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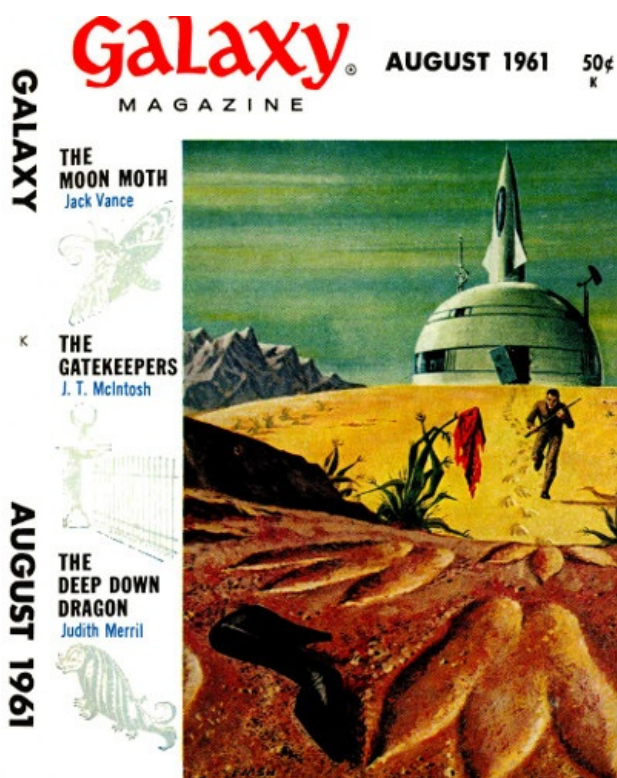
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STUFF ***



THE STUFF

By HENRY SLESAR

Illustrated by Ritter

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Would it work? Yes. How would it work? Exactly like this.

"No more lies," Paula said. "For God's sake, Doctor, no more lies. I've been living with lies for the past year and I'm tired of them."

Bernstein closed the white door before answering, mercifully obscuring the sheeted, motionless mound on the hospital bed. He took the young woman's elbow and walked with her down the tiled corridor.

"He's dying, of course," he said conversationally. "We've never lied to you about that, Mrs. Hills; you know what we've told you all along. I hoped that by now you'd feel more resigned."

"I was," she said bitterly. They had stopped in front of Bernstein's small office and she drew her arm away. "But then you called me. About this drug of yours—"

"We had to call you. Senopoline can't be administered without permission of the patient, and since your husband has been in coma for the last four days—"

He opened the door and nodded her inside. She hesitated, then walked in. He took his place behind the cluttered desk, his grave face distracted, and waited until she sat down in the facing chair. He picked up his telephone receiver, replaced it, shuffled papers, and then locked his hands on the desk blotter.

"Senopoline is a curious drug," he said. "I've had little experience with it myself. You may have heard about the controversy surrounding it."

"No," she whispered. "I don't know about it. I haven't cared about anything since Andy's illness."

"At any rate, you're the only person in the world that can decide whether your husband receives it. It's strange stuff, as I said, but in the light of your husband's present condition, I can tell you this—it can do him absolutely no harm."

"But it will do him good?"

"There," Bernstein sighed, "is the crux of the controversy, Mrs. Hills."

Row, row, row your boat, he sang in his mind, feeling the lapping tongues of the cool lake water against his fingers, drifting, drifting, under obese willows. Paula's hands were resting gently on his eyes and he lifted them away. Then he kissed the soft palms and pressed them on his cheek. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised to find that the boat was a bed, the water only pelting rain against the window, and the willow trees long shadows on the walls. Only Paula's

hands were real, solid and real and comforting against his face.

He grinned at her. "Funniest damn thing," he said. "For a minute there, I thought we were back at Finger Lake. Remember that night we sprang a leak? I'll never forget the way you looked when you saw the hem of your dress."

"Andy," she said quietly. "Andy, do you know what's happened?"

He scratched his head. "Seems to me Doc Bernstein was in here a while ago. Or was he? Didn't they jab me again or something?"

"It was a drug, Andy. Don't you remember? They have this new miracle drug, senopoline. Dr. Bernstein told you about it, said it was worth the try...."

"Oh, sure, I remember."

He sat up in bed, casually, as if sitting up in bed were an everyday occurrence. He took a cigarette from the table beside him and lit one. He smoked reflectively for a moment, and then recalled that he hadn't been anything but horizontal for almost eight months. Swiftly, he put his hand on his rib cage and touched the firm flesh.

"The girdle," he said wonderingly. "Where the hell's the girdle?"

"They took it off," Paula said tearfully. "Oh, Andy, they took it off. You don't need it any more. You're healed, completely healed. It's a miracle!"

"A miracle...."

She threw her arms about him; they hadn't held each other since the accident a year ago, the accident that had snapped his spine in several places. He had been twenty-two when it happened.

They released him from the hospital three days later; after half a year in the hushed white world, the city outside seemed wildly clamorous and riotously colorful, like a town at the height of carnival. He had never felt so well in his life; he was eager to put the strong springs of his muscles back into play. Bernstein had made the usual speech about rest, but a week after his discharge Andy and Paula were at the courts in tennis clothes.

Andy had always been a dedicated player, but his stiff-armed forehand and poor net game had always prevented him from being anything more than a passable amateur. Now he was a demon on the court, no ball escaping his swift-moving racket. He astounded himself with the accuracy of his crashing serves, his incredible play at the net.

