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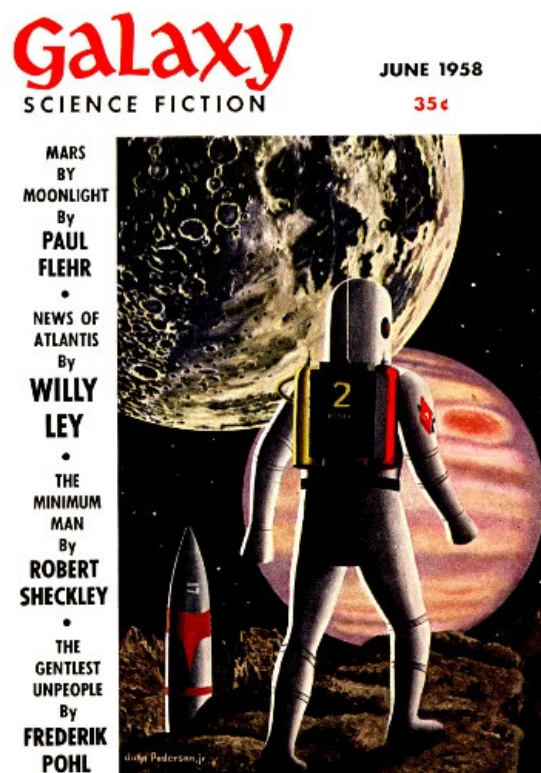
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PERFECT ANSWER ***



PERFECT ANSWER

By L. J. STECHER, JR.

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

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***Getting there may be half the fun ... but it
is also all of a society's chance of survival!***

"As one god to another—let's go home," Jack Bates said.

Bill Farnum raised a space-gloved hand in negligent acknowledgment to a hastily kneeling native, and shook his head at Bates. "Let's try Deneb—it's almost in line on the way back—and then we can call it quits."

"But I want to get back and start making some profit out of this. The Galaxy is full of *Homo sapiens*. We've hit the jackpot first trip out. Let's hurry on home and cash in."

"We need more information. This is too much of a good thing—it doesn't make sense. I know there isn't much chance of finding anything out by stopping at one more solar system. But it won't delay us more than a few weeks, and it won't hurt to try."

"Yeah," said Bates. "But what's in it for us? And what if we find an inhabited planet? You know the chances are about two to one that we will. That'll make thirteen we've found on this trip. Why risk bad luck?"

"You're no more superstitious than I am," said Farnum. "You just want to get back Earthside. I'll tell you what. We'll toss a coin for it."

Bates gestured futilely toward his coverall pocket, and then remembered he was wearing a spacesuit as a precaution against possible contamination from the natives.

"And we'll use one of *my* coins this time," said Farnum, noticing the automatic motion. "I want to have a chance."

The coin dropped in Farnum's favor, and their two-man scout ship hurled itself into space.

Farnum operated the compact computer, aligning the ship's velocity vector precisely while the stars could still be seen. Bates controlled the engines, metering their ravenous demand for power just this side of destructive detonation, while the ship sucked energy from space—from the adjacent universe on the other side of Limbo. Finally the computer chimed, relays snicked, and the ship slid into the emptiness of Limbo as the stars winked out.

With two trained men working as a team with the computer and the elaborate engine room controls, and with a certain amount of luck, the ship would drop back into normal space a couple of weeks later, close beside their target.

"Well, that's that," said Farnum, relaxing and wiping the perspiration off his forehead. "We're back once again in the nothingness of nowhere. As I recall, it's your week for K.P. Where's the coffee?"

"Coming right up," said Bates. "But you won't like it. It's the last of the 'God-food' the Korite priests made for us."

Farnum shuddered. "Pour it out and make some fresh. With a skillet, you stink, but you're a thousand times better than Korites."

"Thanks," Bates said, getting busy. "It was the third place we stopped that they were such good cooks, wasn't it?"

