

THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

35¢

Volume 8

Number 3

November, 1957

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SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, November, 1957, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyright 1957 by Columbia Publications, Inc. 35¢ per copy; yearly subscriptions \$2.10. Printed in the U. S. A.



AUDITION

by Robert Arnett

Whether Earth and its peoples would gain the benefits of membership in the Galactic Federation depended upon the performance of the greatest violinist in the world.



THE GREATEST violinist of Earth sat in the spaceship and cracked his knuckles. This was the only sign of apprehension he displayed as the alien craft, in some incomprehensible way, moved through immeasurable space.

He was stocky, with powerfully sloping shoulders, with strong, square hands. He had bright blue, glittering eyes, and a chin like a chunk of granite. He looked like a weight-lifter, or a middle-weight wrestler, and he had not a hair on his massive head.

His name was Basil Kaevid, and the fate of the world rested upon his shoulders. Yet as he sat in the spaceship that did not resemble a spaceship, almost at ease, he was sustained by a diamond core of egotism, a self-confidence that had never been chipped by fear or shattered by self-doubt. When it came to playing a violin, he was Earth's best, and he knew it. Neither the novelty of space travel nor his own terrific responsibility appeared to disturb him.

He sat a little apart from his six human companions who shared the stateroom, and a feeling of contempt came over him as he looked at them.

But they were not contemptible. They were the high representatives of the

Earth, the six chosen representatives of the World Council of Governments and the three billion humans, whose fate now rested in Sir Basil Kaevid's hands. They sat tensely in the fat, comfortable chairs, taking quick, short puffs from unwanted cigarets, grinding out the tobacco with unnecessary concentration, starting short flights of conversation that tail-spinned abruptly. There was Chin, whose implacable face glowed with a faint film of sweat; Curruthers the lean, indomitable, horsefaced Englishman; Gomez the Portuguese, behind whose placid brown countenance sparkled an incredibly quick brain. There was McDowell, Simonovich, Donet—all exceptional men...all frightened.

KAEVID SMILED without warmth. "To look at you," he said, speaking collectively to the six, in a voice that held an edge, "one would think you doubted my ability."

Donet gave a small start of alarm, and dabbed quickly at his thin features with a damp handkerchief. "Not at all! Not at all! After all, those of us here were instrumental in choosing you to represent Earth! Of course we have no..."

"Cybernetics chose me," interrupted Kaevid coldly.

Chin nodded politely. "True, Sir Basil, very true. But you may be sure that we

have no doubts concerning your ability. We know very well the ability of the cybernetics machines..."

"And you just wonder whether you fed them the right data, don't you?" Kaevid stood up. There was no sense of motion in the spaceship to disturb his equilibrium. "And now you're patting me on the head with pretty little speeches, for fear you'll disturb my confidence, for fear you'll upset me, and I won't play my best!"

He paced the thick carpet and paused to look at them with honest curiosity. "Don't you know that nothing disturbs my ability to play? Didn't cybernetics show you that? Don't you know that nothing you can say or do will disturb my ability appreciatively? I am Basil Kaevid, the greatest violinist in the world. You know it; and since I am not burdened by any false modesty, I know it. There is nothing to worry about."

"Then keep calm," interjected Curruthers. "Don't blame us if we seem a little nervous. After all, here we are on some sort of other-worldly space-craft, going God knows where, at what rate of speed. You can't blame us for being nervous. After all, we're just ordinary mortals, with no pretense of anything more. And the outcome of this...er...Audition..."

A PORTION of one wall disappeared and the Walg walked in.

It moved its dumpy, bulbous little body in an approximation of an Earthly bow. "We have arrived, Earthmen," it said politely. The Walgs were invariably polite. "Welcome to the site of the Audition—an artificial satellite expressly built for this specific event."

The Walg turned to Kaevid. "It shall be as you wish. Your friends may accompany you, or they may wait for you here."

Six of the Earthmen stirred uneasily, glancing uncertainly at the seventh.

Basil Kaevid grunted. "I'm tired of looking at their frightened faces. I'll go alone." He picked up his priceless violin almost carelessly.

The Walg waved a tentacle; a section of the wall swung out; a flight of human-sized steps slid silently into place; and the first Earthman descended onto alien soil—although "soil" was not the right word for the spongy regularity of the satellite's surface.

