



WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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A Scene from "Assassin" by Mel Hunter

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Life is pretty strange when a god who is good and benevolent must prove that he has

Feet of Clay

BY PHILLIP HOSKINS

THE PROBLEM," said Cassidy, "would seem to be simple." He thumped his outsized knuckles against the desk. "Almost too simple."

"Why?" The other was a wearer of the black and silver uniform of Extrasol Traders; a short man, made shorter by the beer-barrel shape of his body and the extreme width of his shoulders. His head was capped with close-cropped gray curls.



Illustrated by Paul Orban

"Why?" he repeated. "I've been studying it ever since it first cropped up, and I must admit that it's been beyond me."

"I must confess, Dillon," said Cassidy, "I wonder how you ever rose to the managerial ranks of Extrasol. I find it hard to imagine a personnel man stupid enough to put you in charge of even a back-water planet like this Kash. Surely somebody in the home office must know how dumb you are?"

"My dumbness is not the subject of this conversation," said Dillon, grimly. "I didn't like the idea of calling in a trouble-shooter. I liked it even less when I found out it was to be you."

Cassidy grinned. "You mean my wonderful personality hasn't made an impression on you? I'm cut to the quick."

"I put up with you for only one reason. You know aliens, far better than I could ever hope to. You're about the best in the field."

"Only about? Really, Dillon, if you knew of someone better than me, why didn't you get them?"

"All right!" He shouted the words. "You're the best! But you still haven't explained why the problem seems simple to you." He pulled out a cigarette, and bit down savagely on the end, only to spit out the loose tobacco amidst a sputter of curses.

"The misfortunes of being feeble-minded," sighed Cassidy. "But for your sake, I'll take you by the hand, and try to lead you down the road of intelligence. But first, you better go over the situation once more."

"We are on Kash," said Dillon, visibly controlling his patience. "It's the fourth world of a G-type sun of the periphery, unnamed in the catalogues. For that reason, we have assigned it the native name. Kash is their term for both the star and the planet, and roughly translates as 'home of the Gods'.

"The planet was first contacted during the great galactic expansion of 2317, when the sole native language was taped. The planet is approximately two-thirds the size of Earth, but its density is somewhat less, so the gravity is about half that of Earth. It is moonless, and so far from galactic center that scarcely a hundred stars are visible in the sky. Thus a trained observer can usually pick out the other five planets of the system with no trouble at all." He paused, and took a drink of water.

"Six months ago it was contacted by Unit 317 of Extrasol Traders . . ."

"Namely you," said Cassidy.

"Me. A month was spent mapping the planet and searching out native villages. I then returned to base and picked up supplies necessary for setting up an outpost. Two months ago I returned.

"And all Hell broke loose . . ."

Night fell quickly, and with little relief on Kash, for the stars were few and far between, and shed little light. Dillon stepped out of the office that was doing double-duty as living quarters until separate quarters could be set up, and started for the nearby well. He

cursed as he realized his flashlight still lay on the desk, but the light pouring from the open door was enough to see by, and he decided against returning.

As he walked, he breathed deeply of the tangy night air, and sighed with satisfaction. This world was infinitely more pleasurable than the last he had posted, and he intended to enjoy his stay.

He let his thoughts ramble as he walked and so almost ran down the waiting alien before he saw him. The native's huge eyes gleamed softly in the spill of light from the office, and the gray down that covered his body and head, except for the face, seemed soft and alive.

"Tarsa, Bila," said the Earthman, using the native greeting.

"Tarsa, starman. May the Gods shine their eternal light on you."

"And on you," Dillon said, observing the ritual. "But what brings you here at night?"

"The night is beautiful, is it not, starman? It shines with a glory all its own. At times it would seem to outdo its brother, the day."

"Indeed," he agreed. "Your world is one of the loveliest I have yet seen, and my travels have led me over as many stars as there are waves on the sea. But surely you did not come to talk merely of the night and its beauty."

"Alas, no," sighed the native. "My task is a most unhappy one, for sorrow hangs heavy over the village. The women and children are weeping, and the men know not what to do in the face of calamity. It seems as though the

Gods themselves have turned against my people." He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"What would you with me, Bila?" asked the Earthman. "Surely I cannot be of any assistance?"