"Nope. Our third stop was the Porandians. They tried to kill us—called us 'Devil spawn from the stars.' You're thinking of the fourth stop; the Balanites."

Bates shrugged. "It's kind of hard to keep them all straight. Either they fall on their knees and worship us, or they try to kill us without even asking questions. Maybe it's lucky they're all so primitive."

"It may be lucky, but it doesn't add up. More than half the stars we visit have planets that can support human life. And every one that can does. Once there must have been an interstellar empire. So why are all their civilizations so backward? They aren't primitive—they're decadent. And why do they all have such strong feelings—one way or the exact opposite—about people from the stars?"

"Isn't that why you want to try one more system?" asked Bates. "To give us another chance to get some answers? Here's your coffee. Try to drink it quietly. I'm going to get some shuteye."

The trip through the Limbo between adjacent universes passed uneventfully, as always. The computer chimed again on schedule, and a quick check by Farnum showed the blazing sun that suddenly appeared was Deneb, as advertised. Seventeen planets could be counted, and the fifth

seemed to be Earth type. They approached it with the easy skill of long practice and swung into orbit about it.

"This is what we've been looking for!" exclaimed Farnum, examining the planet through a telescope. "They've got big cities and dams and bridges—they're civilized. Let's put the ship down."

"Wait up," said Bates. "What if they've got starman-phobia? Remember, they're people, just like us; and with people, civilization and weapons go together."

"I think you've got it backwards. If they hate us, we can probably get away before they bring up their big artillery. But what if they love us? They might want to keep us beside them forever."

Bates nodded. "I'm glad you agree with me. Let's get out of here. Nobody but us knows of the beautiful, profitable planets we've found, all ready to become part of a Terran Empire. And if we don't get back safe and sound, nobody *will* know. The information we've got is worth a fortune to us, and I want to be alive to collect it."

"Sure. But we've got the job of trying to find out why all those planets reverted to barbarism. This one hasn't; maybe the answer's here. There's no use setting up an empire if it won't last."

"It'll last long enough to keep you and me on top of the heap."

"That's not good enough. I want my kids—when I have them—to have their chances at the top of the heap too."

"Oh, all right. We'll flip a coin, then."

"We already did. You may be a sharp dealer, but you'd never welch on a bet. We're going down."

Bates shrugged. "You win. Let's put her down beside that big city over there—the biggest one, by the seashore."

As they approached the city, they noticed at its outskirts a large flat plain, dotted with gantries. "Like a spaceport," suggested Bill. "That's our target."

They landed neatly on the tarmac and then sat there quietly, waiting to see what would happen.

A crowd began to form. The two men sat tensely at their controls, but the throng clustering about the base of the ship showed no hostility. They also showed no reverence but, rather, a carefree interest and joyful welcome.

"Well," said Farnum at last, "looks like we might as well go outside and ask them to take us to their leader."

"I'm with you as usual," said Bates, starting to climb into his spacesuit. "Weapons?"

"I don't think so. We can't stop them if they get mad at us, and they look friendly enough. We'll start off with the 'let's be pals' routine."

Bates nodded. "After we learn the language. I always hate this part—it moves so slowly. You'd think there'd be some similarity among the tongues on different planets, wouldn't you? But each one's entirely different. I guess they've all been isolated too long."

The two men stepped out on the smooth plain, to be instantly surrounded by a laughing, chattering crowd. Farnum stared around in bewilderment at the variety of dress the crowd displayed. There were men and women in togas, in tunics, in draped dresses and kilts, in trousers and coats. Others considered a light cloak thrown over the shoulders to be adequate. There was no uniformity of style or custom.

"You pick me a boss-man out of this bunch," he muttered to Bates.

Finally a couple of young men, glowing with health and energy, came bustling through the crowd with an oblong box which they set down in front of the Earthmen. They pointed to the box and then back at Farnum and Bates, laughing and talking as they did so.

"What do you suppose they want us to do?" Farnum asked.

One of the young men clapped his hands happily and reached down to touch the box. "What do you suppose they want us to do?" asked the box distinctly.