Paula, a junior champion during her college years, couldn't begin to cope with him; laughingly, she gave up and watched him battle the club professional. He took the first set 6-0, 6-0, 6-0, and Andy knew that something more magical than medicinal had happened to him.

They talked it over, excited as schoolchildren, all the way home. Andy, who had taken a job in a stock-brokerage house after college, and who had been bored silly with the whole business until the accident, began wondering if he could make a career on the tennis court.

To make sure his superb playing wasn't a fluke, they returned to the club the next day. This time, Andy found a former Davis Cup challenger to compete with. At the end of the afternoon, his heart pounding to the beat of victory, he knew it was true.

That night, with Paula in his lap, he stroked her long auburn hair and said: "No, Paula, it's all wrong. I'd like to keep it up, maybe enter the Nationals, but that's no life for me. It's only a game, after all."

"Only a game?" she said mockingly. "That's a fine thing for the next top-seeded man to say."

"No, I'm serious. Oh, I don't mean I intend to stay in Wall Street; that's not my ambition either. As a matter of fact, I was thinking of painting again."

"Painting? You haven't painted since your freshman year. You think you can make a living at it?"

"I was always pretty good, you know that. I'd like to try doing some commercial illustration; that's for the bread and potatoes. Then, when we don't have to worry about creditors, I'd like to do some things on my own."

"Don't pull a Gauguin on me, friend." She kissed his cheek lightly. "Don't desert your wife and family for some Tahitian idyll...."

"What family?"

She pulled away from him and got up to stir the ashes in the fireplace. When she returned, her face was glowing with the heat of the fire and warmth of her news.

Andrew Hills, Junior, was born in September. Two years later, little Denise took over the hand-me-down cradle. By that time, Andy Hills was signing his name to the magazine covers of America's top-circulation weeklies, and they were happy to feature it. His added fame as America's top-ranked amateur tennis champion made the signature all the more desirable.

When Andrew Junior was three, Andrew Senior made his most important advance in the field of

art—not on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, but in the halls of the Modern Museum of Art. His first exhibit evoked such a torrent of superlatives that the *New York Times* found the reaction newsworthy enough for a box on the front page. There was a celebration in the Hills household that night, attended by their closest friends: copies of slick magazines were ceremoniously burned and the ashes placed in a dime-store urn that Paula had bought for the occasion.

A month later, they were signing the documents that entitled them to a sprawling hilltop house in Westchester, with a north-light glassed-in studio the size of their former apartment.

He was thirty-five when the urge struck him to rectify a sordid political situation in their town. His fame as an artist and tennis-champion (even at thirty-five, he was top-seeded in the Nationals) gave him an easy entree into the political melee. At first, the idea of vote-seeking appalled him; but he couldn't retreat once the movement started. He won easily and was elected to the town council. The office was a minor one, but he was enough of a celebrity to attract country-wide attention. During the following year, he began to receive visits from important men in party circles; in the next state election, his name was on the ballot. By the time he was forty, Andrew Hills was a U.S. Senator.

That spring, he and Paula spent a month in Acapulco, in an enchanting home they had erected in the cool shadows of the steep mountains that faced the bay. It was there that Andy talked about his future.

"I know what the party's planning," he told his wife, "but I know they're wrong. I'm not Presidential timber, Paula."

But the decision wasn't necessary; by summer, the Asiatic Alliance had tired of the incessant talks with the peacemakers and had launched their attack on the Alaskan frontier. Andy was commissioned at once as a major.

His gallantry in action, his brilliant recapture of Shaktolik, White Mountain, and eventual triumphant march into Nome guaranteed him a place in the High Command of the Allied Armies.

By the end of the first year of fighting, there were two silver stars on his shoulder and he was given the most critical assignment of all—to represent the Allies in the negotiations that were taking place in Fox Island in the Aleutians. Later, he denied that he was solely responsible for the successful culmination of the peace talks, but the American populace thought him hero enough to sweep him into the White House the following year in a landslide victory unparalleled in political history.

He was fifty by the time he left Washington, but his greatest triumphs were yet to come. In his second term, his interest in the World Organization had given him a major role in world politics. As First Secretary of the World Council, his ability to effect a working compromise between the ideological factions was directly responsible for the establishment of the World Government.

When he was sixty-four, Andrew Hills was elected World President, and he held the office until his voluntary retirement at seventy-five. Still active and vigorous, still capable of a commanding tennis game, of a painting that set art circles gasping, he and Paula moved permanently into the house in Acapulco.

He was ninety-six when the fatigue of living overtook him. Andrew Junior, with his four grandchildren, and Denise, with her charming twins, paid him one last visit before he took to his bed.

"But what *is* the stuff?" Paula said. "Does it cure or what? I have a right to know!"

Dr. Bernstein frowned. "It's rather hard to describe. It has no curative powers. It's more in the nature of a hypnotic drug, but it has a rather peculiar effect. It provokes a dream."

"A dream?"

"Yes. An incredibly long and detailed dream, in which the patient lives an entire lifetime, and lives it just the way he would like it to be. You might say it's an opiate, but the most humane one ever developed."

Paula looked down at the still figure on the bed. His hand was moving slowly across the bed-sheet, the fingers groping toward her.

"Andy," she breathed. "Andy darling...."

His hand fell across hers, the touch feeble and aged.

"Paula," he whispered, "say good-by to the children for me."

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