

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 34

35¢

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AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

- ★ GORDON R. DICKSON is one of those rareties in science fiction—a man who can write a really funny story which has a lot more to say than its gags. Readers are still chuckling over his novelet, "Perfectly Adjusted", which appeared a couple of years ago in *Science Fiction Stories*.
- ★
- ★

★
Novel



CLOAK AND STAGGER

by Gordon R. Dickson

Illustrated
by
EMSH

Nothing about Torm Lindsay's mission seemed to make sense except the fact that Earth's acceptance by alien Federation of Peoples depended upon his success. Fine—only exactly what he was expected to do? No one seemed to know.

FIRST IT was just a haze of light. Then it was something distant and white, with a dark blob swimming against it. Then it all cleared; and the white was the ceiling and the blob was the face of a medician.

"Hello, Torm, boy," said the medician. "Easy, now. How's the head?"

Torm Lindsay reached up and felt a skullcap bandage smooth and tight under his fingers. "Whuzzat?" he said.

"I'll take it off now," said the medician. His hands went to Lindsay's head, and Torm could feel the bandage being peeled and rolled back. "Now how does it feel?"

"Feels fine," said Torm, his voice strengthening.

"Fine. Not the best operating conditions here, you know. How d'you feel?"

"Feel?" For a long moment Torm just lay silent, puzzling over this last question. Feel? How *did* he feel? He certain-



"Be careful!" she pleaded.

ly felt different than he had ever felt before. Or had he once—a long time ago...? The memory, if it was a memory, slipped from his mind's searching fingers and was gone.

"I feel fine," he said.

"Ataboy." The medician helped him up off the long, narrow table with its white cover. "Take it slow and easy now; the aliens have the oxygen up around the embassy again. Breathe slowly and naturally. Don't try to move too fast."

TORM TRIED it. The room and everything in it began to settle around him once more. "Now what?"

"Room 243," said the medician. "She's waiting for you."
"Who's waiting?"

The medician peered at him. "Don't you know?"

Suddenly Torm remembered. It all blossomed out inside of him at once; and it seemed to him suddenly that it was the best, the most wonderful, and the funniest thing he had ever known. He started to laugh and his laughter mounted until he was leaning helplessly on the medician and whooping in his ear.

"I'm a spy!" he yelled delightedly.

The medician's face went white. He glanced frantically around him. "For...Torm, you crazy fool! Keep it down! *Keep your voice down!*"

TURNING the corner of the corridor leading to room 243 of the Human Embassy to the alien Federation of Peoples, on Arcturus Five (there was a peculiar feeling of dizziness accompanying the action, as if he had been turning corridors all morning—but not an unpleasant feeling at all; Torm Lindsay could hardly remember ever having felt so good) he came face to face with a mirror. From it, his own image beamed back at him, pug nose, blue eyes, all the normal attributes. He was wearing, he noted, his formal, one-piece suit of diplomatic black with the Green Earth emblem on the chest. A pleasant sight.

"Hi, me," said Lindsay.

Looking beyond the mirror, down the corridor, he saw the doorway he was seeking and went on to and through it. Inside was an office with a tall, shapely brunette in the gold and white of a research medician, standing with her back to him, searching through the spools of a filing cabinet.

"Rrruffff!" Coming up behind, Lindsay gathered her in his arms. For a moment it was touch and go; but then she managed to break away from him.

"No, Torm," she said, getting a desk between them. "Not now. "You sit down over there."

"But I love you," said Torm. "I love you madly, Selagh."

Selagh Maron, who had been about to say something, closed her mouth and swallowed a little convulsively. "This is no time to break the news to me."

"You mean I haven't told you before?" said Torm, frowning. "That's odd."

"Oh, it is?"

"Of course. I've loved you ever since they first sent you out from Earth."

"Torm, will you please sit down?"

TORM SAT down. "Now," said Selagh, briskly, seating herself in turn behind the desk. "I want you to answer a few questions."

"Carry on."

"Name?"

"You know my name."

"Name?"

"Torm Alexander McTavish Lindsay."

"Age?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Position?"

"Junior attache, diplomatic, Embassy to the Federation, Arcturus Five."

"Present duty?"

"To reach by any possible means the planetary center of government, and bring our case to the attention of the higher authorities."

"And what is our case?"

"Ha!" said Torm. "We haven't one."

"Torm!" cried Selagh, sitting up in her chair.

"Well, what do you think?

They've got umpteen thousand races and half the galaxy. If they don't like us, how can we make them? If they don't want us, what can we do about it?" Torm scratched the tip of his nose. "Seems silly to me."

"Torm, that's not the point," retorted Selagh, swiftly. "The Representative they've assigned to deal with us is just being obstructionistic, that's all. Your job is just to find someone else that Ambassador Coran and Admiral Natek can take our case to."

"Ah, well..." Torm shrugged.

Selagh looked at him severely. "Got it?"

"Yup!" said Torm, with a yawn. "Makes no difference to me, anyhow."

"That's right," Selagh got up. "Come on now."

THE GUARD at the entrance stood to one side, stiff in his maroon and grey uniform, and they went in. The office of the Human Ambassador to Arcturus was long and wide, lit by the same bright sourceless lighting that illuminated the whole interior of the embassy building. Around a table at the far end of the room sat three men.

No—not quite three. One had a curiously crippled look about him. On closer inspection, it could be seen that he did not have the outjutting

shoulder bones that belong to the human skeleton. In their place was something like a large double ball-and-socket joint into which his arms fitted at the top, but the details of which were hidden by the sort of loose smock he wore. This structural peculiarity, and the unvarying stillness of his expressionless face, tagged him as an alien of one of the races which together made up the humanly unknown numbers and extent of the Federation of Peoples.

