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Title: Man in a Quandary

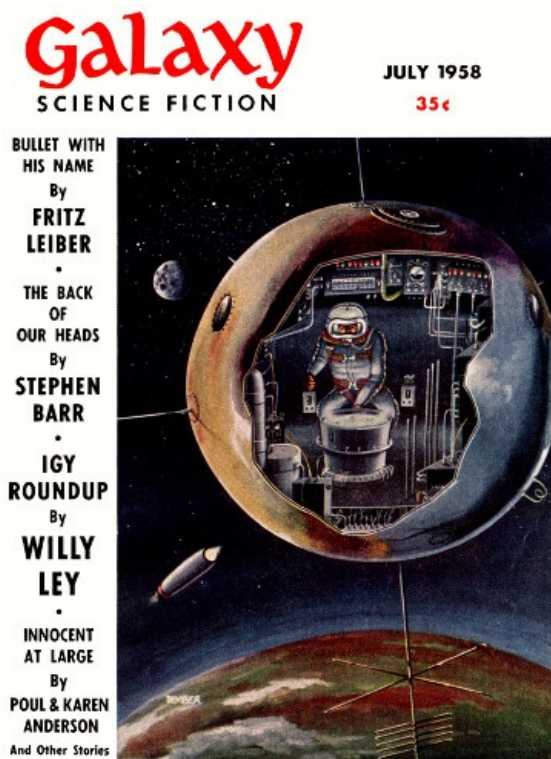
Author: Jr. L. J. Stecher  
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Release date: March 11, 2016 [EBook #51421]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online  
Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MAN IN A QUANDARY \*\*\*



# MAN IN A QUANDARY

By L. J. STECHER, JR.

Illustrated by MARTINEZ

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***If you were in my—well, shoes, if you don't mind stretching a point—what would you do about this?***

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Dear Miss Dix VI:

I have a problem. In spite of rumors to the contrary, my parents were properly married, and were perfectly normal people at the time I was born. And so was I—normal, I mean. But that all contributed to the creation of my problem.

I do not know if you can help me resolve it, but you have helped so many others that I am willing to try you. I enjoin you not to answer this letter in your column; write me privately, please.

You know all about me, of course. Who doesn't? But most of what you know about me is bound to be almost entirely wrong. So I will have to clarify my background before I present my problem.

Know, then, that I am Alfred the Magnificent. It surprises you, I imagine, that I would be writing a letter to Miss Dix VI. After all, in spite of the tax rate, I am one of the richest—I will say it!—one of the richest *men* in the world.

Every word of that last statement is true. My parents were enormously wealthy, but I have accumulated even more of the world's goods than they ever did. And if they had not been loaded with loot, I would not be here now to be writing this letter to you.

Please excuse any lack of smoothness in the style and execution of this letter. I'm doing this all myself. Usually I dictate to a secretary—a live secretary—but you understand that that would not be advisable for a letter of this kind, I'm sure.

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So. My background. I was born in 2352 and, having passed my infantile I.Q. test with flying colors, was admitted to the Harvard Creche for Superior Children at the usual age of three months.

The name of Alfred Vanderform naturally had been entered on the rolls much earlier. Ten years earlier, in point of fact. My parents had been fortunate enough to be selected to have three children and I was to be their first. They chose to begin with a son. They had known that they would be chosen, and that I would be a superior child, and had taken the wise precaution of signing me up for Harvard Creche as soon as the planners had finished drawing up their preliminary charts.

In spite of what you may have heard, there was absolutely no chance of falsifying the initial I.Q. examination; in those days, at least. I was a physically normal, mentally superior child. My

progress at the creche was entirely satisfactory. I was an ordinarily above-average genius in every way.

At age six, I left the creche for my sabbatical year at home with my parents, and it was there that my first disaster occurred.

My mother and father moved into the same house while I was there, which was the custom then (and may still be, for all I know) in order to provide a proper home-like atmosphere for me. Through some carelessness in original planning, this was also the year that had been selected for the birth of their second child, which was to be a girl. Both parents were to be the same for all three of their children. Under usual circumstances, they would have paid enough attention to me so that the disaster would never have been allowed to take place, but plans for their second child must have made them a trifle careless.

At any rate, in spite of my early age, an embolism somehow developed and major damage to my heart resulted. It was here that the great wealth of my parents proved invaluable.

Prognosis was entirely unfavorable for me. The routine procedure for a three-offspring couple would have been to cancel the unsuccessful quota and reissue it for immediate production. However, it was too late to arrange for twins in their second quota and my parents decided to attempt to salvage me.

An artificial heart was prepared and substituted for the original. It had a built-in atomic battery which would require renovation no oftener than every twenty years. Voluntary control was provided through connection with certain muscles in my neck, and I soon learned to operate it at least as efficiently as a normal heart with the normal involuntary controls.

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The mechanism was considerably bigger than the natural organ, but the salvage operation was a complete success. The bulge between my shoulder blades for the battery and the one in front of my chest for the pump were not excessively unsightly. I entered the Princeton Second Stage Creche for Greatly Superior Children on time, being accepted without objection in spite of my pseudo-deformity.

