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Feature Novelet

THE CHILDREN OF THON

by Irving E. Cox, Jr. 8

Dirrul had been told that the key to the mystery of Thon lay in the special meanings that these people had for the terms they used. And that it would be fatal to employ his own meanings for Thonian words — as he discovered!



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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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In science-fiction, one of the many things an author can do is to take an established trend and carry it on to extremities. Such stories are rarely good prophecy, since they cannot foresee other developments of the future which are most likely to modify the trend with which they are dealing. But such stories make good reading nonetheless, and can be delightfully unpleasant — as in the present instance.

AUDIENCE REACTION

by Robert F. Young

(illustrated by Paul Orban)

While the first mass-produced telempathy sets represented a tremendous step in the evolution of mass-media, they were handicapped by a number of serious technical flaws. It is one of the paradoxes of our civilization that those very flaws led to a form of art which remains unparalleled, even to this day. The first sets, for example, while they were able to focus the fictitious background and general narrative trend of the sensual, proved inadequate in the more exacting field of characterization. The participator had to fill in the characters himself, give them names, and supply them with sufficient detail to bring them to life. (Virgith's "All The World's A Stage"; p. 23)

tion and sentenced to the Martian penal colony for life. His father had fled to the moon, taking the boy with him, and found sanctuary with the Interworld Scientist League in their Leibnitz mountain fortress.

When he was twenty, he was captured in the same encounter with the Interplanetary Police that cost his father's life, and sentenced to ten years in the Martian penal colony. He served three of those years without hope in the grim labor-camps of the Red Sands sector. At the end of the third year, the underground agents of the League finally located him. Then he had undergone six months of surreptitious pre-escape conditioning, and had waited six more for the exacting details of his escape to be arranged.

The desert was still vivid in his memory. The desert at night, with the searchbeams of the alerted guard-cruisers stalking whitely all around him, the ventral guns waiting impatiently above him, eager to speak their short staccato sentences. He had run wildly through the night to the deserted outskirts of the city, and he had pounded through the silent labyrinth of streets to the intersection where his contact was supposed to meet him. And the intersection had been empty— as utterly empty as he had become, standing all alone in the yellow light of



HE MESMERIZER whirled faster and faster. It became a wild kaleidoscope, a vertiginous swirl of interblended colors. There was the usual transitory blankness that preceded identification, then—

He was an escaped prisoner. He was somewhere in the deserted section of the City of the Red Sands, Mars. His name was— His name was—

Richard Forrester!

He relived a brief flashback: he had been born on Earth. Not long after the death of his mother, his father had been convicted of illegal experimenta-



Forrester saw the ferret raise his arm and study a small, luminescent object attached to his wrist . . .

the corner streetlight.

He cowered now in the shadows of the corner building, out of range of the light, clinging stubbornly to the hope that his contact might still show up. His bitterness surfeited him. *Four years*, he thought. *Four years with nothing but a promise to keep me alive. And now they've broken the promise!*

The facades of the ugly tenements loomed on either side of the street. The hollow windows were blurs of blackness in the pale darkness of the night. Through the broken banks of the rooftops he could see a ragged river of sky and stars.

He shuddered, wondered how long he had to live.

He was safe enough for the moment. The guard-cruisers could not leave the desert; Interplanetary Law not only forbade their loosing their guns into an alien city; it also forbade their even approaching an alien city beyond a designated perimeter. The alarm, of course, had gone out to the Interplanetary Police, and very shortly he was going to have the ferrets to deal with. But in the labyrinthine streets and alleys of the tenement-section, he could elude them for a long time; with luck he could elude them altogether.

Richard Forrester began to feel better. He stood up straighter in the shadows. He felt the hard, sinewy strength of his young body. He remembered his marvelous condition—the result of

four years of hard labor in the desert prison-camps. He felt so good that he almost shouted with joy when he saw the prow of the levitator-car nose into the yellow circle of the street light. They had kept their promise after all! Then, beyond the prow, he saw the scarlet crested helmet of the Interplanetary Police, and the malevolent glit-ter of the ferret's eyes beneath it.