"Oh, there you are," said Ambassador Coran, looking up, his thin, lined face under its grey hair alertly upon Selagh and Torm as they came up to the table. He turned to the alien. "This, Representative, is the young man we're sending out."

THE FEDERATION Representative turned his unmoving face to Torm. His eyes were dark and lustrous, and seemed to burn with a deeply hidden light. He stared at Torm.

"Reading my mind?" asked Torm, cheerfully.

"Lindsay!" snapped Coran.

The Representative raised one hand, slowly. The hand, too, was very human, though somewhat long and fragile looking.

"It's all right, Ambassador," he said, in words lacking the faintest trace of any accent. "I've seen you before; you're Torm Lindsay, aren't you."

"Right."

"I thought so. No, Torm, I wasn't reading your mind; I can't. We in the Federation, even the best of us, can receive only what is consciously projected at us. You people are not telepathically dumb, you know. Merely deaf—or rather, lacking in proper education. "Now, Torm, you've been warned that going outside of the Embassy may be—to my mind, certainly will be—dangerous for you?"

"Check," said Lindsay.

"And you're going out of your own free will?"

"I am."

The alien's hand disappeared into the long sleeve of his smock and came out holding a small, metallic-looking capsule. He handed it to Torm. "Break this with your thumbnail."

Torm did; and a silver mist seemed to rise from the broken capsule, to flow about him and disappear.

"What's that?" asked Coran.

"Roughly the equivalent—but I should say a great deal better than one of your space suits," answered the Representative. "It will ensure a constant physical environment for him. His own atmosphere, temperature, pressure, gravity, and so on."

THE EYES of stocky Admiral Natek lit up eagerly, then the glow faded resigned-

ly. He had tried prying loose technical improvements from the Representative before this; and with no success.

"Selagh," said Ambassador Coran. "Will you take Lindsay to the door and start him out? Then come back here. We're going to...just come back."

"Yes, sir," said Selagh.

She led Torm back out the door, down several levels and along a corridor that ended in a small door. At her touch it slid back, revealing a short ramp sloping down to a walkway that curved past the embassy building, and curved off to lose itself among further buildings of the great city—of which the humans, imprisoned in their embassy, knew next to nothing.

"There you are." Selagh looked up into his face. "Take care of yourself." Suddenly she threw her arms around him and clung to him. "Oh, take care of yourself!"

"Hey..." began Torm. But before he could respond, she had kissed him quickly and pushed him out onto the ramp. The door closed between them; and Lindsay was left staring foolishly at it.

"Well..." said T o r m. "Well..." After a moment he shrugged his shoulders and turned away. He went down the slight slope of the ramp and turned to his right on the walkway.

II

AS HE STEPPED on to it, it seemed deserted. Aliens of all types, observation from the Embassy's windows had informed its human staff, seemed to prefer the simplicity of disappearing from one place and appearing in another, to more ordinary and personal methods of locomotion. However, Torm Lindsay, being only human, was finding an actual pleasure in stretching his legs; he strode along, whistling to himself.

He had, however, covered only a short distance before he discovered that the walk itself was moving him along. When he stopped and looked down at his feet, they seemed to be firmly planted upon an immovable surface. When he looked at the low walls edging the walkway, he saw, however, that he was undeniably in motion. By way of experiment, Torm sat down: he proceeded as easily and comfortably as before.

"Marchons!" This reminded him of the Marsellaise, and he sang a couple of verses. "Allons," he said. "A l'estacion. Aus den bierstube. Rrrr-apidó—" he said, liking the sound of the rolling r's "corrrrem los carrros del ferrrocarril."

The walk, apparently puzzled, slowed down and stopped. Torm patted it reassuringly. "That's all right.

boy. Just take me to the nearest transportation center."

The walk picked up speed again.

"Faster," ordered Torm.

It went faster.

"Faster!" cried Torm.

The edging walls began to blur with the speed.

"Faster!"

THE WALK stopped abruptly—and somehow without snapping Lindsay's head off at the neck. But at the moment he was not so concerned with that as with its evident disobedience to his command.

"What is this farce? I said —*faster!*" The walk did not stir. "How will I ever get to...oh."

He had just noticed that he was halted opposite a towering building that stretched impossibly up out of sight beside him.

"I am there? You are there!" he told himself. He got to his feet with another charitable pat for the walkway. "Thanks—and pardon my misunderstanding."

He turned and headed for the building's wide entrance. Just inside the shadow of it stood a tall, bipedal alien with several extra joints in each of his arms and legs. It looked at him with large, spaniel-like brown eyes set in a high, bony forehead that was seamed with wrinkles.

"Hi," said Tom. "This the transportation center?"

The alien continued to stare at him. Torm produced a small cube of plastic. "My identification." The alien looked down at it. "Torm Lindsay, Human Embas—" the cube abruptly disappeared. Torm stared at his empty fingers in some surprise.

THE ALIEN unexpectedly produced another pair of eyes from the wrinkles above the first pair. These four now surveyed Torm Lindsay with interest, then closed, one at a time, almost in cadence, from left to right, from top to bottom. Apparently blind, the alien turned and walked unerringly toward a small booth inside the doorway. Torm followed.

The door to the booth opened; the alien stepped inside, the door closed. Torm waited. After a few minutes he knocked.

The door opened. The booth was empty.

"Hmmm?" Torm stepped inside the booth himself.

