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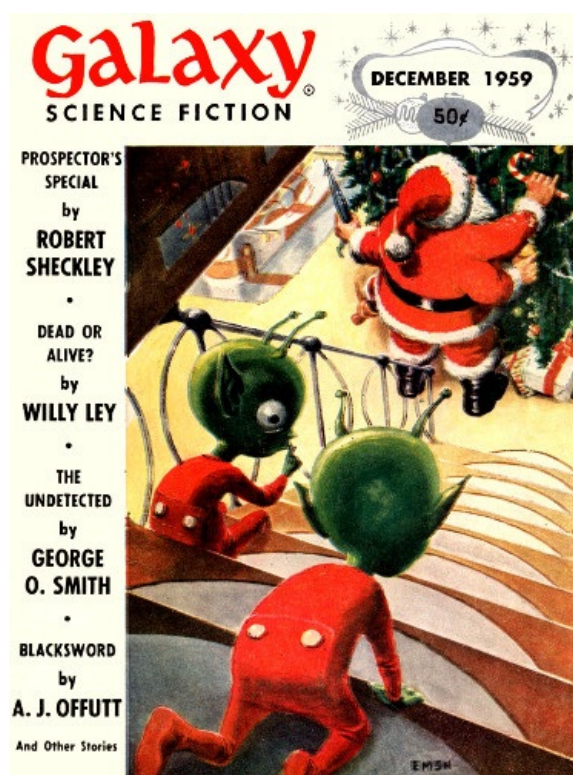
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SALES TALK ***



Sales Talk

BY CON BLOMBERG

Illustrated by MORROW

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***To live different and exciting lives, all I had
to do was sign here—and give up my own life!***

Looking out the window, I saw them crossing the court toward the building—two of them. One, the taller with yellow hair, was carrying a flat, expensive briefcase, and the other, of course, was carrying the large square box that contained the Sim.

The buzzer sounded, announcing them at the door, and I opened it with mixed feelings. I wasn't sure myself how I would act and—well, you hear so many stories about EL, and this was really my first contact with them.

They were standing out in front, looking just like a couple of door-to-door salesmen. And that's just what they were, even if they were called Electro Medical Consultants. Just a fancy name for salesmen.

They were very neat in appearance, just as good salesmen should be. Their hats looked new and so did their shoes.

"Ah, Mr. Gaines," said the yellow-haired one, sticking out his neatly manicured but definitely masculine hand, "I'm very happy to meet you, sir." His grin could only be described as sincerely boyish.

"Come in," I said, feeling like smiling back, so effectively pleasant were their grins. "Come in and sit down, won't you?"

So they came in, doffing their hats, and sat down in two chairs that I ordinarily didn't use. They seemed to know instinctively which was *my* favorite chair. Oh, they were smooth!

"Now, Mr. Gaines," said the light-haired man, "perhaps I should start off with a little introduction all around and a short explanation of what Electronic Living can mean to you."

No one had mentioned EL up to that point, yet they knew without a doubt that I had correctly identified them. Talk about confidence—it was like a physical force in the room.

"I'm Jake Long and this is Arnie Blik," said the light-haired one, rising and gripping my hand with a warm, dry, just right handshake.

"Pleased to meet you," said Blik, gripping my hand in turn with an identical warm, dry, just right handshake.

"I'm going to ask you for a bit of your time," said Long, "and I certainly hope you can grant us a few minutes without too much inconvenience."

I murmured something about having plenty of time. That was a laugh, and he and I both knew it. I had so little to do, I almost welcomed them just for sheer entertainment value.

"Well, that's fine," said Long, "but rest assured we aren't going to try to waste any of your time. We intend to make it short and sweet, as they say." He did such a good job of keeping up the fiction of me being a busy man that I almost believed it myself.

"You probably know more about Electronic Living than I do," he said, and I felt for an instant that I did, "but we'll go over it anyway just so you understand me a little better. You'll remember back in 1958-1959 there was a lot of work done—or I should say a beginning made—in developing an electronic eye for people who had lost their eyesight. This was a start of Electronic Living in its crudest form. These early pioneers, using what little knowledge was available of the brain then, were actually able to insert a probe in the brain and enable the blind person to 'see' light. At first it was just the difference between light and dark, but after a while they did develop a kind of vision—and then finally, after much work, the system grew into actual electronic vision.