"As a man from the sky, surely you have met the Gods in open battle before!" cried the alien. "And just as surely you must have defeated them, else you would not be here this night."

"I am flattered, Bila. It is true that the Gods of the universe and I are not total strangers. Exactly what is wrong?"

"It is Toll, the son of Kylano. He has fallen from a cliff, and the bones of his arm are broken and need curing."

"But isn't that a job for the priest?"

"Aye. But our priest has been on a pilgrimage these past ten days, and is to be gone another thirty or more. There is no one left with the necessary knowledge. You will come?"

"I'll come, Bila. But first I must get a bag from the office. With it I may be able to help the boy."

"Ah, you too have an herb basket like the priest's? Truly you are a friend of the Gods."

"Not quite like the priest's," said Dillon, smiling. "But it serves much the same purpose." He hurried up the path and into the shack, emerging a moment later with the first-aid bag that was standard equipment for all men isolated from the services of a doctor.

"That's where you made your first mistake," said Cassidy. "Reg-

ulation 1287-63C, paragraph 119 states 'no man shall give medical aid to alien races unless a team of certified specialists has checked out all such medicines with respect to such race and certified them safe. Penalty for breaking rule: Revocation of any licenses; restriction to home world for three years; and/or five thousand dollars fine.' You really did things up right. You should have left that bag in the safe where it belonged."

"Well, I didn't," said Dillon. "And it's too late now to talk of what I should have done. At any rate . . ."

"Where is the boy, Bila?" asked Dillon as he came up to the alien again.

"At my village, starman. Come." He slipped down the path and was soon swallowed by the darkness. The Earthman hurried after, afraid of being lost in the almost impenetrable night.

He had forgotten the flashlight again, and he cursed as he stumbled over an unseen obstruction.

"Bila!" he called.

"Yes, starman?" The alien appeared as if from nowhere.

"I'm afraid that I'm not as gifted as you when it comes to traveling at night without light. You had better let me hold onto your shoulder."

"Of course, starman. I am most sorry for causing you trouble."

"It's my own fault. I should have remembered the light. Let's get going again." He placed his hand on the alien's shoulder, and they started off again.

Despite his guide, he twice stumbled over obstructions, and would have fallen but for his grip on the other's shoulder. Bila waited while he steadied himself, and then started off again, keeping up a fast pace.

The village lay three miles from the post, and during the day, Dillon considered it nothing more than a brisk walk. But the blindness that came with the dark wiped out all realization of time and space, and he soon began to think that they must have passed it by, when the alien spoke.

"We are here, starman."

They rounded a bend, and a cluster of huts came into view, lit by the dim light of a few scattered lamps. The alien threaded his way through the narrow lanes between the huts, and stopped outside one of the largest in the group. He held the hangings aside, and Dillon stooped to enter.

The hut was already crowded with natives. The smoke from half a dozen of the sputtering lamps hung like a shroud over the interior, and the Earthman's eyes were soon smarting. He wondered how the natives, with their much larger eyes, could stand it.

The injured boy lay on a pallet in the center of the hut. An animal skin had been thrown over him, with the broken arm exposed. Dillon knelt by him, and felt it over carefully.

"A clean break, thank God," he said, more to himself than his audience.

The boy whimpered, and he reached for the bag, and rum-

maged around. Finally he pulled out an already prepared hypo, loaded with a sedative. He swabbed the boy's good arm, and pressed the needle home.

The natives moved forward when they saw the needle, and some of them began to mutter. But the boy quickly dropped off into an untroubled sleep, and they settled down.

The Earthman took hold of the broken arm, and marvelled at the frailty of it. The bones had to hold a lighter weight than those of Earthmen, and thus were correspondingly weaker. He felt that he could snap one of them with his hands.

He straightened the arm out, as gently as he could, and then pulled. The broken ends slid together with a satisfying pop, and he quickly bound them with a splint from his bag. He wrapped the bandage tight, and tied it. Then he arose, picking up his bag.

"He should be alright now," he said. "I'll stop by in the morning, when he's awake, and give him a going-over."

"His arm," said Bila. "It is . . . fixed?"

