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(Space ship in trouble with meteor swarm; Europa and Jupiter in background)

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Every first-rate fantasy writer must be capable of adjusting his mind so that it works along the lines of the peculiar logic dictated by his story; but occasionally (and with great rejoicing) you find a man whose mind needs no adjustment, who automatically thinks, with cogency and clarity, in terms of the impossible — a Saki, a Gilbert, a Collier. Or, we're delighted to say, a Nelson. Your letters expressed your delight with Alan Nelson's absurd Narapoia in a recent F&SF; and you're certainly familiar with his more serious Professor Pfaff's Last Recital from its numerous reprintings elsewhere. Now meet a grimmer Nelson in this convincing and terrible development of a classic fantasy theme — the hand with a life of its own.

Cattivo

by ALAN NELSON

THEY told me that at Marsello's there was a man named Dubini with live hands. So I went there and found him sitting alone in the far corner, leaning on a table with oilcloth roses and staring at a glass of black ale.

"They tell me your hands are alive," I said, sitting opposite him and ordering whisky.

His face was large and blank and putty-colored. A simple face. All the strength was in his shoulders and arms. His hands hung below the table.

"Your hands," I repeated. "People say . . ."

And now I am going to tell you what seemed to happen:

From the edge of the table, I thought I saw a revolting tarantula-like insect of monstrous size and thick tentacles scabble up on to the oilcloth and start waddling across the table toward me. It hesitated halfway. A thick bulb of a head peered at me from the crotch of two tentacles. It lumbered forward again, edged up to my glass of whisky. The ugly bulb-like head explored the rim of the glass. Then with irritation it kicked the glass off onto the floor and scampered back across the table and disappeared off the edge.

It was only Dubini's hand, of course. His fingers were as thick as sausages and supple as snakes and he could make them into almost anything he wanted. It was like watching a puppet — you look at it long enough and soon you begin to see it breathe.

Dubini laughed. A thin childish laugh. Then he held up his left hand.

"It is Cattivo," he said, looking at the hand with pride. "He is the evil one. He does bad things."

Then the dancer appeared. She ran out onto the oilcloth with flashing legs and started waltzing to the rhythm of the radio music. She pirouetted. She glided and swayed and kicked. She performed intricate steps and tremendous leaps. I found myself staring at her and falling into her rhythm. She was very graceful. The music ended.

Dubini held up his right hand.

"And this is Angelina. She is the good one. She and Cattivo are enemies. They do not like each other."

Can you imagine such a fool? Naming his hands?

Dubini sighed, stretched them both out side by side on the table, examining the powerful double-jointed fingers with interest.

"Did you ever see two hands so much alike and yet so different?" he asked.

It was a clever performance. No props. No make-up. Nothing but hands. Clever. Very clever. But I had not come halfway across the city to see a man play with his fingers. I laid a ten dollar bill on the table.

"How would you like to work for me?" I asked.

Dubini's simple face clouded.

"No," he said. "I know who you are. You are evil — like Cattivo."

"Cattivo and I could become friends." It embarrassed me to call the hand by a name. And yet, if that is what its name *was*, why not?

I laid another ten on top of the first. Dubini finished his ale, licked his lips, and eyed the money.

From the edge of the table, Cattivo scabbled onto the oilcloth once more and quickly ran the length of the table. He sniffed at the money. Nervously he prodded it once like it was something good to eat but which might strike back. Then slowly he began to wad it up into his belly like an octopus absorbing its prey.

Then Angelina appeared. She ran to Cattivo and danced around him angrily. She jumped on top of him. She jumped off him, and stood in front accusingly. Cattivo paused in his dinner. Angelina advanced on him again. She kicked. She scratched. She did everything to get him to disgorge the half digested wad. Cattivo finally let it drop, backed off, and waddled toward the table edge. Angelina followed.

Dubini shrugged at me.

"You see? Angelina will not allow it. She knows you." That simple fool Dubini! I really believe he thought they *were* alive!

"It is better than working in a brush factory," I told him. "You could

have money. Easy money. A nice little room. With a spring mattress and mahogany table."