Behind him the door closed. In the opposite side of the booth, another door opened. Torm stepped out and found that he was no longer in the lobby of the tall building. He was possibly on the top of it—at any rate, in some large, open area with what seemed to be a curtain of white light shimmering by itself off at some distance from him.

The many-jointed alien was not in sight; but nearby was what appeared to be an over-size Gila monster, or something very like it, with a bushy black whiskers. The whiskers were just now in the process of being retracted; as Lindsay watched, the alien split down the back.

A second later, the essential creature began to struggle out through the crack, leaving the heavy, discarded skin behind.

"Need a hand?" asked Torm politely.

The alien did not answer. It was almost completely out of the old skin now, revealing a pink, semi-transparent new skin through which an assortment of organs could be seen dimly in palpitant motion.

"My congratulations", said Torm. "And now I wonder if you could direct me..." the alien abruptly disappeared. A moment later the old skin disappeared also.

"Ah, well," said Torm, philosophically, "it takes all kinds." He looked about him and saw at some distance away the shimmering wall of luminescence. A number of aliens of all descriptions seemed to be coming and going from it.

"When in doubt," Torm Lindsay advised himself, "follow the crowd." He commenced to stroll off in the direction of the shimmering wall.

THE WALK to it was uneventful. Occasionally, he had to sidestep to avoid aliens of various shapes and sizes who appeared in his path. He was almost trapped once, and was forced to detour, by a large hole that appeared before him for no apparent reason, and then as suddenly closed up again. And he stopped to watch what appeared to be a couple of twelve-foot grasshoppers fighting. It was a close match for a couple of minutes; then one of the grasshoppers got the head of the other between his enormous, bony jaws, and crushed it.

"The winnah, and new champeen!" applauded Torm. The winnah, however, like so many winnahs, appeared to have let success go to his head. For he ignored Lindsay and stalked off into the distance with a lordly air. The loser, as might have been expected, disappeared.

Torm shook his head and continued on. As he approached the wall of luminescence, he discovered that it was not a solid unit—as it had seemed to be from a distance—but a long line of glowing capsules of light, in continuous movement from left to right. Every so often, one of the aliens standing in front of it would plunge forward into an empty capsule; the alien would then be carried off, fading as he went, until by the time the capsule he had

entered had covered a dozen feet or so, it was once more empty. Occasionally, other aliens would appear in an otherwise-empty capsule, ride along for a short distance until they had acquired full solidity of definition; and then pop out onto the floor. It was a busy scene.

"Eureka?" said Torm. "It doesn't look like an ordinary transport system. Still..."

Talking it over with himself, he stepped up to the line of capsules. A good share of them he saw, were filled by aliens either dissolving or resolving. Occasionally there was an empty, however. He finally spotted one coming along between a capsule holding something that looked like a small, leafless bush, and another containing a sort of tuskless walrus.

"Heigh-ho, and here we go."

The capsule slid opposite.

"To the governing center of the planet, driver," said Torm, stepping into it. "And don't spare the..."

The lights went out.

TORM LINDSAY was having a dream. He was dreaming that he was his own ancestor back on the border marches between Scotland and England. Appropriately dressed in kilt and broadsword, he was arguing with the Earl Douglas. His Scots accent was impeccable.

"Douglas," he was saying.

"I gi' ye fair warning. Dinna let yersel be cozened into gae-in' tae Bannockburn. Yon Percy hae a lean and hungry look."

"Hoot, awa wi' ye, Lindsay!" The Douglas retorted. "Wi'sic as yersel' and Montgomery beside me, there's nae danger. Danger! Hoot. Hoot! Hoooooot! Hooooooo..."

Torm blinked his eyes open and sat up shakily. A few feet in front of him, the walrus-shaped alien was doing push-ups on his front flippers and hooting distressfully. As Torm Lindsay sat up, the other sank down, closed his eyes as if exhausted, and became silent.

Torm shook his head—in gingerly fashion. It had been a trifle sore to begin with; now, it had picked up a pounding ache. Moreover, to top it all off, he had the dirty, ragged-nerved feeling that follows on a case of severe shock; and he was most outrageously thirsty.

HE LOOKED around in search of something drinkable. There was no such something in sight. In fact, little less than what he saw could have been in sight. Besides himself and the walrus-shaped alien, (which Torm, in his own mind, nicknamed "the monster") there was to be seen only the plant-shaped alien that had occupied the adjoining bubble of light on

Torm's other side; and some evidently damaged contrivance of metal lying sprawled about. Elsewhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing—nothing at all except a dead and level plain of sand. A blinding double sun burnt brightly overhead.

"Well," said Torm thoughtfully. "Well!"

"Hoot!" said the monster, suddenly. "Hoot. Hoot, hoot!"

Torm looked back at the fat alien and discovered him doing push-ups again. As far as it was possible to tell about such things, he seemed to be eyeing the plant. Torm got stiffly to his feet and went over to inspect this other companion in misfortune.

Unlike Lindsay himself and the monster, the plant appeared to be either still unconscious, or else done for altogether. It lay sprawled out on the sand, looking like something weeded from a garden and thrown on a rubbish heap for burning. Torm supposed that the monster was urging him to give it some kind of aid. At least, that was the natural assumption. But how do you go about—say—giving artificial respiration to a plant?