"Yes. He's young, and he should heal fast. Three weeks from now he'll be out with the other children, playing games and just as active as ever."

"We thank you, starman," said Bila. "We have not the words to say just how happy we are that you have helped us."

"It's nothing," said Dillon, embarrassed by the show of gratitude. "All Earthmen would do the same."

"Ah, your magic must be even greater than that of the priests. It is most unfortunate that the village priest was away. But the Gods have smiled on us, by sending you instead."

"He'll be back soon, I hope?" said Dillon. "The priest, I mean."

"Alas, not for at least thirty days, and perhaps more. He knew not where his pilgrimage would lead him."

"But if you have more troubles like this?"

"Our misfortunes," said Bila, his face downcast. "If the Gods see fit to abandon us to the miseries of the world, what can mere men say? If some must die, than they shall surely die."

"No!" He regretted the word the moment it was out, but it was too late to recall it. The milk was spilt, and crying would be foolish at this point. "No. If you have troubles, come to me. I will do what I can, although I am not sure that it will be much."

"Ten million thanks, starman!" His eyes glistened with joy. "Our people shall be eternally grateful."

"You'd better save your thanks, until you're sure that I can help you. But right now, I'd appreciate a guide back to the post, and a lamp, so I don't fall anymore."

"Of course. It shall be done immediately." He motioned for one of the men in the hut, who came with a lamp. Bila held the hangings aside, and the two passed outside into the blackness again.

The trip back to the trader's shack passed without mishap and Dillon went to sleep quite pleased.

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TEN DAYS PASSED. They were days of intensified effort for Dillon, as he went about the task of setting up the rest of the post. The warehouse came first, and the living quarters. The office that had been serving double-duty reverted to its primary function.

Occasionally a few natives would drop around to gaze at the work-in-progress, but they would soon grow bored, and drift away to other amusements. He had twice been back to the village to look at the boy, but so far nothing else had come up to require his meagre medical knowledge. He was beginning to think that he might last out until the priest returned. He had been rereading the regulations covering contact, and the penalties were much too harsh for his liking. He began to worry about hiding traces of his one experiment.

The noonday sun was on the wane when he finished wrestling the last of a group of bins into the warehouse. He pulled out his kerchief, and wiped the accumulated sweat from his eyes. The summer season was full on the land, and the heat was as bad as any he had seen on Earth.

He brought his lunch out to the office porch, and sank down in the rocker that he had brought from his last post. There was a slight breeze blowing diagonally across the clearing in front of the building, and he shifted around to receive its full benefit.

The first bite was scarcely in his mouth when Bila came into sight around the bend of the path. He cursed silently, and put down his

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sandwich. He stood up to welcome the alien.

"Tarsa, Bila," he said. "What brings you here today?"

"Sadness again wearies our people, and we know not what to do. The Gods are indeed angered with us, and our priest is still away."

"Just what is it this time?"

"It is Kylano. He is at death's door, and the messengers of the Gods can be heard waiting to take him beyond." Two tears broke loose and rolled down his leathery gray cheeks.

"The boy's father?" said Dillon. The alien nodded.

"But what is wrong with him?"

"Alas, we do not know. He was swimming in the lake, when a demon possessed one of the fishes, and bit him on the leg. When he came out of the water, a fever lay heavily over him, and he has become unconscious."

"And you want me to save him." It was a statement, rather than a question, and the native recognized it as such.

"If it be within your power, starman. If you do not come, he must surely die."

"All right, Bila. I'll do whatever I can." He ducked inside the office, and came out again with his bag. They set off down the path.

"Your second major mistake," said Cassidy. "You were lucky with the boy, but you should have come to your senses enough to leave the bag behind on the second call. You were just stepping out into deeper water."

"But the man was sick, and I

didn't know what else to do but use the medicines. I couldn't let him die!"

"Why not?"

"Why not? I've got feelings and a conscience. That's why! I couldn't just stand by and do nothing. Especially when the sedative worked on the boy!"

"It would have been far better to let one man die than to have the aliens come to regard you as higher than their own priests."

"It's easy enough for you to say what I should have done here, but I think your own actions would have been far different if you had been in my place."

"I doubt it. I'd never have been made trouble-shooter, if I didn't have the brains to avoid a mess like that. I still think you're just plain stupid."