"This was, as I said, the start of Electronic Living because it advanced the basic premise that the brain can utilize outside electrical impulses for its own purposes. And of course it wasn't long before some experimenters had rigged up a human television receiver. What they did was set up a series of brain probes which were directly connected to a small television receiving apparatus, and the subject could then 'see' the broadcast image without the use of his eyes.

"Since this rough beginning, we at EL have done a lot of work, and we are now able to reproduce every sort of physical sensation known to man through electronic brain connections.

"And recently, as a further refinement, we have been able to capture internal brain voltages and use them to reproduce thoughtlike sensations. Unfortunately, these are still in the realm of strong emotions and not true thoughts, but they are extremely effective.

"Now, it is this combination of physical sensation voltages and internal brain voltages, when fed into your brain from a simple tape like this, that produces what we call Electronic Living."

With that he pulled a piece of tape out of his pocket as if producing an elephant from a thimble.

Arnie Blik hadn't said a word up to this point. He had hung on every word his partner uttered as though it were all new to him. Now he took up the song.

"May I ask if you've ever experienced Electric Living?" he asked.

"No," I said. I really had once or twice, but I figured it was none of his business.

"Ah. Well, if you have no objection, I'd like to use this Simulator here for a few minutes and give you a bare idea of what's going on in Electronic Living today."

"Sure," I said. "Go right ahead."

Blik opened up the Sim and fished out a hat that was shaped much like a medieval knight's helmet, except that it had a couple of big fat wires connected to it at the back.

"Just a moment while I tune it in," Blik said, lowering the helmet part way over his head. He closed his eyes and began fiddling with a series of small knots and buttons which were mounted inside the case. Finally he took it off his head and approached me, carrying this ridiculous helmet like it was a crown on a velvet pillow.

"You will be experiencing a basketball player," he said, and plopped it down over my head.

When the helmet came down, there was a momentary blank period, and then suddenly I was a basketball player who was playing a fast professional game. I was good, or should say he was? He felt exultation because his team was ahead and he'd put them there with a difficult shot. I could feel the pounding of his heart and the strain of his chest as he gulped in huge quantities of air. His eyes ranged around the court, following his teammates and opponents.

It was something, all right, but not everything, because on top of the sensations and emotions of the basketball player, I was getting another series of feelings and emotion which were my own.

Superimposed on the other players on the court was the image of my own living room with the two men watching me. Over the smell of sweat of the basketball players came the odor of my apartment. Above the sensation of running, jumping and colliding with other players was the sensation of sitting in my favorite chair with a weight on my head.

In short, I was two people at one time.

Even the emotions of the basketball player—joy at making a basket, a flare of rage at a rough opponent, and the surge of hope that a teammate would come through—were clouded over with my own emotions of not completely accepting as right the whole concept of EL, coupled with the feeling that I didn't want to show any reaction in front of the EL men.

After a short time, Blik removed the Sim, and the basketball player's Life Experience faded away. The two EL men looked at me expectantly.

"Hmmm," I said, forcing myself to appear neutral. They did not seem to be disappointed by my reaction or lack of it.

"Quite an experience, wasn't it?" said Blik, putting the Sim down on the floor. "Of course you realize that you don't get the full effect because you actually have two primary sets of electric images going into the brain. We never have been able to overcome the subject's own real physical and mental sensation with a device that works outside the skull."

"But I'm sure Mr. Gaines gets the idea," said Long.

"I'm sure I do," I said. The damn thing was plenty intriguing, but somehow, despite all its good points, I wasn't really sold on it.

"Perhaps you'd be interested in the kind of thing we have programmed for our EL subscribers," said Long with a kindly smile. "If you are someone who likes active sports, we can give you an evening of that kind of thing. We don't program sports in the daytime or early evening because it interferes with the regular sports consumers, but it's nice to have later on in the evening if you like it."

I nodded in what I hoped was a cold manner.

"Perhaps you'd like the milieu built up around a hard-working farmer or laborer for a daytime program. A certain amount of physical labor which is coupled with a strong emotion of accomplishment and pride. An excellent milieu and one of our most popular currently."

"Very interesting," I said noncommittally, intrigued in spite of myself.