"Oh. A recording machine. Probably to help with language lessons. Might as well help them out."

Farnum and Bates took turns talking at the box for half an hour. Then the young man nodded, laughed, clapped his hands again, and the two men carried it away. The crowd went with them, waving merrily as they departed.

Bates shrugged his shoulders and went back into the ship, with Farnum close behind.

A few hours after sunrise the following morning, the crowd returned, as gay and carefree as before, led by the two young men who had carried the box. Each of these two now had a small case, about the size of a camera, slung by a strap across one brawny shoulder.

As the terrestrials climbed out to meet them, the two men raised their hands and the crowd

discontinued its chatter, falling silent except for an occasional tinkle of surprised laughter.

"Welcome," said the first young man clearly. "It is a great pleasure for us to have our spaceport in use again. It has been many generations since any ships have landed on it."

Farnum noticed that the voice came from the box. "Thank you for your very kind welcome," he said. "I hope that your traffic will soon increase. May we congratulate you, by the way, on the efficiency of your translators?"

"Thanks," laughed the young man. "But there was nothing to it. We just asked the Oracle and he told us what we had to do to make them."

"May we meet your—Oracle?"

"Oh, sure, if you want to. But later on. Now it's time for a party. Why don't you take off those clumsy suits and come along?"

"We don't dare remove our spacesuits. They protect us from any disease germs you may have, and you from any we may have. We probably have no resistance to each others' ailments."

"The Oracle says we have nothing that will hurt you. And we're going to spray you with this as soon as you get out of your suits. Then you won't hurt any of us." He held up a small atomizer.

Farnum glanced at Bates, who shrugged and nodded. They uneasily unfastened their spacesuits and stepped out of them, wearing only their light one-piece coveralls, and got sprayed with a pleasant-smelling mist.

The party was a great success. The food was varied and delicious. The liquors were sparkling and stimulating, without unpleasant after-effects. The women were uninhibited.

When a native got tired, he just dropped down onto the soft grass, or onto an even softer couch, and went to sleep. The Earthmen finally did the same.

They awoke the following morning within minutes of each other, feeling comfortable and relaxed. Bates shook his head experimentally. "No hangover," he muttered in surprise.

"No one ever feels bad after a party," said one of their guides, who had slept nearby. "The Oracle told us what to do, when we asked him."

"Quite a fellow, your Oracle," commented Bates. "Does he answer you in riddles, like most Oracles?"

The guide was shocked. "The Oracle answers any questions promptly and completely. He *never* talks in riddles."

"Can we go to see him now?" asked Farnum.

"Certainly. Come along. I'll take you to the Hall of the Oracle."

The Oracle appeared to live in a building of modest size, in the center of a tremendous courtyard. The structure that surrounded the courtyard, in contrast, was enormous and elaborate, dominating the wildly architected city. It was, however, empty.

"Scholars used to live in this building, they tell me," said one of their guides, gesturing casually. "They used to come here to learn from the Oracle. But there's no sense in learning a lot of stuff when the Oracle has always got all the answers anyway. So now the building is empty. The big palace was built back in the days when we used to travel among the stars, as you do now."

"How long ago was that?" asked Farnum.

"Oh, I don't know. A few thousand years—a few hundred years—the Oracle can tell you if you really want to know."

Bates raised an eyebrow. "And how do you know you'll always be given the straight dope?"

The guide looked indignant. "The Oracle *always* tells the truth."

"Yes," Bates persisted, "but how do you *know*?"

"The Oracle told us so, of course. Now why don't you go in and find out for yourselves? We'll wait out here. We don't have anything to ask him."

Bates and Farnum went into the building and found themselves in a small, pleasant room furnished with comfortable chairs and sofas.

"Good morning," said a well-modulated voice. "I have been expecting you."

"You are the Oracle?" asked Farnum, looking around curiously.

"The name that the people of this planet have given me translates most accurately as 'Oracle'," said the voice.

"But are you actually an Oracle?"