He shrank back, flattening his body against the warped siding of the building. It was unbelievable. The ferret *couldn't* be there; there simply had not been time enough for any police-force, no matter how efficient, to scour an entire section of a city and un-erringly track down one single individual.

Then he saw the ferret raise his arm and study a small, luminescent object attached to his wrist. That was when Richard Forrester remembered—

Remembered his I. E. P.

HE LEANED limply against the building, felt the sudden coldness of his perspiring body. He smelled the Martian desert smell, dry and faintly flavored with oasis spices, coming in on the light cool wind. He thought: *I should have let the guard cruisers get me. It would have been easier, dying out there on the desert. . . . This is a hell of a hole to have to die in. This is a hell of a way to have to die. . . .*

The system of recording and indexing the individual emotional-patterns of criminals resembled, fundamentally, the obsolete system of fingerprinting, and was nearly infallible for the same reason fingerprinting had once been infallible: no two individuals possessed the same pattern. But the scope of I. E. P. detection went far beyond simple identification; far beyond merely establishing a person's guilt by means of certain idiosyncrasies in his emotional behavior.

For an individual not only possessed

a singular emotional pattern: he transmitted it also. Unconsciously, of course—and, in the case of fugitives, unwillingly. But as long as he lived he transmitted it without respite, whether he slept, worked, loved, or played. That much had been common knowl-edge for a long time before the de-tector was devised. It had been im-practicable knowledge, but with the advent of the detector it instantly be-came the most effective weapon any police had ever possessed.

With the I. E. P. of the quarry a known factor the ancient game of Cops and Robbers became the regenerated game of Hide the Thimble. The quarry was the thimble and the ferrets, their detectors attuned to the quarry's I. E. P., were the searchers. A simple graduation of numerals on the de-tector-dial informed them whether they were "hot" or "cold." Since the device functioned effectively up to a maximum radius of two kilometers, once the I. E. P. of the quarry was picked up within that limit his chances for survival were negligible. There was one way, and only one way, for him to escape: he had to alter his I. E. P.

And there was only one way to alter an I. E. P.

Richard Forrester's pre-escape con-ditioning had paved the way for that. His contact was to have consummated it. His contact! he thought bitterly. His idealized blue-eyed contact! His long-limbed, lovely, *deus ex machina* of a contact who couldn't fulfill the single function she had been specifical-ly conditioned for! Then he was astounded. For instead of the hatred and resentment his thoughts should have provoked he felt only tenderness, and a strong proclivity toward forgive-ness once an excuse—any excuse would do—were offered for her late-ness.

He was even imbued with a new will to live, to find his contact. The two were synonymous. He began to think

more clearly. First he had to find his contact; more accurately, he had to remain alive till his contact found him. He knew that the League would never deliberately desert him; that if his contact had failed to meet him as planned there must have been an excellent reason why.

THE FERRET had finished studying his detector. Shadows softened the lean brutality of his oddly-familiar face but Richard Forrester could feel those cold, implacable eyes. Presently the levitator-car began to inch forward out of the light and into the shadows.

Forrester edged his body carefully along the tenement-front. When he came to the rachitic porch he rolled over upon it, and crawled to the door. His extended fingers touched the rotten wood of the sill, then the warped panels. He pushed tentatively, praying that it was not locked, that the rusty hinges would not squeak. The door swung inward soundlessly and he crawled over the threshold. He straightened and swung the door shut just as the ferret, anticipating the garish finale of the hunt, switched on his dual search-beams and drenched the street with glaring light.

He waited, leaning against the door, till his eyes had accustomed themselves to the darkness. Directly before him he made out the darker blur of a spiral stairway. Cautiously he began to ascend it. He paused at each landing, listening. Quiet cloyed the corridors and the empty tiers of rooms. Presently he discerned the pale darkness of the sky showing through a square aperture in the roof and he hastened his steps.