Kaevid took a tentative sniff. "Air seems all right," he said matter-of-factly.

He rubbed his square, strong fingers over his gleaming bald head in a gesture familiar to millions of Earthlings. "Let's get on with it," he said to the Walg. Wrapped

in self-confidence, Kaevid followed the little alien up the gentle incline of a hill topped by a large, faintly-gleaming edifice.

THE SIX representatives of Earth watched him intently as he approached the building—watched him from the comparative familiarity of the ship. Curruthers' thin lips twisted into the faintest of smiles. "Look at old Baldy go. He doesn't even handle that Guarnieri with any respect."

Donet sighed, and gave a Gallic shrug. "And with him go all our hopes and aspirations."

Gomez added softly, "Good luck to him—and to Earth!"

Inside the edifice, the Walg turned to Kaevid and made another approximation of a courteous bow. "Welcome to Audition Hall. I will be happy to show you your dressing room, where you may rest from the rigors of your voyage."

"I'm not tired," said Kaevid.

"This way, please," said the Walg.

Kaevid followed the Walg down a long, tubular corridor filled with a subdued, quiet light, and suffered himself to be led into a small room furnished with Earth appurtenances. It contained a couch and a table, upon which stood more-or-less familiar utensils containing food and drink.

The Walg gestured toward the items on the table. "Refreshments suitable for Earthmen are here. The elimination room is in there." He pointed a tentacle toward a door. "Now, I will leave you alone for a short time, to meditate." His bulbous little form waddled from the room.

AS THE DOOR closed, Kaevид thought contemptuously, "If that's a sample of Higher Development, the people of Earth certainly have nothing to worry about."

The emptiness and silence of the place disturbed him. Basil Kaevид was used to noisy, admiring throngs; depression settled over him. He laughed shortly to himself. "Perhaps the strain is telling on me!" He lay down upon the couch, briefly pleased by its perfect support, and fell asleep immediately.

HE WAS AWAKENED by the Walg, standing politely a few feet from the couch. "If you please, Sir Basil, the Auditions are about to begin."

Kaevид sat up, yawned, rubbed his fingers over his baldness. "I'm ready. Let's go."

The Walg formed an ingratiating smile. "First, it is necessary for me to repeat the circumstances of the situation that brings you here," it said, in the manner of one explaining a foible.

Kaevид frowned. "Skip it. I know what it's all about!"

The Walg gave what it meant to be a sympathetic shrug. "I know—but the Rulers insist."

Suddenly, somewhat to his own surprise, Kaevид's temper slipped its bonds. He jerked to his feet. "Always the 'Rulers!' Always the damned, invisible 'Rulers!' Why don't I ever see one? Why do I never see any creature but you absurd-looking Walgs? You know what I think—I think these 'Rulers' of yours are a very convenient fabrication! I think that whenever you need a reason for one of your incomprehensible actions, you blame it on the 'Rulers!'"

For a moment, Kaevид struggled with his temper. Then, muttering, "I'm sorry," he sank back on the couch.

A LITTLE HISS of air emitted from the Walg's breathing apparatus in the form of a sigh. "I'm afraid, Sir Basil, that it is very unlikely you will ever see a Ruler. There is no particular reason why you *should* see a Ruler; and, besides, I regret to say that your eyes are not quite properly constructed. However, the Rulers will be in Audition Hall, as that is one of their duties; and, if you look carefully out of the corner of your eyes, as your phrase goes, you may be able to see a bending of light, a

refraction. That is a Ruler. It is probable you will never see one more clearly."

Kaevid grunted skeptically. "And these 'Rulers' are absolute top-dogs in this galactic set-up, eh?"

"If you mean that the Rulers rule—that is true. They do. That is because they are the most highly developed life form in the galaxy, and development entails responsibility."

"I suppose that the rest of you 'life-forms' wouldn't take over the job if you had the chance?"

"We would prefer not to," replied the Walg seriously. "It is an onerous task. Like street-cleaning in one of your planet's cities, it is simply a task that must be done. There is no special honor associated with it."

Kaevid sank back resignedly on the couch, his strong hands clasped behind his head. "I believe you," he said, sarcastically. "And since there's no help for it, you might as well get on with your spiel."

The Walg spoke quietly, politely. "It is necessary that I repeat what you perhaps already know in order that there shall be no complaint to the effect that you did not understand—should you fail."