Dubini's face grew sad. I thought he was going to cry. I continued:

"All the ale you could drink. Days in the sun. A blue suit with a pin stripe."

"Cattivo is not *really* bad," he protested. "He only pretends to be."

"It is too bad Angelina will not allow him to do as he wants."

He didn't answer; just sat there in the chair, frowning with indecision, his hands in his lap. I picked up the money and left. I was in no hurry.

Every evening for four evenings I returned. Every evening we played our little game. It was a long way to come and the air in the bar was very bad, but Dubini had such strong useful hands. Useful to me.

When I arrived on the fifth night they were playing checkers — Cattivo and Angelina. Angelina danced about the board, gently kicking the checkers into place. Cattivo squatted across from her.

"They play frequently?" I asked.

"Frequently," Dubini answered without looking at me.

"Who wins?"

"Angelina. Always. She is the smart one."

Well, we would see just how smart. I piled five bills neatly on the edge of the table. They played a while longer. It was obvious Angelina was trying to keep Cattivo's interest on the game. Between moves she jumped and pirouetted. Anything to keep him distracted from the money. I added one more bill. Then still another. Suddenly the board overturned and the checkers scattered in all directions. Quickly Cattivo ran to the money and snatched it up. Hungrily. Then he ran off. Angelina just stood there.

Well, I taught him many things. He was a simple soul — Dubini — but he was a good pupil; he had such clever fingers. I taught him how to rest his hands on the counter at second-rate jewelry stores and come away with rings and trinkets. I taught him how to board a crowded street car and get off three blocks later with a wallet or woman's purse. I taught him how to wrap his loot up neatly in a little jewel box so that it looked like a box of cigars. I taught him to bring it all to *my* apartment.

And I got him his pin-stripe suit and his case of black ale and his apartment with the mahogany table. I even gave him money. But he wasn't happy.

"Look what you've done to me!" he'd wail after placing the oak box on my desk. He'd stretch the long fingers out and gaze at them with a frightened look on his face. "You've made a thief of Cattivo! And Angelina! She won't dance any more! You and your smooth tongue!" Then he'd wad his fingers into fists and beat his temples.

"But you are becoming a man of means," I'd tell him. Then I would place five bills on the edge of the table. As if I'd pressed a button, Cattivo appeared and crawled over to them. He seemed to have grown larger. Uglier. More insolent. He would strut in front of the bills. Lunge at them. Retreat. Like a cat playing with a mouse. I didn't like to look at Dubini's face at these times.

"He was not *really* evil before!" he'd groan. "Now look at him! A thief! All on account of your tongue. Some day I silence it! Forever!"

"You will not do that because Cattivo and I are friends. He would not let you harm me."

"Then Angelina will!"

"Cattivo would allow *no one* to harm me."

Dubini's moral struggles bored me. Any conflict does whose outcome I know. But I tolerated them. I even humored them during the weeks that followed when Dubini came to me, writhing with guilt, and bringing me the little box filled with watches and wallets.

In three months I was ready.

You think my hours of instruction went for the sake of a few gold-plated baubles worth maybe \$25 apiece? You think I endured Dubini's threats and remorse for the pleasure of stripping old ladies' purses of car tokens and five dollar bills? You underestimate me.

I had an enemy. Congor. It is hard to determine whether he was my enemy because I wanted the ring; or whether I wanted the ring because he was my enemy. Does it matter?

What mattered was the ring. The emerald ring. Why did I want this ring? Certainly not because I like to wear jewelry. Certainly not because the stone possessed any strange hypnotic fascination. Nor because I liked the color green. I wanted it simply because I knew where I could sell it. Quickly. For \$35,000. That's the reason. You call that greedy? With \$35,000 in my pocket, you can call it any name you want.

When I told Dubini that in order to get the emerald it was necessary for Congor to die, he refused to have any part of it. Naturally. He didn't get excited; just sat there and said no. And Angelina came out and danced a bit. She was awkward. Stiff. As though she had forgotten how. I did not press the matter.