"My thoughts of you are better left unsaid. At any rate, when we got to the village . . ."

It was the same hut, and a crowd that may or may not have been present the earlier night. The numbers were the same. The only change was the lack of the overhanging pall of smoke from the lamps.

The man occupied the same pallet as the boy, and the crowd made way for Dillon as he moved to his side. It was readily apparent that he was very ill, and Dillon uttered a silent prayer that he had something in the kit to help him.

The leg wound was nasty and crusted over. He swabbed it clean, blanching when he saw its depth. Steadying himself, he bound it

tightly, and sat back on his heels to ponder his next move.

The bandage would prevent any further infection, but the Earthman was afraid the damage had already been done. The fever lay heavily on the native, and he tossed and turned in his coma. The drugs in the bag were all intended for use by Terrans only, and an attempt to aid the slight alien might only result in death. Whereas if he were left alone to ride out the fever, he just might come through all right.

Kyano let out a muted sob, and struck out wildly, nearly hitting Dillon in the face. He cursed, and turned to his bag, selecting the most catholic antibiotic it contained. He looked up at the watching crowd, but they just stared back impassively. He cursed again, and swabbed a spot on the native's arm, and thrust home the needle.

He threw the empty hypo back in the bag, and shut it savagely. Then he stood up, and looked around for Bila.

"A drink of water, please," he said, catching the other's eye.

"Certainly, starmen," he replied, handing over a gourd.

Dillon drank deeply, then wiped his mouth. He handed back the gourd and picked up his bag. As he pushed his way through the crowd, Bila followed.

"Kyano will be well now?" said the alien.

"I don't know. I just don't know. I hope so."

"Is there anything more you can do?"

"Perhaps. If I knew just what he

was sick with, and I had the right drugs to treat it, I could do a lot. As it is . . ." He left the sentence hanging.

"If the Gods will it, he will live."

"Pray that they will it. In the meantime, you might bathe his forehead every now and then. It'll help to make him more comfortable."

"In any event, we thank you, starman. With our priest gone . . ."

"Why did your priest leave on such a long journey, Bila? I should think he would be more concerned with the care of his flock."

"The ways of the priesthood are beyond the comprehension of ordinary men. When the Gods speak to them, they obey, no matter how onerous the orders may be. If men must suffer during their absence, it is unfortunate. But it must be."

"Then I'd think that your priests would see to it that someone in the village would know what to do in case of emergency."

"Oh, no!" He seemed horrified at the thought. "Knowledge is for the Gods to give to the chosen ones. Common men would not be worthy of it, for it is certain that they do not have the intelligence to deal with it properly. Only the priests are wise enough to be so honored. Priests and men from the stars," he added, as an afterthought.

"Well, in any event, I hope you don't need me any more . . ."

"But they did need you," said Cassidy.

"Unfortunately, yes. Four more times in the twenty days before the

return of the priest."

"What were the troubles?"

"Once, it was to aid in childbirth—my first adventure as a mid-wife," he said, remembering the event and his shame at his ignorance in the matter. He had had to take directions from the woman. "Once, a hunter had fallen in an animal trap, and broken both his legs," he continued. "And twice, it was for sickness."

"The same one as this Kylano?"

"I don't know. I couldn't hope to diagnose it, so I just shot them full of antibiotics, and prayed for a miracle."

"You should have prayed for brains instead. But all of your sick ones recovered?"

"Yes. I couldn't seem to do anything wrong, and it wasn't long before the natives were beginning to look on me as the personal representative of their Gods. It was embarrassing, the way they fawned over me."

"Tell me," said Cassidy. "You said you read the regs over. Why in the name of all that's holy didn't you have the sense to follow them?"

"I couldn't stand by and watch them die! I had to help them, Cassidy. Damn it, I *had* to!"

"Yeah, sure. But go on."

"Well, to shorten matters, the local priest finally got back from his pilgrimage, and took up his old duties. All went well for about a week, and then another alien became ill. The priest heard about it, naturally, and went to his aid. But it seems my percentage of recoveries was better than his at

its very best. They wouldn't let him even near the sick one. Instead, they sent for me."

"You went?"