TORM SCRATCHED his head and fell, rather than sat, down on the sand beside it to look at it. There was nothing in the way of clues about its anatomy. Generally speaking, it appeared to re-

semble a small scrawny bush, a little over a meter in height. Its limbs were leafless, short and sparse, sticking out straight from its body and ending in sharp, but delicate tips. At its base, several of what Lindsay took to be roots sprawled out limply. And just above these, at the base of the stem, there was a bulge of about the same size as a small grapefruit. Torm touched the bulge dubiously with one forefinger, in the rather forlorn hope of running into something resembling a heartbeat. But the bulge was hard and silent.

Torm went back to the monster. His knees felt shaky and he dropped onto the sand facing it.

"Well, I guess something went wrong."

"Hoot," said the monster, companionably.

"Sorry to drag you two into it."

"Hoot. Hoot!"

"Look here," said Torm, "we're obviously all stuck someplace we didn't intend to be; and our friend over there doesn't seem to be in any too good shape. Now, I think the first thing we better do is work out some kind of a code for communication purposes. To start off with, if you can understand me, hoot twice."

"Hoot. Hoot!" hooted the monster.

"Fine. Marvelous. Now—is our friend over there alive?"

"Hoot. Hoot!"

"Is there something I can do to him?"

"Hoot. Hoot!"

"GOOD," SAID Torm, pushing himself painfully to his feet. "I'll just go get him and bring him to you..."

"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot—" the monster went off into a frenzy of trumpeting.

Torm paused, astonished. "Don't bring him over?"

"Hoot—"

"Leave him where he is?"

"Hoot! Hoot!"

Torm goggled at the monster. "But shouldn't we—"

"Hoot!"

"But you just said—you know," said Lindsay thoughtfully, "I'm beginning to wonder if you understand me after all."

"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!"

"Oh, fine; that explains everything." Torm glanced over at the plant. It was beginning to stir feebly. "Wait here," he told the monster. "I'll go see if I can't make a little more sense out of him than I can out of you."

IGNORING the busy hooting that the monster set up, the minute he turned his back on it, Torm Lindsay walked over to the plant, which was making weak efforts to stand upright. He gave it a hand up; it pushed out with its roots, rocked dizzily for a moment and found its balance. Now

that it was once more animated and erect, a lot of the scrubbing of its appearance seemed to have vanished. Vibrant and alive, it marched away on its roots for a few feet, turned and marched back, looking a little like a strutting dandy out of medieval Europe.

"Well now," said Torm. "That's better. Can you understand me?"

The plant regarded him. Its top bent toward him and its limbs quivered slightly. It took a couple more steps toward him and quivered again. It came on and started to climb up his leg.

"Here!" said Torm, detaching it—the root and limb ends were a little on the sharp and thorny side. "No. Stay down." The plant was evidently anything but amenable to suggestion—it was trying to climb his leg again. "No, I say! Stay on your own—er—base."

He slapped it gently for emphasis. The plant retreated a few steps, dug its roots firmly into the sand, and began to quiver violently, as if with indignation. It occurred to Torm that possibly he was being told off.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said, soothingly. "Very probably you're one of the leading lights of the Federation. The point is, how am I to know? And I don't like you climbing on me like that. Gives me a prickly feeling."

"Hoot!" put in the monster.

"Another precinct heard from." Torm glanced over at the larger alien. "Now—" he turned back to the plant, "let's see if I can get into some kind of communication with you. At least one of the two of you ought to be telepathic."

THE PLANT waved a few limbs and quivered expressively.

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean, but I'll take it for agreement. Now..." Lindsay sat down on the sand again. He found himself a trifle dizzy, and the dizziness seemed to subside a bit when he was closer to the ground. "Here's the situation as I see it. When I stepped into that—er—bubble, it threw something or other out of kilter. And as a result we're all both lost and stranded. Right?"

"Hoot," said the monster. Torm looked over at him; but it was impossible to tell whether the fat alien was agreeing, or merely felt like hooting. Torm inclined to the latter opinion. The monster was not a particularly impressive looking being; he looked like a grounded sea-cow, and his hoot resembled the note of a querulous fog horn. Torm turned his attention back to the plant, whose continual nervous movement seemed to augur a more alert and intelligent nature.

"At any rate," he wound up, "the point is we're stuck here. And the question is—what to do about it? Any suggestions?"

The plant quivered and did a little one-two step.

"Well, don't either of you have any notion of how to get out of this fix?"

His two auditors preserved their uninformative attitudes.

"Now look," said Torm. "We can't just stay here indefinitely. For one thing, I'm thirsty; and there's no water in sight. And whatever you two eat or drink—"

The plant turned and began to move away, abruptly. It marched over to the damaged-looking Metallic contrivance and began to climb over it.

"Hey," said Torm, getting to his feet; "is this the gimmick that does the transporting?" He walked over to the 'gimmick'. The plant retired about the distance of a meter and quivered busily at him.

"I wish I knew what you were trying to tell me." Torm looked down at the gimmick again. "It makes sense, though. This is the transporter, or whatever it was. And it's been damaged." He looked at the plant. "Are you trying to tell me we can fix it?"

III

THE PLANT stamped twice with its roots, marched in a half circle around to Lindsay's flank;

as he turned to face it, the plant quivered once again. Torm looked over at the monster. "What do you think?"

The monster was lying still with its flippers limp on the sand and its eyes closed. It did not answer.

"Our friend yonder," said Torm to the plant, "doesn't seem to be mechanically inclined."

The plant turned half around, as if discovering the monster for the first time. For a second it merely quivered in the other's direction. Then, abruptly, it began to march toward the monster.

"That's right; wake him up."

