him? Don't let his grieving friends and relations suffer; provide them with a pseudo-life. He's just the same, they said, and he's not sick. And should a man die? Oh, no! Make a pseudo-life for his wife and children."

"But, Johnny—"

"Be still, pseudo-life! Why bother with men who were beginning to understand the human mind, when you can create pseudo-life? The cheap drives out the good every time. Oh, with the kindest intentions, with the softest sympathies! Hide. Conceal. The truth be damned!"

"But, Johnny darling—" began Monica Drake Lane.

"Be still, pseudo-life. There's one more thing, the final capstone to mankind's pyramid of folly." He got Prime Center on the communication. "Answer, pseudo-life, I command. Am I the last human being on Earth?"

"Since you put it that way," said Prime Center reluctantly, "you are."

"And in the Solar System?"

"I'm afraid so."

The communication dropped from John Davis Drumstetter's hand.

"This is the logical conclusion," he said slowly. "The actors are playing on a stage of worlds for an audience of one. At the solar observatory on Mercury, astronomers study the Sun and send in their reports, in case I should glance at them. In the mines of Pluto, miners dig ore to provide a market quotation I might see in the telepapers."

He kicked the communication across the floor.

"Get out," he told them with infinite weariness. "The last human being commands."

He slept for a day and had breakfast in *full public view* under a tree. Peeping Toms of both sexes watched him.



Prime Center appeared in person just as he finished mopping up the last of his once-over-lightly egg. Prime Center coughed and blushed and looked away, and John Davis Drumstetter laughed aloud, humorlessly.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully.

"Hm, yes," said Prime Center.

"Sit down. Have an egg?" A wicked light appeared in his eyes, and he went on in a low, sinister voice, "A coddled egg, soft and white and runny? Maybe you want to gulp some coffee? Or snap your way through a piece of crackling toast? No?" His guest was turning pale and sick-looking. "Well, let me finish this bacon, and state your business."

He threw back his head and slipped the bacon into his mouth. Prime Center shuddered.

"Scientist Drumstetter," he said, keeping his gaze fixed on the trunk of the tree, "I have come to offer you all the worlds. Yes, the whole Solar System, including the asteroids and Pluto. You will be more powerful than Alexander or Caesar or Stalin or O'Toole. We will create a new office—Prime *Squared* Center—to rule the Solar System. Do you mind not doing that?"

John Davis Drumstetter was licking his fingers thoughtfully. He nodded.

"Then you accept?"

"No, I'm through licking my fingers. I'll give you your answer on a systemwide communication. Arrange it, pseudo-life, immediately."

As a concession to morality, John Davis Drumstetter agreed to step into a molecular cleanup booth. When he came out again, he spoke to the worlds and all the ships in space:

"My friends, from now on the blind will lead the blind. Moral obliquity has triumphed and becomes common morality." He laughed and rubbed his nose. "I'm sorry. I was speaking to an audience of one—myself. What I want you billions to do is to continue your work, to maintain the system as it now stands. Pseudo-life will be replaced with pseudo-life till the end of time. It will be a static world. It will be a nearly-as-good world. It will be a pleasant world by your standards. I wish you to do this, and you must, of course, obey my command. My purpose reaches a little beyond your natural inclination; this system will serve as a fertile warning to any beings with intelligence who may come after me.

"I will not be with you long, myself—"

"Suicide?" asked Prime Center hopefully.

"Alpha Centauri," said John Davis Drumstetter with a chuckle. "The colonists left because they didn't like pseudo-life, either. Good-by to you all."

He snapped off the communication, waved to the little group under the tree, and entered the *Last*

Hope. The entry port swung closed. The force field glowed, and then the ship was gone, leaving behind a whirlwind of dust.

"Alpha Centauri?" asked Monica Drake Lane.

"Following the others of his wild, unstable breed," said Scientist Norcross.

"Easy come, easy go," the girl said, shrugging.

Prime Center had the last word. "Yes, and good riddance. Human beings have always been a nuisance."

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