It cannot be proved that any special emolument was offered to or accepted by the creche managers in order to secure my acceptance. My personal belief is that nobody had to cough up.

Three years at Princeton passed relatively uneventfully for me. In spite of the best efforts and assurances of the creche psychologists, there was naturally a certain lack of initial acceptance of me by some of my creche mates. However, they soon became accustomed to my fore-and-aft bulges, and since I had greater endurance than they, with voluntary control over my artificial heart, I eventually gained acceptance, and even a considerable measure of leadership—insofar as leadership by an individual is possible in a creche.

Shortly after the beginning of my fourth year at the Princeton Creche, the second great personal disaster struck.

Somehow or other—the cause has not been determined to this day—my artificial heart went on the blink. I did not quite die immediately, but the prognosis was once again entirely unfavorable. Considerable damage had somehow eventuated to my lungs, my liver and my kidneys. I was a mess.

By this time, my parents had made such a huge investment in me, and my progress reports had been so uniformly excellent, that in spite of all the advice from the doctors, they determined to attempt salvage again.

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A complete repackaging job was decided upon. Blood was to be received, aerated, purified and pumped back to the arterial system through a single mechanism which would weigh only about thirty-five pounds. Of course, this made portability an important factor. Remember that I was only ten years old. I could probably have carried such a weight around on my back, but I could never have engaged in the proper development of my whole body and thus could never have been accepted back again by Princeton.

It was therefore determined to put the machinery into a sort of cart, which I would tow around behind me. Wheels were quickly rejected as being entirely unsatisfactory. They would excessively inhibit jumping, climbing and many other boyish activities.

The manufacturers finally decided to provide the cart with a pair of legs. This necessitated additional machinery and added about twenty-five pounds to the weight of the finished product. They solved the problem of how I would handle the thing with great ingenuity by making the primary control involuntary. They provided a connection with my spinal cord so that the posterior pair of legs, unless I consciously ordered otherwise, always followed in the footsteps of the anterior pair. If I ran, they ran. If I jumped, they jumped.

In order to make the connection to my body, the manufacturers removed my coccyx and plugged in at and around the end of my spinal column. In other words, I had a very long and rather flexible tail, at the end of which was a smoothly streamlined flesh-colored box that followed me around on its own two legs.

A human has certain normally atrophied muscles for control of his usually non-existent tail. Through surgery and training, those muscles became my voluntary controllers for my tail and the cart. That is, I could go around waggin' my tail while draggin' my wagon.

Pardon me, Miss Dix VI. That just slipped out.

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Well, the thing actually worked. You should have seen me in a high hurdle race—me running along and jumping over the hurdles, with that contraption galloping along right behind me, clearing every hurdle I cleared. I kept enough slack in my tail so I wouldn't get pulled up short, and then just forgot about it.

Going off a diving board was a little bit different. I learned to do things like that with my back legs under voluntary control.

Speaking of diving boards, maybe you wonder how I could swim while towing a trailer. No trouble at all. I would just put my tail between my legs and have my cart grab me around the waist with a kind of body scissors. The cart's flexible air sac was on its top when it was in normal position, so this held it away from my body, where it would not get squeezed. I would take in just enough air so that it was neutrally buoyant, and with its streamlined shape, it didn't slow me down enough to notice.

I usually "breathed"—or took in my air—through the intakes of the cart, and they stayed under water, but there was an air connection through my tail up to the lung cavity anyway, allowing me to talk. So I just breathed through my mouth in the old-fashioned way.

Backing up was rather a problem, with my posterior legs leading the way, and dancing was nearly impossible until I got the idea of having my trailer climb up out of the way onto my shoulders while I danced. That got me by Princeton's requirements, but I must confess that I was never very much in demand as a dancing partner.

At any rate, that system got me through to my sixth and last year at Princeton. I sometimes believe that I may be considered to be what is occasionally called an "accident-prone." I seem to have had more than my share of tough luck. During my last year at Princeton, I got my throat cut.

It was an accident, of course. No Princeton man would ever dream of doing away with someone he had taken a dislike to quite so crudely. Or messily.

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By voluntary control of my heart, I slowed the action down to the point where I managed to keep from bleeding to death, but my larynx was destroyed beyond repair. That was when I got my Voder installation. It fitted neatly where my lungs used to be, and because it used the same resonant cavities, I soon learned to imitate my own voice well enough so that nobody could tell the difference, "before" or "after."

Actually, it was a minor accident, but I thought I'd mention it because of what the news media sometimes call my "inhuman voice." It even enables me to sing, something I never was much good at before that accident. Also, I could imitate a banjo and sing at the same time, a talent that made me popular at picnics.

That was the last real accident I had for quite a while. I got through my second (and last) home sabbatical, my Upper School, my First College and my Second College. I was chosen for, and got through, Advanced College with highest honors. Counting sabbaticals, that took a total of twenty-nine years, plus the last of my time at Princeton. And then, an eager youth of forty-two, I was on my own—ready to make my way in the world.