The plant continued on its way, trundling along stiffly like a Napoleonic soldier on parade. When it was halfway to the monster, the latter suddenly opened his eyes. He took one look at the advancing plant; and began to hoot violently, waving its flippers. His eyes were on Lindsay.

For a moment, Torm hesitated. "This doesn't make sense," he said. But the plant continued to advance and the monster continued to hoot.

Torm shook his head, walked over and caught up with the plant, and picked it up from behind. The monster's hooting abruptly ceased. The plant craned itself around in his hands, quivered energetically, and tried to

climb his arm. It was unsuccessful.

Torm looked from it to the monster. "What's wrong between you two?"

NEITHER answered. Torm Lindsay shook his head and put the plant down. It immediately lit out once more in the direction of the monster.

"No," said Torm, going around and getting in its way. "Whatever there is between you two, we're all in this thing together and we can't afford to take picks at each other."

The plant was not convinced; it tried to go around Lindsay. Remembering a technique that had worked before, he slapped at it a couple of times, lightly. It retreated half a meter, dug itself perhaps twenty centimeters into the sand and quivered violently for a good minute.

"Consider me told off again," said Torm. The plant dropped rather limply. "You shouldn't excite yourself that way. *He...*" Lindsay glanced over at the monster, "isn't doing any harm, just lying there that way."

"Hoot," said the monster. "Of course, he isn't doing us any good either."

The monster closed his eyes and relaxed. The plant continued to droop.

"Perk up, son," Lindsay said to the plant, "and let's

get back to business. You, at least, were making yourself useful on this gimmick business. Let's go back and see what can be done about getting it working again, eh?"

THE PLANT made no response. After a minute, Torm dug the sand away from its roots, picked it up and carried it back to the gimmick. It gave a couple of half-hearted quivers on the way over.

"Cheer up," said Torm. "Nothing is impossible. Now..." he sat down and placed the plant in front of him, between himself and the apparatus. "Let's see what we have here."

The plant walked off a meter's length or so and stood still. Lindsay poked interestedly at the gimmick.

In appearance, it was so simple as to appear easily understandable. There were several plates spaced along a narrow rod, which seemed to have been twisted somewhat out of plumb. There was a long coil of fine wire, attached to the bottom plate and trailing loosely off to one side. And there was a fine, colorful little object that would have made an excellent child's marble back on Earth if it had not been for the fact that it was ellipsoidal in shape, rather than spherical.

"Hmmm." Torm lifted the long coil of wire. It draped nicely in length. "Where do you suppose this goes?"

IT WAS A good question. The coil was too long to fit between the plates—unless Torm didn't mind having a lot left over. But the loose end had an uncompleted look about it, as if it were supposed to fit somewhere.

"Hey!" Torm called, looking over at the plant. "Give me a hand, here."

The plant ignored him.

"Fine thing!" I draw one alien who spends all his time snoozing when he isn't hooting his head off; and another who's a little bundle of temperament." He reached over and poked the stem of the plant, gently. "Hey—"

The plant quivered briefly. That was all.

"Now look," said Lindsay, "what good's it going to do to you to sulk? If this thing is completely unfixable, just wave your top back and forth a couple of times. If something can be done, just move a little closer to me."

This request got him nowhere. The plant refused to stir.

"I wouldn't bother you," said Torm. "But our friend yonder seems a little too bovine to be helpful. I've got a hunch you're the one with the brains in this crowd."

He waited; but flattery, it seemed, would also get him nowhere.

"Very well," said Torm, rising. "You force me to take me aside to the opposition."

He gathered up rod and plates, coil and mable; and went over to the monster. He poked it in the region where in any reasonable scheme of bodily organization, it should contain its ribs.

"Pardon me; but about this gimmick..."

The monster opened one eye, suspiciously.

"How do I fix this?" demanded Torm.

"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot," said the monster and apparently went back to sleep.

"Much obliged. But couldn't you be a little more explicit?"

The monster lay quiescent.

"**AH WELL.**" Torm Lindsay sat down and resigned himself to fiddling with the apparatus alone. He tried wrapping the coil around the rod; he tried attaching it to the various plates; he searched for some evidence of a broken connection point. He picked up the marble and examined it.

"You wouldn't know this," he said confidentially to the motionless and silent monster, "but I'm supposed to be rather good at intuitive reasoning, according to the aptitude tests. Even with good intuitive reasoning, however—" he caught sight suddenly of the plant which was working around in a wide arc so as to come up behind the monster. He put the equipment down, struggled to his feet, and

walked wearily over to confront the plant.

It stopped. "Son," said Torm, "this is unworthy of you."

The plant quivered.

"I know. He's probably one of your own trail herd; or maybe he broke out of the pasture once and ate your uncle Otto by mistake. But I've already told you I can't take chances on one of you doing something to the other. I'm just about positive I'm responsible for this situation we're in; and if I don't get both of you back in top shape, I can just imagine what kind of reaction I'll get from the authorities—whenever they happen to be. Now, will you go back a reasonable distance and sit down?"

THE PLANT took half a step toward him.

"All right," said Lindsay, "you asked for it." He looked around for some way of immobilizing the plant without hurting it. With the exception of the monster and the equipment nothing presented itself as providing a possible restraint. Finally, an idea occurred to him. He took off his one-piece suit of embassy black, and tied a leg of it around the plant's stem just above the bulge.

"There," said Torm. The plant swayed and struggled against the weight of the suit. Dragging on the ground, the tangle of cloth made an effec-

tive hobble. Torm went over and got the equipment. He brought it back and sat down on one arm of the suit to work on it. The plant was neatly tethered. It quivered violently at Lindsay.