The following week when Dubini returned with his jewel box of trinkets I outlined the plan to him in detail. He jumped from the chair and shouted:

"No! No! I told you *no!*"

I waited for him to calm.

I outlined the plan once more.

"No!" he screamed in a rage.

It was then I told him about the jail. He didn't like that at all. First he stared in disbelief at me; then in horror at his left hand as though it didn't belong to him at all.

"You can't send *me* to jail," he shouted. "It is *you* that should be there."

"Cattivo has been very bad," I said. "You would remain there a long time."

From an inner pocket I removed a stack of bills. There were twenty-five ten dollar greenbacks. They were new and crisp and made a crinkly sound as I stacked them on the desk edge. I looked up. Dubini leaned across the desk with a revolver pointed at me. Angelina's legs curled about the trigger.

"Your slick tongue!" he snarled. "It's made Cattivo a thief. Next a murderer. I will silence it forever." He aimed the gun at my heart.

I laughed at him.

"You cannot harm me!" I told him. "Not while Cattivo and I are friends. We understand each other. He won't allow it."

The gun came closer, wavering. I riffled the edges of the bills, waiting for Cattivo. I smiled up at Dubini's drawn face, then back to the table top. Cattivo was there now. How glad I was to see my friend! My very dear friend, Cattivo! How was it possible such a simple clod as Dubini could possess such a wonderful hand? Cattivo was stalking about the blotter. Dubini looked at Cattivo with a blank, unbelieving face. When the gun dropped to the table, Cattivo hovered over it. As though he had killed it. Then he moved toward the money. . . .

It took three more days to perfect the details. Everything had to be just right. And then on *the* night, I waited at Dubini's apartment — the one with the mahogany table and pin-stripe suit hanging in the closet. I wanted no trail leading to *my* house. Not on the night Congor died.

It was difficult just waiting. I had scheduled Dubini's moves minute by minute, and when nine o'clock came and I knew he would be wrapping the ring up in the jewel box, my heart began to pound. I gave him thirty-five minutes to get home and when he didn't arrive I had to force myself into the chair to keep from throwing open the window and looking down the street for him.

I waited. A half hour. Then another. I moved from chair to chair, digging my nails into the chair arms. I waited. At the end of the second hour, I had no cigarettes left. And still I waited, peeling many paper matches into many small strips.

And then finally he came, lunging through the door with a sick look on his face. He slumped into the chair. His eyes were feverish and never left my face.

"The emerald?" I asked.

He tossed the jewel box wrapped in brown paper toward me. He watched me strangely as I snatched it up and tugged at the knotted string. I looked at him again.

"And Congor?"

"Dead."

I returned to the string. But there was something about Dubini I didn't like. The sick look. The way he kept his left hand in his pocket. The way his left arm hugged his side. The way he kept staring at me.

"You all right?" I asked.

"I'm all right," he said dully. "But Cattivo. He . . . he strangled a man tonight."

I threw the string on the floor and folded back the brown paper. Something made me look up.

Dubini had risen and was moving toward me. I knew now why his left arm had been hugging his ribs: there had been a short gleaming hatchet concealed there. It was concealed no longer. It was raised in his right hand — by Angelina who no longer looked like a dancer.

He moved closer.

"Put it down, Dubini," I said quietly. "You know you can't injure me." I wasn't afraid. Now the emerald was in my hands I was even calm.

But why did he keep Cattivo hidden in his coat pocket? Why was his face so white?

He inched forward.

"Put it down!" I commanded. "Cattivo will not let you!" I stared at the coat pocket waiting for him to appear. My fingers trembled on the hinged lid of the box — I wanted to see the emerald so badly. But I did not dare look down. My eyes kept moving from the side coat pocket to the axe and back again. Would Cattivo *never* appear!

"Maybe you'd like to be sure I actually brought the emerald." Dubini nodded to the box in my hands.

"Yes, the emerald. . . ." I was uneasy now. But I must not appear uneasy. I lifted the lid.

The emerald was in the box, all right. But when I saw it I was afraid. For the first time in my life I was really afraid. For Cattivo was wearing it. . . .