"Don't worry your head about that," Kaevid muttered grimly.

"WHEN THE life-form, Man, on your planet, Earth, discovered a limited ability to control atomic structure, that information immediately was received by all members of the Galactic Government. This resulted in an inspection of your intellectual development, inasmuch as the ability to use atomic power is Step One in the procedure of becoming a member of GG. Representatives of GG, including primarily members of my own life-form, made the journey to Earth to determine whether your life-form, had developed sufficiently for admission into GG.

"Your development was checked against the time available for development, and found adequate. We investigated your scientific and social achievements and found them also adequate. We studied your ability to associate amiably and constructively with each other, and compared the number of non-conformists with the number of conformists. We checked the number of what you call selfish actions against the number of what you consider to be altruistic actions. We looked carefully at your methods of emotional communication, including the practices of dancing, music, drama, and the written word, and found..."

"Well, for God's sake, if you did all that, why couldn't

you—or one of your hypothetical, invisible ‘Rulers—have gone into Carnegie Hall one night when I was playing there, and spared me this ten-million-mile fool’s errand?”

The Walg sighed again. “I’m afraid the purposes of the actions of the Rulers are not always immediately apparent.” It continued, “... and found that your life-form had advanced sufficiently along the noble road of achievement to be eligible for GG membership. The only serious deterrent was the fact that organized groups, of your life-form persisted in disagreeing violently with organized groups and attempted to solve such disagreement by mutual extermination.”

KAEVID GRINNED wryly. “If this Galactic Government of yours is going to give us the powerful instruments you spoke of on Earth—if we’re admitted—aren’t you afraid we might turn against some of you in a few centuries?”

The Walg answered solemnly, “The matter was given thorough consideration, and it was determined that by the time you would be in a position to do any harm to any member of GG, your advancement would be such that you would no longer have the desire to do so. I am afraid you have very little understanding of the sphere of

achievement you must encompass before you attain a semblance of equality with some of the more highly-developed members of GG.

“To continue, it was determined that your planet was eligible for GG membership, it was, of course, necessary to convince your life-form that such membership was desirable. This we did convincingly with scientific demonstrations.”

“I’ll say you did,” the musician mumbled, remembering the ancient man restored to the days of his youth, the basket-case that astoundingly grew new arms and legs, the instantaneous cure of all the people in the world sick with cancer.

Suddenly his body was slick with sweat, and an icy lump settled in his stomach. He realized fully, for the first time, that if he failed, the wave of hate that would greet his return would be a tangible horror. There were many more diseases besides cancer—many millions of aged. The tense threat of Atomic war was a constant, disturbing vibration in the neighborhoods of Earth. If he failed, Kaevid saw clearly, he could not go back. Even the World Council representatives would be in danger when they returned.

AND WITH the full realization of the Audition’s importance there came a flooding resurgence of his

superb ego. Basil Kaevid stood up from the couch and straightened defiantly his powerful shoulders. He was no longer petulant. "Go on with your resume—I don't believe I know your name."

"Call me Walg," said the Walg. "I see you have now realized that one of the reasons for holding the Audition on this artificially constructed mass. It is perhaps not the same as a recital in your Carnegie Hall, when you are not aware of the presence of the Rulers. The circle of achievement is perhaps greater?"

Kaevid nodded grimly. "Go ahead, Walg."

The Walg said, "And when your life-form decided that membership in GG was highly desirable, there remained only the final test, inasmuch as the part represents the whole. Members of your life-form voted on one to represent them in a demonstration of a form of your Art. You were chosen, and consequently will appear before the Rulers—three in number—to demonstrate an Earthling's ability. If this ability is judged adequate, your planet will take its place among members of Galactic Government."

Kaevid said hoarsely, "I'm ready. Let's get on with it." He picked up the violin case.

The Walg led the way from the small room, down the softly-glowing corridor. "There are three candidates

at the present time-interval, including yourself. I will not trouble explaining whence the others come, as their planets are at a considerable distance from your Earth. The site of the audition is near your planet because the other two candidates are less easily exhausted by long journeys."

Kaevid wondered briefly at a culture that considered ten million miles "near."

"In here," murmured the Walg.