He had reached the top landing before he saw the silhouette. Simultaneously he heard the relieved sigh: "It's really you!" Without pausing he leaped up the intervening steps, grasped the figure in the aperture and dragged a surprisingly yielding body

down beside him. Then, when he felt the softness of a woman, he dropped his arms in consternation.

"I'm here to help you!" she said.

He was still too dumbfounded to speak.

"Darling, don't you understand? I'm your contact!"

Her hand found his in the darkness. She led the way and he followed willingly, up the stairs to the roof. Her levitator-car was a tapered blur in the starlight. They hurried toward it. When they reached it she stopped and faced him.

Her bobbed hair was the exact shade of blonde he had known it would be and her face was just as he had visualized it. He could not see the color of her eyes but he knew they must be blue.

His contact! There was a tightness in his chest, a slow throbbing in his temples.

Her voice was husky. "Darling," she said, "did you forget? You're supposed to kiss me."

Another flaw which seriously handicapped the first T.E. sets was their inability to attain cross-sexual identification. Fundamental physical conformity is prerequisite in rudimentary em-patha-existence. When the lead-character of a sensual is male, the male participator alone can integrate himself; the female participator is unaffected. She is unable, even temporarily, to abnegate her own sex and become a member of the opposite. Consequently, even in the early sensuels, we find the intriguing formula which (while it was originally devised to circumvent the flaw) proved so popular that it has been retained to this day: two provocative lead-characters, each of equal importance to the story, one of them male, the other female; and the double narrative progressing along parallel lines, the lines merging whenever possible and parting only when necessary, always coming ultimately together to achieve the standard em-patha-ending.

(Virgith's "All The World's A Stage"; p. 28-4)

THE MESMERIZER whirled faster and faster. It became a wild

kaleidoscope, a vertiginous swirl of interblended colors. There was the usual transitory blankness that preceded identification, then—

She was an agent of the Interworld Scientist League. She was in the downtown section of the City of the Red Sands, Mars. Her name was— Her name was—

Rhonda Forrester!

She relived a brief flashback: after her mother's death, she had spent a lonely childhood in her father's crumbling mansion near the ruins of Chicago. She remembered her father as a vague little man who spent nearly all of his time in the laboratory. She remembered the day the Interplanetary Police had come. She saw her father shuffling down the stairs to meet them. She saw him stop, bewildered, and then she saw him become a brief flaming pyre before the light-lances of the ferrets.

She could not recall how long she had remained in the house, silently screaming; there was a gray blank in her memory. Following the blank was the warm remembrance of the luxurious underground-fortress of the League and of the kind people who had rehabilitated her. Then there was the memory of the absorbing years spent at espionage school.

A year ago she had begun training for her first assignment, and nine months later she had arrived in the City of the Red Sands on her first mission. She had lost track of the long slow days awaiting her alert—and then, when her alert finally had come through, it had been late and her mission, precarious at best, now verged on the impossible.

She cursed the heavy downtown traffic. Her foresight in selecting the fifth level permitted her to move along at a semblance of speed, but she could not attain even half the velocity she needed to reach her rendezvous on time.

She glared at the clouds of levitator-

cars surrounding her. Some were so close they nearly touched the sleek sides of her Sky Dream special.

Of all the times to get my alert! she thought. Just when every snivelling little Martian in the city is poking home from work! She knew, of course, that the escape had been planned with the homebound traffic as an integral factor, but the knowledge only infuriated her further. If the traffic had been part of the plan, then double care should have been taken to alert her on time.

Gradually, the cars began thinning out around her and she breathed more freely. She risked rising to the sixth level and swiftly devoured three blocks before the crimson headlights of a fire-launch forced her back to the fifth. Grudgingly, she readjusted her speed.

Below her, the neon arteries of the city straggled out into thinner and thinner capillaries. The clouds of cars dwindled to an occasional suburban commuter. Tentatively she exceeded the fifth level limit, then doubled it. The Sky Dream soared through the deepening night. The cool wind eddied around her, bringing the exotic scent of Martian desert-oasis to her nostrils. Her anger subsided before the sheer enchantment of the adventure. The industrial district rushed up, then flowed swiftly past beneath her; and presently, far ahead, she could discern the ramshackle jungle of the tenement-section. Finally she cut her lights and drifted over the jumbled rooftops.