"Of course. I didn't know the priest was back, and what else could I do?"

"I shudder to think. What happened?"

"The native got well, and the tribe practically pitched the priest out on his ear. He went running to his superiors, and they called a council of war. They banned the natives from the post, and threatened to cut off any who were seen with me from all priestly privileges.

"The tribe made an almighty stink. They called their own council, and there was practically civil war. That's when I called you. Or, rather, the nearest trouble-shooter."

"Ah, me. Why is it that I, Cassius Cassidy, get saddled with all of the real stinkers in the galaxy? I don't mind shooting other people's troubles for them, but I do resent the fact that the messiest ones get dumped in my lap. Sometimes I feel like resigning."

"Cassidy, one of these days . . ."

"Oh, simmer down. I said there was a simple solution to your problem, and I knew what I was talking about. The natives have been so taken in by your ridiculously lucky flukes that they think you're the next thing to a God. Right?"

"Right." Each looked as though the other were something unmentionable, left over from the last cleaning of the cesspool.

"So we just . . ." He leaned forward and outlined his plan.

FIVE DAYS PASSED, peacefully. The natives gave the post a wide margin; not even Bila showed his face. Dillon began to think that maybe there was a chance things would go back to normal by themselves; and that Cassidy's plan would not be necessary.

The first four days were merely a continuation of the heat. The two Earthmen sat around the office, speaking only when it was absolutely unavoidable, and then only in snarls. Dillon sent out a rush request for air conditioning equipment, omitted, by some mistake, from the supplies.

The fifth day was as sunny as ever, but a stiff west wind sprang up, and the temperature was bearable. Cassidy smiled for the first time in days, and Dillon tried to be pleasant to him.

The sixth day broke with an unceasing torrent of rain, and the men returned to their surly grumbling.

"I hope the post isn't washed away," said Cassidy. "This storm begins to assume the aspects of the Biblical flood."

"We're safe enough," said Dillon. "Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Nothing. Just a hunch."

"Good or bad?"

"Bad. All bad. I've got a feeling we're due for a visit."

As if on cue, a knock came on the office door. Dillon opened it,

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and stood aside for the thoroughly bedraggled alien waiting outside. Bila was a sorry caricature of himself, with his down plastered to his body. Water dripped from him in a steady stream.

"Tarsa, starman," he said.

"Tarsa, Bila," replied Dillon. "I've been expecting you."

"Oh? Do you then have the powers of foreseeing the future, too?"

"No," he said, laughing. "It's just that it's been several days since you were last here. You were overdue for a visit."

Cassidy cleared his throat, and Dillon turned to him.

"This is Cassidy, Bila," he said. "He is my brother from the stars, and has come to visit me for a short while."

"Tarsa, Cassidy," the native said, gravely.

"Tarsa, Bila. I have been hoping to meet a member of your people."

"Oh? Has the fame of Kash spread far through the universe then?"

"Indeed, all of the civilized worlds talk of Kash and its gentle folk. It is a common ambition to be able to come here and see you in person. It is hoped that soon such travel will be most frequent, to the reward of both of our peoples."

"Indeed," said Bila. "I thank you in the name of my people. Will you yourself be here long?"

"Unfortunately, no. But when I go I will take fond memories as souvenirs."

"What is so important that it brought you out in this storm,

Bila?" asked Dillon, breaking into the conversation. "Your troubles must be pressing."

"Indeed, they are. The Gods frown heavily on our village this day, and I have come once more to seek your intercession."

"What is the matter?" asked Cassidy.

"Alas, the trouble is in my own household. My wife lies at the door to death, and I fear she is fast slipping beyond."

"Haven't you had the priest in?" asked Dillon.

"Against your great and wondrous magic, Dillon, what is the priest? He is like a lost little boy, unable to tell North from East, and helpless in the face of death. Only you have the power to bring her back to the world of the living, as you did with Kylano and the others."

"I thank you for your trust," said Dillon. "I only hope it is not misplaced."

"You will come?"

"Of course. As soon as I dress for the storm, and get my bag." He turned to do so, then was struck by an afterthought. "By the way, do you mind if Cassidy comes with us? He would appreciate the chance to see your village."

"It will be an honor."

"Good. Get into your togs, Cass."