A DOOR OPENED, and Kaevid entered a tremendous room, or, rather, hall. It was apparently empty, except for a relatively small platform in the center.

"You will mount the platform," explained the Walg, "and I will remain with you to explain anything you wish to know."

Kaevid could feel the tension tingling along his nerves as he made the long walk to the platform and mounted the 10 steps. But though cybernetics had chosen well, the emptiness grated upon him. He was used to the appreciative rustle of large crowds when he stepped on platforms.

"The first candidate," said Walg, "is that life-form over there." He pointed to what appeared to Kaevid to be a large edition of a praying mantis. It held some kind of a little box, and a stick with

a knob on the end. Another Walg stood beside it.

Kaevid glanced around for the third candidate, and saw only a dead-black container, roughly spherical, about six feet in diameter.

Walg said, "Yes, the third candidate, is in there. It is not an oxygen-breather; the first candidate, like you, is."

Walg motioned Kaevid to a chair that had been provided for him. "Sit down, now. The first candidate is about to perform."

The praying mantis moved to the center of the platform with jerky steps. Kaevid felt again the same sense of alienness that struck him when he had first seen a Walg. Slowly the life-form lifted the little box and struck it four times with the knobbed stick. The little box emitted four shimmering sounds, but Kaevid's trained ears could not detect a resemblance to any scale with which he was familiar. Then the praying mantis left the center of the stage.

Puzzled, Kaevid asked, "What's it doing now? Why did it leave the center of the stage?"

Walg answered calmly, "Because it is finished, of course."

THE TENSION Kaevid had been rigidly controlling broke. He guffawed joyously, shattering the silence of the vast hall with a whoop of laughter. What had he been

worried about? He—Sir Basil Kaevid—who would play Mozart, Beethoven and Handel as they had never been played before! He found that he could not stop the welcome relief of laughter, until Walg touched him with a thin tentacle and something very like an electric shock sobered him at once.

"That was very impolite," reproved the Walg severely. "That life-form would never be guilty of laughing at you."

Kaevid wiped his streaming eyes. "I'm sorry. It was just—just those four notes! Four notes!" With difficulty he smothered another surge of laughter.

The Walg said, "I must point out to you that you are the next candidate."

Sir Basil Kaevid nodded briskly. "Of course." He got to his feet, regal assurance in every movement, withdrew the violin from its case, and stepped confidently to the center of the platform. Remembering Walg's advice regarding the Rulers, he tried to look out of the corner of his eye. Was that a flicker of light he saw? He shrugged; it didn't matter. He placed the musical instrument under his chin and held the bow lightly over it. His strong, square fingers had never felt so sure. He took one deep breath—and began to play.

WHEN HE had finished, Kaevid blinked. It took

him a moment to regain his surroundings. As usual, Music had transported him. He was aware that he had never played quite so well before; he had played his best, and his best was Earth's best. For a moment, the absolute silence startled him, until he remembered that this audience did not applaud.

He returned to his chair beside the Walg; there was no doubt in his mind that earth would be accepted into Galactic Membership.

"You played very well," Walg said politely.

Kaevid condescendingly nodded. "Thanks. What do we do now?"

"You may return to your dressing room and await the decision, or you may remain here while the third candidate performs."

"I think I'll stay, if it's all the same to you." Kaevid was enjoying himself, now that the ordeal was over and he was confident of the outcome.

Walg nodded. "If you will excuse me a moment, I must assist in placing the third candidate in the center of the platform."

Kaevid watched as the two Walgs moved the black container. As Walg returned to his side, a low musical sound filled the great hall. It penetrated his inner-most being. It was unbearably sweet, filled with intolerable longing and the strong promise of complete fruition.

THE NOTE changed; it became a dozen notes, each individual, each part of the whole. And then the colors came. Not just colors—but visible reflections of the entity that was Basil Kaevid. The colors blended, swept the huge hall on wings of perfect sound. He found that the color had meaning. There was the color of the icing on the cake with which he had celebrated his sixth birthday. There was the color of his mother's eyes, blending with the exact shade of grass that grew beneath the elm tree in his own back-yard. There was the delicate hue of the body of the girl with whom he had had his first love affair. There was the little jingling sound of the Christmas tree ornament that had hung on the fir tree branch one December 25th. There was the grandeur of the ocean's shoreward surge, as he had heard it on a particular July day. The sounds and colors of all his past came shining forth—and not just his own past—the past of all the people he had ever known—and not only theirs, either—the past of all the people who had ever lived on Earth—and the future of all of them—each a part of a glorious Whole: Earth Entire, a vision, a loveliness... meaningful... purposeful! Kaevid thought his heart would crack.