Then it was Blik's turn. "If you are interested in the social type of thing, we have several new milieus that fit right in with this sort of thing. I can recall one of a formal dinner party which has strong emotional connotations of well-being and a sense of—grandeur—yes, grandeur in the old meaning of the word. And in this same milieu it is possible to get the bon-vivant type of thing. You know, the raconteur who is a real spellbinder. That has a strong emotion of ego-fulfillment."



"Very interesting," I said again, "but it doesn't quite fill the bill as far as I'm—"

"Arnie, we've been overlooking the obvious," said Long. "Mr. Gaines is looking more for the intellectual type of Life Experience. Now, I recall one of a sculptor which has a fine feel to it. Extremely intellectual and yet artistically creative, if you know what I mean. And then there's an extremely thrilling milieu dealing with a symphony conductor in which there is an absolute physical thrill that is audio-inspired. Just the thing for anyone who is an audiophile, I'd say."

I had to admit that it was beginning to sound more appealing all the time and I found myself wondering just which Life Experience one would pick first if he were to go EL.

"Of course," said Blik, with a manly grin, "we have the thing we call our 'playboy milieu' which is strictly a sensual sort of a thing. It often appeals rather strongly to new subscribers, although I have to warn you that it soon becomes an Experience which palls on you."

He almost had me with that one, because after all I have normal male curiosity and all that, and naturally it's always these "playboy milieus" that you hear the most about among people who are non-EL subscribers. Yes, for a minute or two there, I was teetering on the brink, but my better sense did ultimately win out and I could feel the emotion of resistance welling up inside me.

"Well, actually, gentlemen, it isn't a case of not finding the right milieu, because I'm sure you have anything that I could ever want. It's more on philosophical grounds that I find that I hesitate to go along with Electronic Living," I said boldly. Just saying it gave me a tremendous lift.

"Ah," said Long, looking at the ceiling and making a tent of his fingers in front of his chest. "I always enjoy talking with a man who has a philosophical bent. In fact," he said, unfolding the tent and leaning close to me and lowering his voice a little, "it's the one big pleasure I get out of this job."

"I'm afraid that I have to agree with you there, Jack," said Blik, digging his toe into the rug in a distinctly boyish manner.

"Why don't you sort of fill us in on your thinking, Mr. Gaines?" urged Long.

"Well," I said, feeling warm under the collar and allowing my hand to tremble slightly with emotion as I got into what I now realized was the meat of my resistance to EL. "Well, let's take it from the word go. If I sign up with you now, I'll go down to the Electronic Living Center tomorrow or the next day and they'll take me into an operating room and put some tiny probes into my brain, and aside from a momentary twinge or two, I won't feel a thing. And then when it's over I'll walk out of the room looking just the way I did before, except that I'll have a neat little connection mounted high on the left side of my head where it can be tastefully covered with hair when not in use.

"And I'll probably come back to this apartment to find the Electronic Living Machine installed in

that corner, tastefully decorated to look like an old-fashioned antique bookcase, or a modern bar, or whatever I want it to look like. But whatever it looks like, there will be a comfortable chair unobtrusively attached to the ELM and sooner or later I'll sit down in that chair and read over the list of Life Experiences and select one.

"Then I'll sink back in the chair and the little connection on my head will fit neatly into another little connection on the chair, because my chair will fit only me, and it will fit me perfectly.

"And then, while I drift off to EL-land, the chair will unfold around me so that all sight and sound and almost all feeling will disappear and I'll be like a chrysalis in a cocoon.

"So for two or three or eight hours I'll stay inside the cocoon, living another person's life. And while I'm in there, everyone will be sighing a sigh of relief that here is another potential producer who has finally given up the ghost and turned consumer.

"Then when the tape is through, the cocoon will open and I'll wake up tired or refreshed or satiated or somehow changed, and then I'll get out to the food center and dial a meal or call someone up, or go out and walk around or something."

I was really getting wound up, but Long broke in on me. "Tell me a little more," he said, "about that one idea, will you? You know, the idea about how you will give up being a producer and will be all consumer?"

"I was just coming to that," I said hotly. "Yes, they'll probably enroll my name on the EL subscribers roll with a big cheer, and all my non-EL friends will hear about it and they'll raise their eyebrows, or maybe they'll sign up too.