SHE RETAINED altitude only long enough to orient herself, then descended slowly to street level. The Sky Dream came to rest on rough pavement in the dark interval between two wan street lights. There was the brief grating sound of contact, and then silence. Complete, terrifying silence. Rhonda Forrester shuddered. She had visited the section a dozen times, familiarizing herself with its eve-

ry street and alley, but she had always come during the day. It had never occurred to her that night could make such a demoralizing difference.

She noted her position on her eidetic map and calculated how far she had to go to reach the contact point. Then she looked at the luminous dial of her I. E. P. detector. The indicator registered 79.6. She took a deep breath. The distance checked; therefore the fugitive must be at the contact point now. But, more important, the mere fact that the indicator registered at all proved beyond doubt that he was still alive.

He was probably waiting for her, she thought excitedly. Impatiently waiting. Angrily waiting. She could feel the accelerated pounding of her heart, her mind seeing him tall and strong, and dark from the desert sun; his gray eyes alert for the slightest movement in the shadows; crouching like a splendid beast at bay, ready to spring like a Martian desert-cat upon the first unwary ferret to come his way. And then, returning to reality, she remembered that all ferrets carried light-lances and loved to use them, and that if anything even remotely resembling a Martian desert-cat were to spring out of the darkness at them, they would coldly and efficiently incandesce it.

She lifted the Sky Dream a short distance above street-level, accelerating as much as she dared. She followed her eidetic map, twisting and turning through the labyrinthine streets. At intervals she cast anxious glances at her detector, willing it not to drop irrevocably to zero. When she reached the street she wanted the indicator registered 88.1.

She knew then that he must be very close, for the dial was only calibrated up to 100. 100 was maximum intensity—attainable only through actual contact.

Far down the street she could see the lonely street-light illuminating the intersection. But there was no sign of

movement around it; no sign of life. Her heart slowed. He *had* to be there!

She started moving toward the light. Her indicator climbed steadily. 90, 91. She was almost to the intersection, when she saw the other car moving at right angles to her own. At first her eyes rejected the sight. It was too cruel to be true. Then, when she saw the hateful scarlet crest of the ferret, she braked desperately, and swerved into the shadows of the corner building.

For awhile she could not function at all. She could only sit there numbly, staring at the oddly familiar figure of the ferret. As she watched, the ferret finished studying his detector, raised his eyes and coldly regarded the street before him.

SHE HAD failed her mission. The words arranged themselves condemningly in her mind. They flashed on and off, like a vindictive neon sign. She had let the ferrets get between her and the fugitive. She, the key figure, the only person in the system who embodied just the right physical properties to scramble the fugitive's I. E. P.; the only person who could save his life. She felt sick. For a moment she felt like giving up, like waiting there in the street till the exultant sirens of the ferrets announced that the hunt was over; till the tiny indicator of her detector dial dropped to zero.

But only for a moment. Then her training reasserted itself. She drew her light-lance, but before she could focus it the ferret had set his craft in motion. In an instant the shadows had engulfed him; in another he had disappeared beyond the corner building.

Rhonda Forrester swore. Then she touched the controls and the Sky Dream began to rise slowly. She was impatient, but she realized that a gradual movement in the darkness would be less noticeable than an abrupt one, and she did not doubt for a moment that there were other ferrets in the vicinity. Her best chance, she knew,

lay in gaining the roof. From there she might be able to hold the ferrets off till the fugitive got clear. And if he did not get clear, she would at least be in an excellent position to avenge him.

Halfway up she checked her detector. The indicator still registered 91. She was puzzled. The count should have receded, since the distance between them had to increase with each millimeter she gained in altitude. It didn't figure at all.