The silence was a blow. Kaevid was not aware when

the music ended, the colors faded. How long he sat there he did not know, until he felt the touch of Walg on his arm. "Come, we return to the dressing room now," it said quietly. "I think it would have been better if we had gone before the third candidate started to play. However, it is over."

"Yes," Kaevid bumbled. "It is over." He looked down at the violin case at his feet, too spent to obey the impulse to smash it.

Reading his mind, the Walg picked it up.

"Yes," Kaevid repeated numbly, "it is over." How could the tinny little sounds he had made compete with the grandeur of the Art of the Third Candidate?

HE PERMITTED himself to be led back to the dressing room.

"Sit down here on the couch," said the Walg kindly, and assisted him. "I go now to learn the results of the Audition. Here—I will place your violin by the couch."

"Don't bother," muttered Kaevid, but Walg had gone. He sat on the couch, a fog of apathy enveloping him, the fiber of his ego shriveled. He thought of the great green Earth to which he could not return, and wonderly idly how he could commit suicide—painlessly, if possible—no, not painlessly, but with all the pain possible, for the

crime of arrogance, the assumption of superiority. How could he have been so blind, how could...?

"Congratulations," said Walg, smiling in Earth-fashion.

"What?" wondered Kaevid, blankly.

"Congratulations," repeated Walg. "Candidates One and Two were admitted. Your Earth is now a member of Galactic Government. Your mission has succeeded."

Kaevid looked at the Walg with a stricken face on which Hope was vainly striving to be reborn. "I don't understand. Not... Not the Third Candidate?"

The Walg gave its rendition of a shrug. "It is really very simple. Perhaps you still do not understand the Test?"

"I guess not," mumbled Kaevid.

"WELL, THE TEST concerned the ability of the candidates to use what they had. Candidate One had a box—a small box and a stick. It is difficult to do much with such an instrument. Yet those four notes he struck—the minimal amount—will reverberate always in your memory, although your earthly sensitivities did not immediately respond. When you are an aged man—and now it will take you a long time to attain that state—the slightest effort of mind will

bring back those four exquisite notes.

"Candidate Two also had a sort of box, equipped with strings and a bow. It is difficult to get much expression from such an instrument, yet the candidate did superbly well. In fact, I was most pleasantly surprised.

"Candidate three used not only the full range of the spectrum visible to you, but also called upon a telepathic device that enabled it to play your memories, aspirations and race-consciousness back to you. How effective these endeavors are with the Rulers, I do not know. With such devices he should have been able to do much more. I know you were profoundly moved, but the Rulers were not impressed with the performance.

"The Rulers were not impressed," repeated Kaevind blankly. "If the Rulers were not impressed by *that*, what would impress them?"

"It is difficult to tell what would impress the Rulers. The Walgs do not know what art-forms, if any, the Rulers possess.

"But," continued Walg, "I am interested in this little music box of yours. I have never actually tried to play one. Would you mind if I—that is—if you don't mind—"

"By all means," urged Kaevind bitterly, "by all means

try your hand...er...tentacle at it."

AND FOR the second time the soul of Basil Kaevind was bathed in beauty—this time, beauty from his own violin, beauty he could not hope to equal. The walls of his self-control broke.

He held his face in his cupped hands, and the salt tears dribbled through the interstices of the strong, square fingers.

When Walg had finished playing, Kaevind stood up and wiped his eyes. "Do me a favor," he said humbly, "accept my Guarneri as a gift from me for all your kindness. I won't have any more use for it."

The Walg assayed a smile that was nearly Earth-like. "Thank you. Thank you very much. It is a very nice toy."

Kaevind nodded wryly. "Yes...yes, of course. A toy. A very Nice Toy. After all, on my own Earth, we sometimes judge the capabilities of our children by observing how they handle the simple toys we give them to play with. Simple toys, like wooden blocks."

Walg nodded agreeably. "Shall we return to the spaceship and tell your friends the gladsome news? I shall be most happy to accompany you."

Walgs were always polite.