"My principal function, insofar as human beings—that is, *Homo sapiens*—are concerned, is to give accurate answers to all questions propounded me. Therefore, insofar as humans are

concerned, I am actually an Oracle."

"Then you have another function?"

"My principal function, insofar as the race that made me is concerned, is to act as a weapon."

"Oh," said Bates. "Then you are a machine?"

"I am a machine," agreed the voice.

"The people who brought us here said that you always tell them the truth. I suppose that applies when you are acting as an Oracle, instead of as a weapon?"

"On the contrary," said the voice blandly. "I function as a weapon by telling the truth."

"That doesn't make sense," protested Bates.

The machine paused for a moment before replying. "This will take a little time, gentlemen," it said, "but I am sure that I can convince you. Why don't you sit down and be comfortable? If you want refreshments, just ask for them."

"Might as well," said Bates, sitting down in an easy chair. "How about giving us some Korite God-food?"

"If you really want that bad a brew of coffee, I can make it for you, of course," said the voice, "but I am sure you would prefer some of better quality."

Farnum laughed. "Yes, please. Some good coffee, if you don't mind."

"Now," said the Oracle, after excellent coffee had been produced, "it is necessary for me to go back into history a few hundred thousand of your years. At that time, the people who made me entered this galaxy on one of their periodic visits of routine exploration, and contacted your ancestors. The race that constructed me populates now, as it did then, the Greater Magellanic Cloud.

"Frankly, the Magellanic race was appalled at what they found. In the time since their preceding visit, your race had risen from the slime of your mother planet and was on its way toward stars. The speed of your development was unprecedented in millions of years of history. By their standards, your race was incredibly energetic, incredibly fecund, incredibly intelligent, unbelievably warlike, and almost completely depraved.

"Extrapolation revealed that within another fifty thousand of your years, you would complete the population of this galaxy and would be totally unstoppable.

"Something had to be done, fast. There were two obvious solutions but both were unacceptable to my Makers. The first was to assume direct control over your race and to maintain that rule indefinitely, until such time as you changed your natures sufficiently to become civilizable. The expenditure of energy would be enormous and the results probably catastrophic to your race. No truly civilized people could long contemplate such a solution.

"The second obvious answer was to attempt to extirpate you from this universe as if you were a disease—as, in a sense, you are. Because your depravity was not total or necessarily permanent, this solution was also abhorrent to my Makers and was rejected.

"What was needed was a weapon that would keep operating without direct control by my People, which would not result in any greater destruction or harm to humans than was absolutely necessary; and one which would cease entirely to operate against you if you changed sufficiently to become civilizable—to become good neighbors to my Makers.

"The final solution of the Magellanic race was to construct several thousand spaceships, each containing an elaborate computer, constructed so as to give accurate answers throughout your galaxy. I am one of those ships. We have performed our function in a satisfactory manner and will continue to do so as long as we are needed."

"And that makes you a weapon?" asked Bates incredulously. "I don't get it."

Farnum felt a shiver go through him. "I see it. The concept is completely diabolical."

"It's not diabolical at all," answered the Oracle. "When you become capable of civilization, we can do you no further harm at all. We will cease to be a weapon at that time."

"You mean you'll stop telling the truth at that time?" asked Bates.

"We will continue to function in accordance with our design," answered the voice, "but it will no longer do you harm. Incidentally, your phrase 'telling the truth' is almost meaningless. We answer all questions in the manner most completely understandable to you, within the framework of your language and your understanding, and of the understanding and knowledge of our Makers. In the objective sense, what we answer is not necessarily the Truth; it is merely the truest form of the answer that we can state in a manner that you can understand."

"And you'll answer any question at all?" asked Bates in some excitement.

"With one or two exceptions. We will not, for example, tell you how we may be destroyed."

Bates stood up and began pacing the floor. "Then whoever possesses you can be the most powerful man in the Universe!"

"No. Only in this galaxy."

"That's good enough for me!"