When she was level with the roof she checked the detector again. The indicator had not moved. She drifted over the coping and brought the Sky Dream down on the roof. She sat in the control seat, breathing hard, watching the indicator desperately. She willed it to recede, willed it to behave normally. The indicator perversely climbed to 91.1. Then, raising her eyes and examining the roof, she made out the dark blur of the aperture, and a realization of what might be happening flooded her, leaving her nearly exhausted with relief, and aflame with sudden, delirious anticipation.

She left the car and crept over to the aperture. She looked down into the throat of the stairwell. The darkness was impenetrable. But there was a reassuring sound of nearing footsteps. Her breath came faster. Her fingers clutched the frame of the aperture, sinking into the soft rotten wood.

Presently she saw the vague outline of him, and then she made out the familiar contours of his broad shoulders, the familiar line of his neck and head. That was when he looked up and saw her.

"It's really you!" she sighed.

She saw him leap up the intervening stairs and she felt his hands grasp her waist. She permitted herself to be dragged through the aperture, into the darkness of the stairwell. Then she heard his indrawn breath and felt his hands fall away from her.

"I'm here to help you!" she said. . .

"Darling, don't you understand? I'm your contact!"

She found his hand in the darkness and led the way up the stairs to the roof. The Sky Dream was a tapered blur in the starlight. They hurried towards it. When they reached it she stopped and faced him.

His hair was dark and curly just as she had known it would be and his face was just as she had visualized it. She could not see the color of his eyes but she knew they must be gray.

There was a tightness in her chest, a slow throbbing in her temples.

Her voice was husky. "Darling," she said, "did you forget? You're supposed to kiss me."

Empatha-existence encompasses all the senses: auditory, visio, olfactory, tactile, and kinaesthetic. In a modern sensual, this involvement is not injurious, for modern sensuels are made with the Three Ideals (Relaxation, Enjoyment and Sex) continually in mind. Unfortunately, there was no ideology behind the first sensuels. While they did accentuate sex, they were made primarily to thrill their audience—to imbue them with a sense of romantic adventure.

In this connection, an interesting parallel can be drawn between early TV and early TE. The former repeated the blood-and-thunder western-sagas of the 2-D's, while the latter repeated the blood-and-thunder space-sagas of the 3-D's.

Obviously the first participators were unable to endure a full hour of such involvement without some respite. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first sensuels were broken up into four ten minute sequences. Neither is it surprising that the intervals between those sequences were utilized for commercial purposes.

(Virgith's "All The World's A Stage"; p. 36-7)

"WE WILL return to 'Hide The Thimble' in just a few moments," the caressing voice in their suddenly-empty minds said. "In the meantime there will be a few important words from our sponsor. . ."

Richard Forrester stood up. "I can stand a drink," he said. "Anybody second the motion?"

"I'll say," Rhonda Forrester said.

"I'll help you mix them," Anita Esmond said, getting up and following him into the kitchen.

He got the liquor and glasses from the cupboard, and she got the seltzer and ice cubes from the refrigerator. He lined up the glasses on the white kitchen table and she plunked an ice cube into each of them. He caught her eyes as he was pouring the liquor. "How about a special just for us?" he asked.

"Okay," she said.

He got two more glasses and poured them one third full. "Straight?"

"You're the doctor."

They raised their drinks, looking at each other. "Here's to us," Anita Esmond said.

They clinked glasses.

"Hurry up!" Rhonda Forrester called from the living room. "The commercial's almost over."

They set their empty glasses down and carried the drinks into the darkened living room. They resumed their seats on the twelve foot divan before the TE set.

Everyone drank hurriedly.

"And now back to 'Hide The Thimble'," the announcer's voice crooned. . .

Since the participator invariably identified himself with the main character of the sensual, the other characters became the people he knew—people he liked or disliked, depending on whether they abetted or obstructed the solution of the problem. This reaction intensified the already-violent objections of the old-school psychologists. The participator, they warned, by identifying the characters with the incorrect real people (a husband, for example, identifying the heroine with his neighbor's wife and vicariously realizing his latent desires) would become less and less integrated in his real existence and eventually become incapable of accepting reality at all.

Virgith's "All The World's A Stage"; p. 51)

ANITA ESMOND'S voice was husky. "Darling," she said, "did you forget? You're supposed to kiss me."