"But the point is this. Is it right for me, a big, strong, healthy human being with powers of perception and reasoning and a capability for work and creativeness—is it right for me to substitute this dream world of EL for actual real thinking, or doing, or creating? Do any of us have the right to subvert our normal impulses for creation and for living in this way?"

"A good question," said Long with a sigh. "I'm afraid he's put it in pretty unanswerable terms, all right. Except for one minor point, I couldn't help but agree with everything he said, in spite of the fact that I—well, I'm sold on EL, naturally."

We sat for a while just sort of gazing around at nothing.

Finally Blik spoke up. "What was that one point that you disagreed on Jack?" he asked his partner. "I've been running Mr. Gaines' statement over in my mind and I can't seem to find the flaw you mentioned."

"Oh, it was nothing," said Long impatiently. "Just a minor point."

"No, I mean it," said Blik. "I'd really like to know."

"Not worth talking about. Let's pack up and not take any more of Mr. Gaines' time."

"Come on, Jack, tell me what it was," said Blik, in a rather positive way, I thought.

"Really, Arnie," said Long, firing up a little, "take it easy, will you? We don't want to have to argue about some little point that doesn't mean anything. Just forget it."

His attitude changed quickly from irritation to downright nastiness. Apparently, as head of the sales team, he wasn't going to take anything from a subordinate. It kind of irritated me in turn, because he gave me the impression that he felt as if he was too good to talk with us about it.

"All right, all right," said Blik, "the hell with it. So it was a minor point."

"Why not tell him?" I asked Long, cutting in quickly as Blik made a move to pack up the Sim.

Long turned toward me with a supercilious look that put me in the same category as assistants who had the temerity to question the boss. Then in an instant the mask returned and he was just as polite and smooth as ever—but I'd seen the crack in the slickness before he changed. It really got me where I live. That's one thing I can't stand—an assault on the ego by a slick bum like that, who thinks he's so good.

"Oh, I don't see how it can be that small a point," I said. "Especially if you thought of it." I said the last part as insultingly as I knew how, and I saw the color rise in his face.

"Yes, speak up," said Blik, siding with me. "He's got a right to know."

"All right," said Long with some asperity that even the professional mask couldn't hide, "but I warn you that it's strictly a minor point."

"So it's a minor," said Blik. "Tell us."

"The point is," said Long, after a short pause to collect his thoughts, "that EL fills a need for some people. You see, with the big upsurge in automation years ago, it got harder and harder for a production-oriented economy to survive. Jobs got fewer and easier. People were thrown out of work. During the early years of automation, there was a lot of population displacement because of a lack of jobs, and this made for a lot of economic juggling which really didn't help matters.

"It wasn't until some ten years ago that people finally came to the conclusion that production was outstripping the need for labor and that, in fact, production was beginning to become a burden on the economy. And so they turned things around a bit. Instead of giving rewards and subsidies to the production end of the economy, they began giving it to the consuming end. That was really the only way out of the hole.

"But it was soon found that people are not merely organisms geared to consume. At first it was grand and glorious, but after a bit the urge to create, to work, to think began to assert itself strongly, and that's where EL came along. EL was developed to give unsatisfied people satisfactions that they couldn't get anywhere else. They couldn't be allowed to produce because that was what was wrecking things. So they had to be provided with a synthetic 'production-fulfillment.'

"Today these producer-minded people can get any sort of satisfaction they need from EL, and it keeps them from wandering around trying to produce something that would just be a hindrance. After all, what we need is consumership, not production.

"But that's a relatively minor point, as I said earlier," Long concluded looking at me with a superior air. "It's such a minor point, it won't even bear discussion."

His manner, underneath the slick facade, implied that he wouldn't deign to discuss it with two peasants like Blik and me under any circumstances.

"Just a minute," I said. "It's *not* a minor point at all. It seems to me that you've hit the core of the problem."

"A minor point," insisted Long, his eyes blazing, although his face retained the mask of the smiling salesman.

"Perhaps I didn't make myself clear," I said. "Have you ever stopped to think that if you take EL into the larger picture, it does serve a purpose, and perhaps we are all here for a different reason than I had originally discussed? Maybe the thing to be is a super-consumer—maybe definitive consumership is the most vital thing in our life, not the production of things."