"Fortunes of war," said Torm, and got back to work.

It was a little hard to concentrate, he found. His headache was getting worse, and the desert seemed to shimmer and dance in the distance. When he tried to focus down on the metallic objects in his hands, these too seemed to waver and bend out of focus. It occurred to him, somewhat belatedly, that the contents of the capsule the Representative had given him to pop with his thumbnail, while "good as a spacesuit" might be somewhat lacking in protective qualities where the possibility of sunstroke was concerned. He looked over at the plant, which had dug itself into the sand and was, apparently, sulking again.

"You should grow some shade leaves," he told it.

The plant, however, showed no signs of obliging; and Torm Lindsay went back to fiddling with the coil of wire. He tried it in every way he could think of—without success; wadded up, wound around the rod, festooned from the plates. No results.

HE TURNED his attention to the marble again. He tried it against both ends of

the rod and against all of the plates, unsuccessfully. His eyes were seeing dots by this time; and he stopped to rest.

He would probably not make it, he thought. In a little while, he would pass out from sunstroke; the plant would get free and eat the monster—or vice-versa, which was more likely. The survivor would keel over in due time; and eventually sometime in the galactic future, a passer-by would find them all, three bleached skeletons, in the sand. *Alas, poor Lindsay, I knew him well...*

Torm squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head to clear it and opened his eyes again. *Concentrate*, he told himself.

"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot," hooted the monster, suddenly waking up and doing an energetic series of pushups.

"And a happy New Year to you," said Torm, looking over at him. He picked up the equipment and bent once more to his task.

Sometime later, quite by accident, he got his first break. He was twisting the coil around aimlessly, and without any great enthusiasm, when it suddenly clung to the rod, as if a sort of magnetic force and abruptly asserted itself. Torm rubbed his eyes; and looked at it. Through the swimming dots, he made out that he had looped the coil in an arc; and the middle of it was apparently glued to the

top tip of the rod, while the far end had caught and frozen itself tight to the near end, where it fastened to the rod's base. The whole thing now looked something like a directional antenna.

"Hey!" said Torm, pleased. He set the contraption upright on the sand and stared at it.

"Let's see now; suppose it is directional. Suppose it taps some kind of channel of power; and then when you think of where you want to go—" Torm Lindsay closed his eyes and thought devoutly of the spot he had last seen back on Arcturus V.

He opened his eyes again. The desert still surrounded them.

UNDISCOURAGED, he kept his eyes closed, thought of the Arcturian station, and carefully rotated the device in a circle, on the sand.

No results.

He tried rotating it vertically.

No results.

He pondered the situation somewhat woozily for a few seconds; and then remembered that he'd forgotten the marble. He hunted for it among the sand and swimming dots before him and finally found it.

"All right, little marble," he told it. "Where do you go?"

Shakily, but methodically, he set out at the top end of the rod, and commenced to run the marble over every pos-

sible inch of the apparatus. He progressed down the rod, and over the three plates, with no success. However, the moment he touched the wire coil where the two ends joined together against the rod, the marble stuck.

"Hallelujah!" Torm bent down to take a closer look at the marble and found to his surprise that it was not merely sticking to the wire; in some mysterious fashion, it had melted around the wire so that it was now strung on it like a bead on a string. Torm poked it with his finger. It slid freely on the wire.

"Well, whither now?" Torm slid the marble around the coils, moving it up along the rod. At the very tip, the marble froze, making it seemed, a connection between the tip of the rod and the wire.

"What a clever little old diplomat you are, to be sure," said Torm, admiringly. "Subspatial transporters repaired, rebuilt..." The sentence trailed off, uncompleted. He became conscious of the fact that the effort involved in finishing it was not worth the trouble. He swayed a little, where he sat on the sand. It was taking most of his strength now just to remain upright. In fact, thought Torm, looking affectionately at the inviting bed of sand stretching off to the horizon, why stay upright, anyhow? A little nap...

A SLIGHT tugging sensation brought him back for a moment to his full senses. With a great effort, he turned his head to look behind him—and stared blankly for a moment at the sight of his suit lying still and empty upon the sand. For a moment, he gazed at it stupidly; then he remembered what it should, instead, have been occupied with.

He swiveled his head toward the monster. Sure enough. There was the plant, loose from the suit, already well on its way toward the rotund alien.

"Hey!" cried Torm, in a cracked voice. The plant paid no attention. Lindsay made a spasmodic effort to get to his feet and found that his legs were like strips of unbaked dough, with neither substance nor muscle to them. The plant marched on.

"Wait—wait—" mumbled Torm. Gazing around, his eye fell on the apparatus. Dizzily he fumbled for it.

"Now—" he said. "Got to—" He made a mighty effort with his mind. "Station—"

Nothing happened. He fumbled with it.

"Got to work—" he muttered. "Push? Pull? Something—button to push? Button—" through waves of dizziness and swimming specks, and the nightmare marching of the plant bearing down on the silent monster, his atten-

tion was caught by the glitter of the marble.

"Button—" he mumbled; and, sliding his hand up the length of the rod, touched, marble, wire and rod, all at once.

There was a sort of colorless flash; and a black wave rose up over Tom Lindsay and swallowed him entirely.

IV

THIS TIME, he was very cautious about opening his eyes.

He lifted his right lid no more than a fraction of an inch and peered carefully through the tiny aperture. He saw a portion of white ceiling and the face of Selagh. Relieved, he opened both eyes.