Richard Forrester's pre-escape conditioning had prepared him perfectly: his emotional pattern stood at maximum susceptibility. Everything dissolved around him except the star-lit figure of the woman whose image had been implanted in his mind a year ago; who had become for him the incarnation of both life and love. He took her into his arms. He felt the soft pliancy of her tall body and in a blinding climax he discovered the cool hotness of her lips.

There was a violent shift in his emotional pattern as it readjusted itself to embrace a force it had never experienced before: the overwhelming force of Love. . . .

Then he heard the grating of the levitator-car upon the coping. He whirled, trying to shield the girl's body with his own. The ferret was standing up in the control-seat and for the first time—as the identification completely resolved itself—Richard Forrester recognized the familiar hateful features. Then he flinched before the bright rapier of the light-charge. Its closeness seared his cheek. Behind him a tindery tenement leaped into sudden flaming brightness.

Anita Esmond had her own light-lance focused by then. He saw the thin bright rapier reach out and touch the ferret. He saw the ferret become the shrieking flame-etched caricature of John Esmond, topple grotesquely from the control seat of the still rising car and fall flaming into the street below.

He felt Anita Esmond's hand tightly gripping his arm. He heard her words, "Quick! My apartment. It's the only place in the city where we'll be safe!" He followed her into the Sky Dream and they rose together into the cool, star-sequined night.

Below them the flames began their crackling repast of tenements. . .

RHONDA FORRESTER'S voice was husky. "Darling," she said,

"did you forget? You're supposed to kiss me."

Her conditioning had prepared her perfectly: she was ready to respond with the maximum intensity needed to consummate the first phase of her assignment. Everything dissolved around her except the starlit figure of John Esmond, whose image had been implanted in her mind a year ago; who had become for her the incarnation of both life and love. She found herself in his arms, scarcely able to breathe. Then, in a blinding climax, she discovered the crushing warmth of his lips.

And she knew that his emotional-pattern was violently shifting, readjusting itself to embrace a force it had never experienced before: the overwhelming force of Love...

Then she heard the grating of the levitator-car upon the coping. She whirled, her right hand dropping instinctively to her belt, her fingers curling around the hilt of her light-lance. The ferret was standing up in the control seat and for the first time—as the identification completely resolved itself—Rhonda Forrester recognized the familiar hateful features. Then she flinched before the bright rapier of the light-charge. Its closeness seared her cheek. Behind her a tindery tenement leaped into sudden flaming brightness.

She focused her own light-lance. She saw the thin bright rapier reach out and touch the ferret. She saw the ferret become the shrieking flame-etched caricature of Richard Forrester, topple grotesquely from the control seat of

the still rising car and fall flaming into the street below.

She gripped John Esmond's arm. "Quick!" she said. "My apartment. It's the only place in the city where we'll be safe!" She stepped into the Sky Dream and he crowded in beside her. They rose together into the cool, star-sequined night.

Below them the flames began their crackling repast of tenements...

The old-school psychologists were mistaken about a number of things, and their absurd prognosis of the effect of the sensual upon the mass-audience is merely another example of their bungling attempts to understand humanity. Their perspective was hopelessly warped by the rigid reality of their day.

The ancient conception of reality seems fantastic in retrospect. It is difficult to believe that reality could ever have been arbitrarily confined to the narrow field of objective perception. For there are realities, and realities; and there are valid only in ratio to the intensity of the pleasure with which they are experienced. If the "simulated" reality transcends the "actual" reality, then the "simulated" reality is more valid than the "actual" reality—and justifiably enjoys a higher calibration on our scale of values.

The old reality was little more than a fixation, a stubborn precept forced upon mankind by successive generations of pseudo-intelligentsia. It is a part of the jetsam of our culture. It is an obsolete word and has no more meaning to our civilization than "Wife," "Husband," "Love," "Honor," or "Friend."

(Virgith's "All The World's A Stage"; P. 51-2; Decadence Literature Files, Reintegration Center #12, New America, Earth)