They were soon ready. Dillon grabbed up his bag, and he followed the native out into the storm. The rain blew straight toward them, and they bent forward, into the wind. The trip to the village was a fight all the way.

The village itself had become

isolated; an island in the midst of a shallow lake. They waded across, to the hut that was Bila's. He held the hangings aside, and the Earthmen stepped into the stink of the alien crowd.

The omnipresent lamps were lit, and the smoke hung heavy. Both of the Earthmen were soon wishing they had protection for their smarting eyes.

The natives stopped their keening, and made room for the two men. They both moved forward, and bent over the woman. Dillon could see that she was as sick as the others, but whether or not it was the same disease, he could not say. For the eighth such time, he wished he had taken medical training as a youth, in deference to his family's wishes.

"It's hot in here," said Cassidy. Sweat beaded out on his forehead, and he wiped it away with a shaking hand.

"Small wonder," said Dillon, "with all these people here. They must up the temperature by twenty degrees." He opened his bag, and dug out a swab. After cleaning a spot on her arm, he dug out a needle, and filled it from an ampoule.

"Dillon!"

He whirled around. "Cass! What's the matter?"

"I . . . don't know. Woozy. I feel woozy." He staggered, and fell forward, unconscious.

"Cass!" He bent over the man, and turned him over. Cassidy's face was white, and the sweat rolled off in rivulets. Dillon felt for a pulse, and then pulled out a stetho-

scope. Baring the other's chest, he listened for a beat.

"What is it, Dillon?" asked Bila. "What is wrong?"

"I don't know. He's sick." He looked worried.

"Sick?" The natives stared at each other, unbelieving.

"Yes, sick! Earthmen get sick too, you know!" He bared Cassidy's arm, and swabbed it clean. Then he pressed home the needle he had prepared for the woman.

"He will get well?" asked Bila.

"I don't know." Dillon felt for a pulse again. Disbelief washed over his face, and he sank back on his heels.

"What is it?"

"He's dead."

"Dead?" Amazement took hold of them.

"Dead." The Earthman stood up, shaking his head. "But your wife, Bila. I must attend to her."

"No." The native stepped between the man and woman, and held out his arms.

"No? Why not?"

"The Gods have frowned on you, starman. It is obvious that they are dissatisfied with you, for they took your brother."

"But just because Cassidy died doesn't mean your wife will." He stared at the lesser being, dumfounded. "But she might, if not treated."

"We shall get the priest. We cannot run the risk of offending the Gods by permitting you to touch her."

The Earthman stared from face to face, but the same message was written on all. Hopelessness took

the place of question, and he turned, and stumbled from the hut, and into the storm.

"Take the man to the post," said Bila. Several of the men hurried to do his bidding. They carried Cassidy out into the night, without looking back.

"Simple," said Cassidy. "Just like I said." He was hunched over his coffee, his ham-like hands soaking up the warmth from the cup.

"Simple," said Dillon. "I don't get it. Just why did they stop me from treating the woman?"

"We come from the stars, which the natives associate with the home of the Gods. We don't look quite like their legends say Gods should, but they figured we must be close to them, so they credited us with omnipotent powers. The priests claimed the cures they affected were done with the grace of the almighty, and the natives figured your cures came from the same source."

"I can't figure why they wouldn't even let me touch her," said Dillon. "It doesn't make sense."

"Actually, if you had given her

the shot without me on the scene, and she had died, they probably would have accepted it as the will of the Gods. The priests fail once in awhile, and they just claim that the Gods have wanted that particular person to die. But when you were unable to save me, another man from the stars, and therefore presumably a close acquaintance of the Almighty, they could come to only one conclusion: The Gods withdrew their blessings from you. After that they wouldn't have let you touch a sick pig—if they have pigs here." He drained his cup.

A roar sounded down from the sky, building up into a wail that scraped the spines of the hearers. It rose to a crescendo, and then came a jarring shock that shuddered the whole building.

"My chauffeur," said Cassidy. "Hot-rodding, as usual." He rose, and picked up his baggage.

"You know, Dillon," he said, "You're a jerk. I'll tell my grandchildren about you. You're a perfect example of what not to do." He shook his head. "A horrible example." END