Not only Selagh, but Ambassador Coran, Admiral Natek, and the Alien Representative were standing looking down at him. He was lying in the same recovery room where it had all started.

"Uh...hello," he said.

"Hello, Torm," said the Representative.

Torm Lindsay decided to sit up. He swung his legs over the edge of the narrow couch-like affair he was lying on and pushed himself up with his hands. Selagh hurried to help him. He was back in his suit, he noticed with some relief; and the medician that he had first talked with was hovering in the background. Ambassador Coran noticed the direction of Torm's gaze.

"You can go now, Hartlye," he said. With an air of something very like relief, the medician nodded, went across to the door and slipped out, closing it behind him. Coran turned back to Torm. "How do you feel?"

"Rocky," answered Torm. His head had come to life when he sat up; and now it seemed to be full of shooting pains.

"Anesthetics all out?" asked Coran, looking over at Selagh.

"Yes sir."

"WELL, THEN," said the Ambassador, turning to the Representative, "I think we've proved our point. Lindsay has certainly returned unharmed; and since you were watching his progress on that screen of yours along with the rest of us, you must admit that he behaved successfully in his contacts with other members of your Federation."

"Perhaps, Mr. Coran, perhaps," replied the Alien. "But you may have settled one point of objection only to another. Torm was operated on by your people before being turned loose. Suppose you explain that operation to me."

Coran nodded at Selagh. "Commandress..."

"A refinement of the old operation of prefrontal lobotomy," said Selagh.

"I don't understand,"

"On our home planet, back

in the days when psychiatry was young," explained Selagh, "it was found possible to relieve cases of chronic tension, by, in essence, cutting off a certain portion of the brain from its normal connection with the rest of it. The tension would be relieved. Unfortunately, the patient normally suffered a loss of will power at the same time. He would start eating, say, and keep at it until the food was all gone, or someone stopped him. Or he might start doing something like chopping wood; and once started, keep at it until he was ordered to stop."

"Go on," said the Representative.

"WELL, OVER the years, the technique was improved. The last innovation was a development of my own—the basis of my surgical thesis, in fact. What we did on Torm Lindsay was what you might call a selective topectomy, except that instead of cutting, we merely anesthetised to block off certain parts of his brain. When we finished, we hoped that we'd made him emotionally immune—that is, incapable of reacting emotionally to outside stimuli."

"I see," said the Representative, thoughtfully. He turned back to the cot. "You know about this, Torm?"

"Yes," said Lindsay, as cheerfully as he could with

invisible little men probing through his head with white-hot needles. "I volunteered."

"And how did you feel—after the operation?"

"Oh...fine, I guess. Good. Yes, I felt good."

"I see," said the Representative

"Well?" demanded Coran. "You claim we humans aren't ready yet for contact with the rest of the races in your Federation. You offer to let us prove this to ourselves by sending a man out. You say that he will find contact psychologically unacceptable." He waved a hand at Lindsay. "Here's our answer."

THE ALIEN looked at him.

"My dear Ambassador, you insist on misunderstanding my objection to allowing your people to join our group of races. It is not that you are a young people, or a primitive people, for those are minor points. It is simply that you must be able to rise above all barriers of mistrust and prejudice. Now, just recently, Torm here did very well. He was not shocked by a being with double the number of eyes he had himself, and a different skeleton, nor by the sight of alien viscera in the case of the being changing his skin. He made no attempt to judge between the two members of the same race which he saw fight until one was killed at the transport center. But that was the result of

your operation. While now..."

He turned abruptly, and put an impossibly fragile hand on Lindsay's shoulder, at the same time bringing his inhumanly still face up-against Torm's. In spite of himself, Torm started, and shrunk back slightly.

"You see?" said the Alien, sadly, letting go. "Prejudice. Fear, suspicion, and disgust toward the strange and unfamiliar."

"I—" began Torm, miserably.

"Never mind," said the Representative. "Don't feel that you have to apologize. I was merely proving a point where your race as a whole is concerned. I do not blame you for your fault, but you must see why it bars you from acceptance by the rest of us."

"But why isn't Torm's operation the answer?" asked Coran.

"BECAUSE," sighed the Representative, "your cure is more crippling than your disease. It is no solution to stop a man scratching his nose by cutting off his nose. In the case of Lindsay, you rendered him immune to emotional upset over something he might see or hear, or experience. But the moral sense in all beings is based upon emotion; by removing emotion, you destroyed this, too. You created, in fact, a psychopathic personality.

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"I grant you he did not immediately act like one, but that was because his habit patterns reacted for him out of sheer momentum. Given time, he would have behaved very badly, indeed. He would have become a danger to any community. You remember I noticed something odd about him, when he came in to meet us before leaving. His actions and his speech—even then—showed evidence of a complete non-morality, and a complete unconcern for others." His glance singled out Selagh. "You," he said. "You noticed it."

Selagh blushed, and nodded.

"So you see," wound up the Representative, "by rendering yourself acceptable in one sense, you immediately render yourself unacceptable in another. In the galaxy, no race may judge another; but also no race may harm another. It is live and let live with a vengeance. If it had occurred to Torm to do damage to another individual, or to any thing, there would have been nothing within him to hold him back."

He looked around the room at the unhappy faces of the humans.

"Now wait," said Torm, suddenly. "Wait a minute—"

The Representative turned to him.

"If I'm so non-moral," he said, "why was it that I had

to be the one to keep the plant and monster from each other? They certainly weren't living and let living!"

HE STARED demandingly at the Alien. He did not notice the looks of slight embarrassment on the faces of the other humans.