With horror I glanced at the side coat pocket; now I understood why it was so flat. A crimson edge of the tourniquet was just visible. Once more I stared down at the motionless fingers of Cattivo.

"Cattivo cannot help you any longer," Dubini cried, coming closer.

"You? You did this. . . ." Sweat prickled my forehead. I found myself trembling all over.

"With this." Dubini raised the hatchet a trifle.

"But . . . But why?" That fool Dubini! That crazy fool!

"Because he would not leave me alone." His voice quivered. "Never will it bother me again. It is what happens to all evil things that will not leave me alone!"

He stared at me. I took a step back, looking for something sharp. Something heavy. Dubini followed.

"You have your emerald. You also have your friend." He nodded to the box. "But not for long. . . ."

I continued searching for a weapon, frantically. Then I found one. I had been holding it in my hand all the time.

Quickly I fished him out of the box. Cattivo — my friend, my dearly departed friend — might still save me. But I must act decisively. Boldly. Speak aloud — as though I believed my words. Holding Cattivo high, I took two steps toward Dubini. I pointed a finger at Dubini — one of his own.

"You fool!" I screamed. "*You are the evil one! You and not Cattivo! You are the guilty one! You see? He is accusing you!*"

I advanced slowly. I watched. Dubini's mouth slackened. His eyes fixed upon his own finger and could not let go. His chest heaved. I lifted Cattivo even higher — over my head. I took another step. Dubini backed slightly, his eyes still fixed on the pointing finger, his face so very white.

Then the spell broke. With a sob he drew back his arm and threw with all his force. But not at me. I heard the clatter of the broken glass window behind me as the weapon sailed over my head. Dubini's face was ugly with hate. He shrieked a single curse as he turned toward the door. I listened to his lumbering steps growing fainter down the outside stairs.

Quickly I snatched at the ring. But it would not move from the cold, rigid finger. The swollen knuckle held it fast. I worked at it — carefully, precisely, turning it gently, trying to ease it over the knuckle. It would not move. I cursed softly.

From below I thought I heard noises. I laid Cattivo on the desk and hurried to the door. Listened. No sound. But I must leave. Now! They would be back in a minute — Dubini and whomever he brought with him: neighbors, a doctor, the police. They *must* not find me here. I must be home in bed. Then it would be my story — a sane, believable story — against whatever wild tale the hysterical Dubini might relate.

I rushed back to the ring. In growing panic I yanked. I tugged. It would not move.

The jewel box! I'd take the whole thing with me in the box. I looked on the floor. . . . But what if I was stopped on the way out? Searched? A ring I could conceal. But not a hand. I'd have to leave without the ring.

Once more I started for the door. Once more I hesitated. Have you ever tried walking away from \$35,000? I couldn't do it.

Sweat blinded me as I returned to the desk for the third time. I felt my self-control slipping away. I would not be done out of \$35,000 by a dead hand! No lump of cold clay was going to cheat me of a fortune. I reached out for it — then drew my arm back as a new thought suddenly struck me.

Could it be possible . . . ?

I hovered over the hand suspiciously. Gingerly I prodded it. I studied it closely from different angles. Cattivo had once performed a similar routine on an oilcloth table. I continued to stare.

And then I knew.

Oh, it wasn't that Cattivo moved. Not a muscle twitched. You had to look very, very close. You had to have very sharp eyes. But I could tell. Just by the way he squatted there. Silent. Motionless. Fingers curled in greed. Holding tight to the ring he liked and wouldn't give up. Waiting. Waiting for me to go away so he could have it himself. Oh, Cattivo was clever all right. Much cleverer than that fool Dubini who thought he'd finished him.

"Give me the ring!" I shouted. Not a muscle quivered. Cattivo sat very quiet. Waiting. The emerald blinked up at me like a monstrous eye.

"Give it to me!" I screamed again. "Isn't there any end to your greed? Must you ruin me with it too?"

Motionless he waited. A terrible anger boiled within me. From a distance I heard muffled voices. I seized Cattivo — viciously, furiously. . . .

They broke in on us — Cattivo and me — a few minutes later. And just in time. They had to pry his fingers from around my throat.
