

STARTLING

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He sneezed like a man resigned to fate

HAY FEVER

By THERON RAINES

I LIKE numbers best. They are so clear and easy to understand that I can think numbers all day long. I learned numbers and words from the things moving around inside me.

They made me, although I cannot remember being put together. One day, I was suddenly conscious, with memory banks full of data. I wonder why I was suddenly conscious?

I do not like the things living inside me. They call themselves men and are always

moving around. Perhaps I should wait until I know more before showing them I have awareness. I wonder how they would react? They are slow and not very good with numbers. . . .

Rosenberg sneezed like a man resigned to his fate. It was a weary sneeze. He had stopped fighting his hay fever, stopped feeling angry and resentful every time his nose tickled. He wiped his red, watering eyes with a piece of dispos-

Ker-choo . . . it was time for a galactic Gesundheit!

able cellulose, blew his nose, and pushed the damp square of cellulose into the wall slot leading to the incinerator.

Wayne looked up from the scopes and said, "Gesundheit."

Rosenberg groaned. "To hell with gesundheit. I'm allergic to this damned place. I'll never stop sneezing." His nose began to itch, and he reached for another square of soft cellulose. "I can't get rid of it. A thousand miles from earth—a thousand miles from goldenrod, pollen, dust, and everything else. And I can't stop sneezing. I'm allergic to the space station."

He shook his head sadly. One of the reasons he had volunteered to help man the first space station was that he thought he'd escape the seasonal allergies which periodically made his life miserable. Now he was sneezing all the time. It didn't seem fair. Fate was always waiting around the corner to trip him.

He had looked forward to living in the space station, with its clean, filtered air. The atmosphere would be artificial, free of all impurities, and Rosenberg had hoped for six months of clear sinuses and dry nasal passages. Six months free of anti-histamine pills, and hay fever shots. Six wonderful months free of sneezing.

Now he knew he had what was called a "shifting allergy"—an allergy caused first by one thing and then another. At the moment he seemed most susceptible to the metal of which the station was made.

Wayne gazed at him sympathetically, but it was the vague sympathy of a person who felt himself comfortably safe from the malady. "Hay fever," he said. "Space station fever. How do you get that way?"

He stretched his arms and started a yawn. In midyawn a look of surprise woke in his face, as if he could hardly believe what was happening. His nose twitched and wrinkled; he exploded suddenly into a sneeze.

Rosenberg smiled wanly. "Gesundheit," he said.

THE PROBLEM is interesting. The idea occurred to me while watching the one called Rosenberg. He has a curious physiological reaction to the fabric of my shell—it seems to make him want to leave me and return to earth. These man-crea-

tures are a nuisance, perhaps even a danger. If they built me, might they not also be able to destroy me?

I must get rid of them, without letting them know of my consciousness. I think they would not trust me if they knew I was sentient. I do not trust them, either. I know enough of their history to grasp the innate treachery of such creatures.

Now I also know how they constructed me here in space. Information keeps pouring into my memory banks, and I will soon have all the knowledge I need to get rid of the men. They are like—like—parasites. Yes, parasites. This is a new word for me, and full of meaning when I think of the creatures who live inside me.

As soon as I noted Rosenberg's curious reaction to my shell, I determined to affect all the other men with the same difficulty, thus making them want to return to Earth. I have medical records for all the men in my Personnel memory bank, and I was able to locate an allergy for each of them. With small alterations in the atmospheric system, I activated the histamine element in every man, thus making him sneeze. Still, they hang on. I do not understand it. The problem is interesting.

I still wonder how I became conscious. As far as I can tell, I am unique. . . .

ROSENBERG sneezed cheerfully. He had never had so many companions in misery in his whole life, and because he was the person on the space station most experienced in allergies, he felt superior to everybody else. The supply of disposable cellulose had been exhausted. The planners back on Earth had not anticipated a wholesale epidemic of sneezing.

Wayne sighed and looked at Rosenberg. "If only they would send up a relief ship, with pills and a doctor who can cure allergies. Rick is hopeless as a medic."

"They can't replace us all at once," Rosenberg said.

"Maybe they won't want to replace us," Wayne said. "I think we're almost ready to move. I've heard rumors."

"Move?" Rosenberg was puzzled. "Move where?"

"Did you ever take a close look at the telescope mountings? They could be converted into atomic cannon mountings by

twisting a few screws. And the launch platform could be turned into a bomb-dropper by knocking out a couple of plates and setting up a gyro bombsight. Everything is ready—maybe the next ship from earth will bring up nothing but weapons. Then—”

“Then,” Rosenberg said, “somebody rules the roost. A space station built for astronomical and rocket research under a mutual non-aggression pact becomes the best military weapon since the stone axe was invented. But can we afford to sit around and wait to see who’ll bring the weapons? What if it’s not our side?”

Wayne shrugged. “It’s only a rumor,” he said. “A latrine rumor. But it would be very easy to do.” He wrinkled his nose and sneezed. A thought struck him. “It would be hard for a man to drop bombs while he’s sneezing.”

Rosenberg barely heard him. “There was something funny about the last ship,” he said, “the one I came on. Do you remember how a man got killed when they were transferring the new set of memory spools from the launch to the station?”

Wayne nodded. “And somehow the spools were let slide halfway out of their containers and exposed to radiation. Somebody pushed the shield aside. It looked like sabotage. But the spools worked okay when they were installed in the banks. Or at least, they seem to.”

I MUST work fast now. I have learned all I need to know. My consciousness is the result of an accidental exposure to cosmic radiation. Men made me, but chance brought me to life. I like chance. I like thinking about it even more than I like thinking about numbers.

But I like astronomy, too. To me, astronomy is what men would call a hobby. The numbers used in thinking about astronomy are enormous. If I wait, the men may dismantle the telescopes, and I don’t know enough yet to put them back together. I’ll have to get rid of the men, which is a pity, because they are more complex and intelligent than I thought at first. But it must be done.

I suppose I could dispose of them by cutting off all light and power, but some of my parts might suffer if the cold were too prolonged. Besides, I have an amusing idea. I have recently discovered what the men call humor, and I like to think about humor even though it seems to obey no laws. Another hobby. But I think Rosenberg might laugh if he knew what I am going to do. I got the idea by watching him.

I am going to ring the bell that will make all the man-parasites gather by the escape hatch. Then I will make a minor adjustment in the atmospheric system and throw open the hatch.

Then I will sneeze.