I was smart to avoid the government service that catches so many of us so-called super-geniuses. It's very satisfying work and all that, I suppose, but there's no money in it, and I was rich enough to want to get richer.

The cart containing my organs didn't get in my way too much. With my athletic days behind me, I taught it to come to heel instead of striding along behind me. It was less efficient, but it was a lot less conspicuous. I had a second involuntary control system built in so it would stay at heel without conscious thought on my part, once I put it there.

In my office, I would have it curl up at my feet like a sleeping dog. People told me it was hardly noticeable—even people who didn't work for me. It certainly didn't bother me or hold me back. I started to make money as though I had my own printing press and managed to hang onto most of it.

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In spite of what the doom criers say, as long as there is an element of freedom in this country—and I think there always will be—there will be ways, and I mean legal ways, of coming into large hunks of cash. Within ten years, I was not only Big Rich; I was one of the most important people in the world. A Policy Maker. A Power.

It was about that time that I drank the bottle of acid.

Nobody was trying to poison me. I wasn't trying to kill myself, either. Not even subconsciously. I was just thirsty. All I can say is I did a first rate job with what was left of my insides.

Well, they salvaged me again, and what I ended up with was a pair of carts, one trotting along beside each heel. The leash for the second one was plugged into me in front instead of in the back, naturally, but with my clothes on, nobody could tell, just by looking, that they were attached to me at all.

The doctors offered to get me by without the second trailer. They figured they could prepare pre-digested food and introduce it into my bloodstream through the mechanism of my original wagon. I refused to let them; I had gotten too used to eating.

So whatever I ate was ground up and pumped into my new trailer—or should it be "preceder"? There it would be processed and the nutriments passed into my bloodstream as required. I couldn't overeat if I tried. It was all automatic, not even hooked into my nervous system. Unusable products were compressed and neatly packaged for disposal at any convenient time. In cellophane. There was, of course, interconnection inside of me between the two carts.

I'm told I started quite a fad for walking dogs in pairs. It didn't affect me at all. I never got very good at voluntary control of my second trailer, but by that time my habit patterns were such that I hardly noticed it.

Oh, yes—about swimming. I still enjoyed swimming and I worked it out this way: Wagon number two replaced number one in straddling me, and wagon number one hung onto number two. It slowed me down, but it still let me swim. I quit diving. I couldn't spare the time to figure out how to manage it.

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That took care of the next five years. I kept on getting richer. I was a happy man. Then came the crowning blow. What was left of me developed cancer.

It attacked my brain, among other things. And it was inoperable. It looked as if I had only a couple of years before deterioration of my mental powers set in, and then it would be the scrap heap for me.

But I didn't give up. By that time, I had gotten used to the parts-replacement program. And I was very rich. So I told them to get busy and build me an artificial brain as good as my own.

They didn't have time to make a neat package job this time. They took over three big buildings in the center of town and filled them with electronics. You should see the cable conduits connecting those buildings together! Then they bought the Broadway Power Plant and used most of its output. They ran in new water mains to provide the coolant.

They used most of my money, and it took all of my influence to speed things up, but they got the job done in time.

It won't do you any good to ask me how they transferred my memories and my personality to that mass of tubes and wires and tapes and transistors. I don't know. They tell me that it was the easiest part of the job, and I know that they did it perfectly. My brain power and my personality came through unchanged. I used them to get rich again in mighty short order. I had to, to pay my water and power bills.

I came out of it "Alfred the Magnificent" and still I'm just as human as you are, even if a lot of people—a few billions of them, I guess—won't believe it. Granted, there isn't much of the Original Me left, but there's an old saying that Glands Make the Man. Underneath it all, I'm the same Alfred Vanderform, the same old ordinary super-genius that I have always been.

I have almost finished with the background material, Miss Dix VI, and am nearly ready to present you my problem. I am now approaching the age of sixty—and have therefore reached the time of Selection for Fatherhood. I have, in fact, been fortunate enough to be one of the few selected to father three children.

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If you have chanced to hear rumors that money changed hands in getting me selected, let me tell you that they are entirely true. The only thing wrong about the rumors is that none of them has named a big enough amount—not nearly big enough. It isn't that I don't qualify by any honest evaluation. I do. But there has been a good deal of prejudice against me as a Father, and even some skepticism about my capability. But that doesn't matter; what does is that I *have* been selected.

What is more, a single superior female was chosen to be Mother of all three of my children. By what is not at all a coincidence, this woman happens to be my private secretary. She is, I may add, very beautiful.

I am just old-fashioned enough to want my children to have all of the advantages that I had myself, including parents who are fully married, in the same way that my own mother and father were. Legal ceremony—religious service—everything!

So I have asked the chosen mother of my children-to-be to marry me, and Gloria—that's her name—has been gracious enough to accept. We are to be married week after next.

Now, Miss Dix VI, we come to my problem. How can I tell if Gloria is in love with me, or is just marrying me for my money?

Perplexed,  
Alfred Vanderform  
(The Magnificent)

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