"Well, that's an idea, sure enough," said Blik suddenly. He had been silent during the flare-up between Long and me. "But I can't help but think," he continued, "that your original argument was a little tighter. The old virtues do have a place, don't they?"

You see how slick, how well-trained, how cunning they were? When Blik opened his mouth, the bubble burst, and I knew that they had neatly switched me around to where I was arguing against myself. Up until the instant Blik started talking, I was actually selling myself on EL, and the truth was that I had almost completed the job by that time. If he had remained silent, I probably would have signed the contract—I think I would have fought to sign it.

I felt an emotion of strength and power then. A top EL team had given me the works and I had seen through them. They still didn't know they had lost, but they would—just as soon as I opened my mouth to speak. The emotion of victory is sweeter than almost anything else, and all the sweeter for having skirted defeat.

"You know, Arnie," I said, "I agree with you. The old virtues are best. I think EL is a living hell."

It was a sight to see, believe me. Their slick, slick faces folded like paper houses in a hurricane. Blik's hands were shaking as he bent over and started packing up the Sim without another word. You have to be good to know that fast that you have lost irrevocably.

They got up then and scooped their hats up from the floor and put them on. The gracious, gentlemanly conduct was a thing of the past.

"Tell me," said Long, his hand on the door, the edge of the EL contract peeking untidily out of his expensive briefcase, "where did we make our mistake?"

I laughed a good loud whoop. It felt good. "It was when Arnie here switched sides."

"Stupid fool," said Long, looking as though he wanted to slam the square box containing the Sim over Blik's head.

"Sorry, old man," Blik said, coloring a deep red. "I'll try to make it up next time."

"Not with me, you won't," said Long. "Technician!"

They opened the door and went out. I jigged with glee as I looked out the window and watched them cross the court. Long was walking along in a high dudgeon, his briefcase swinging angrily with every step. Blik was trotting along to one side and behind him, his shoulders slumped, defeat written all over his form and walk.

I looked around as the wall swung open and Rommy walked in with his hand outstretched.

"Congratulations!" he said, beaming widely. "It was perfect! My God, it's a delight for a director to work with a real group of competent actors. All three of you were perfect!"

"Thanks," I said. "I hope I was as good as you think when we play the tape back." I felt along the

base of my skull where the transmitter hung encased in Natur-flesh and covered with fake hair. I could hardly believe it was there, it felt so natural.

Rommy looked out the window. Long and Blik were walking back through the gate, talking and waving their arms the way people do when they're excited about doing a good job.

"There's a pair of sweethearts," said Rommy. "Real actors, those boys. I checked out the transmission right up to the last minute and they really gave out—you couldn't find a quiver of disbelief or strain. They *felt* it."

"So did I," I said, sitting down and putting my feet up on a low table on the set. "Tell me, Rommy, what in hell is EL going to use these tapes for, anyway? It seems to me it would be sort of dangerous to put all this on tape."

"We couldn't tell you before because it might have spoiled your reactions, but we have a lot of EL subscribers who are down deep opposed to EL, and this tape will be sort of a catharsis for them. It'll give them a real jolt."

"Oh, producer types who are struggling to become consumer types," I said. "They'll experience the role I just got through playing, and it will make them feel they didn't sign the contract, huh?"

"There's more to it than that," said Rommy. "There are some people who just like to experience an extremely strong sales-resistant emotion, mostly because they're pushovers. We wouldn't make a tape like this just for the anti-EL jerks. It's too expensive."

"Tell me," I said, "what are you using Long and Blik for? I thought I detected transmitters on them, too."

"Just the opposite from what you were doing. Some people like to experience a setback or even a complete failure now and then. Sort of an opposite to the 'high' tapes. Lord knows we got hundreds of 'high' tapes, but not many low ones, so we're starting to build a library of them now. A lot of subscribers are getting tired of winning all the time and they'd like to experience a defeat or two once in a while just for the contrast."

Long and Blik came in the door without knocking.

Rommy was on his feet in an instant. "Boys," he shouted, "you were great! I checked the tapes and nobody could be lower than you guys walking out across that court. It was sensational. Probably the best thing that's ever been done here at EL Studios!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SALES TALK ***

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