"Jack," said Farnum urgently, "let's get out of here. I want to talk to you."

"In a minute, in a minute," said Bates impatiently. "I've got one more question." He turned to face the wall from which the disembodied voice appeared to emanate. "Is it possible to arrange it so that you would answer only one man's questions—mine, for example?"

"I can tell you how to arrange it so that I will respond to only your questions—for so long as you are alive."

"Come on," pleaded Farnum. "I've got to talk to you right now."

"Okay," said Bates, smiling. "Let's go."

When they were back in their ship, Farnum turned desperately to Bates. "Can't you see what a deadly danger that machine is to us all? We've got to warn Earth as fast as we can and get them to quarantine this planet—and any other planets we find that have Oracles."

"Oh, no, you don't," said Bates. "You aren't getting the chance to have the Oracle all to yourself. With that machine, we can rule the whole galaxy. We'll be the most powerful people who ever lived! It's sure lucky for us that you won the toss of the coin and we stopped here."

"But don't you see that the Oracle will destroy Earth?"

"Bushwah. You heard it say it can only destroy people who aren't civilized. It said that it's a spaceship, so I'll bet we can get it to come back to Earth with us, and tell us how we can be the only ones who can use it."

"We've got to leave here right away—without asking it any more questions."

Bates shook his head. "Quit clowning."

"I never meant anything more in my life. Once we start using that machine—if we ask it even one question to gain advantage for ourselves—Earth's civilization is doomed. Can't you see that's what happened to those other planets we visited? Can't you see what is happening to this planet we're on now?"

"No, I can't," answered Bates stubbornly. "The Oracle said there are only a few thousand like him. You could travel through space for hundreds of years and never be lucky enough to find one. There can't be an Oracle on every planet we visited."

"There wouldn't have to be," said Farnum. "There must be hundreds of possible patterns—all of them destructive in the presence of greed and laziness and lust for power. For example, a planet—maybe this one—gets space travel. It sets up colonies on several worlds. It's expanding and dynamic. Then it finds an Oracle and takes it back to its own world. With all questions answered for it, the civilization stops being dynamic and starts to stagnate. It stops visiting its colonies and they drift toward barbarism."

"Later," Farnum went on urgently, "somebody else reaches the stars, finds the planet with the Oracle—and takes the thing back home. Can you imagine what will happen to these people on this world if they lose their Oracle? Their own learning and traditions and way of life have been destroyed—just take a look at their anarchic clothing and architecture. The Oracle is the only thing that keeps them going—downhill—and makes sure they don't start back again."

"It won't happen that way to us," Bates argued. "We won't let the Oracle get into general use, so Earth won't ever learn to depend on it. I'm going to find out from it how to make it work for the two of us alone. You can come along and share the gravy or not, as you choose. I don't care. But you aren't going to stop me."

Bates turned and strode out of the ship.

Farnum pounded his fist into his palm in despair, and then ran to a locker. Taking out a high-power express rifle, he loaded it carefully and stepped out through the airlock. Bates showed clearly in his telescopic sights, still walking toward the Hall of the Oracle. Farnum fired at the legs, but he wasn't that good a shot; the bullet went through the back.



Farnum jittered between bringing Bates back and taking off as fast as the ship could go. The body still lay there, motionless; there was nothing he could do for the Oracle's first Earth victim—the first and the last, he swore grimly. He had to speed home and make them understand the danger before they found another planet with an Oracle, so that they could keep clear of its deadly temptations. The Magellanic race could be outwitted yet, in spite of their lethal cleverness.

Then he felt a sudden icy chill along his spine. Alone, he could never operate the spaceship—and Bates was dead. He was trapped on the planet.

For hours, he tried to think of some way of warning Earth. It was imperative that he get back. There had to be a way.

He realized finally that there was only one solution to his problem. He sighed shudderingly and walked slowly from the spaceship toward the Hall of the Oracle, past Bates' body.

"One question, though," he muttered to himself. "Only one."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PERFECT ANSWER ***

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