"Now, Torm," said Ambassador Coran, clearing his throat, "you jumped to the wrong conclusion about those two."

Torm Lindsay stared at him in surprise.

"Wrong conclusion?"

"My dear Torm," said the Representative. "The gadget was not what you thought it was. The monster was not—what you thought he was—but a rather nice old gentleman taking a botanical specimen home to his private laboratory."

"Specimen—oh," said Torm. "You mean, the plant—"

"Exactly," said the Alien.

"But—but—"

"Yes, Torm?"

"But look here. How did it happen he was so helpless and frightened of the plant? Why did it have to be me who fixed the gimmick and got us home?"

"But you didn't," replied the Representative. "You were picked up by a transport rescue crew, summoned by me, when we saw on our viewer what had happened; and also by the old gentleman, himself, who sent out a men-

tal call the moment he discovered what had happened to the three of you."

"But the gimmick?"

"IT HAD NOTHING to do with the mechanisms of transport, Torm. It was a device for restraining the plant." He shook his head at Lindsay's puzzled face. "The plant," he explained, "requires moisture to live. On its native planet, it gets it by sucking the juices from other flora and fauna native to the place. Because it's actually rather a weak, slow-moving creature, it has developed a weapon. It is capable of broadcasting a rather limited mental stimulus that induces a paralyzing fear in its victims. The gimmick inhibited this capacity in it and kept it immobilized by a counter field. The gimmick was set up in a center capsule to keep the plant under control; and it was that capsule you stepped into with conflicting directions of destination, just as the unit of three capsules was about to discharge for the old gentleman's home planet."

"I see," said Torm. There was a short silence. "But why didn't the plant affect me?"

The alien chuckled. It was an odd sound to hear coming from his still face.

"How could it?" he answered. "You were anesthetized. Remember?" He chuckled again. "The plant has relatively little intelli-

gence; but what it has must have been rather sorely tried by the way you reacted to its best attempts to immobilize you. You do deserve congratulations for putting the restraint back together though. It protected the old gentleman until the rescue squad arrived."

"Thanks," said Torm.

"Don't be bitter," replied the Alien, kindly. "You did the best you could under the circumstances, and it turned out to be very good indeed, even if you were acting on false premises."

OFF TO ONE side, Ambassador Coran cleared his throat.

"All this..."

"Yes," the Representative turned toward him with regret in his voice. "All this is beside the point. The situation stands that you cannot be accepted into the Federation of Peoples, for the reasons I have given you. You are still too rigid, too bound with prejudice; and Torm's operation is not an acceptable way of mending that fault. You must be all that you are normally; and, in addition, be free of the tendency to judge from your own small basis of experience."

"I must again request," said Coran, stiffly, "that we be allowed to take this matter to higher authorities."

"There are no higher authorities," replied the Alien.

"From the day when your interstellar ship first entered this system, from the day of my first meeting with your people, you have been unable to accept the fact that I am literally what I call myself. I represent the Federation. I speak not for myself, but for every member of every race included in it. Believe me, if you could question each one individually, he would say only what I say."

"I feel I must doubt that," said Coran.

The Representative sighed. "This embassy building is yours. Free passage to this world, and to this spot, is yours. But the rest of the Federation is closed to you. You will not be allowed in any of its solar systems, or on any of its worlds. If you approach them, you will be turned back." He looked about at them. "But don't give up hope. Don't be discouraged. This fault is one that time will inevitably mend; and the scale is larger out here in the galaxy. What are ten, fifty, a hundred thousand years, if they have to be?"

"We can't stand still, cried Coran, desperately. "It isn't in us. We aren't built to stand still."

"I am sorry."

THE REPRESENTATIVE was turning and going away toward the door, his strange form oddly pyramidal under the robe he wore. Torm

Lindsay felt a choking sensation in his throat, as if from something huge and desperate, clawing to get out. He opened his mouth, but no words came. Frantically, he tried again. "Wait..."

The Representative, almost to the door, paused and turned.

"Wait," said Torm, chokingly. "Listen..."

"I am listening."

"We aren't all prejudiced. We aren't all like this. What would you say if we produced some people with an open mind? I mean—open completely?"

"Torm," said the Alien, softly. "You don't understand. They must be without a single prejudice; and yet unspoiled. And none of you are like that."

"But that's just it!" Torm cast a frantic look around at his fellow humans. "We're all alike here. But I noticed something. It was the way I felt, after the operation; I couldn't put my finger on it until just now. You see, it wasn't the first time I'd felt that way—and for a while I couldn't remember when."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Coran, harshly.

"WHAT I REMEMBERED," said Torm. "I remembered that once I was free and unbound. Once I could look at anything new and accept it, and take it for

granted as being just what it seemed to be and nothing else. You see? You understand?"

"No," said Coran.

"I see," said the Alien. "And I should have seen before. But there is something about you people that is different from all the others. You would say your answer lies in the untouched minds of your children."

"Is that it? Am I right?"

"Perhaps..." In the Alien eyes of the Representative, it seemed that a distant fire dimmed as something in him went away, and far far away, until nothing but the shell of a being stood before them. For a moment it stood, unguess-

able, and unknowable, facing them; and then slowly, gradually, he began to come back. The light kindled again, and the Representative was once more with them.

"Yes," he said. "It will be a long road for them and a hard one. And you will have to let them travel it alone and apart from you. But I think you have found your answer."

His eyes moved from Torm and took them all in. And they stood, the four humans and the one inhuman; caught then in a single crystal moment of a hope of peace and final brotherhood, and dream of greatness, future, everlasting....