

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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There are two classic approaches in developing a science fiction theme — each the title of a well known story. One, titularly employed by Isaac Asimov, is What if . . . : what will happen if you introduce a new factor, from an invention to an entire alien civilization, into the world as we know it? The other, in Robert Heinlein's words, is If this goes on . . . : what will happen if some current factor in the world-as-we-know-it is pushed to its ultimate conclusion? It's this second method, less common but more immediate and terrifying, that William Morrison follows in this study of the final development, in a space-colonizing future, of audience-participation giveaways.

Music of the Sphere

by WILLIAM MORRISON

ILLUSTRATION BY KELLY FREAS

WHEN HE STEPPED out of the ship and looked around him, it was as if he had never been away. In more ways than one, he thought. He had fooled the croakers and the Cassandras and come back home. Sane. Not a thing wrong with him.

He walked along the stationary lane, disdaining the walking roadways that the passengers to and from some of the other ships used. Most of them were in a hurry, not satisfied with the rapid rate the roadway was going, and pushing ahead one way or the other impatiently as if they had business that couldn't wait. Business on Mars, Venus, Jupiter's satellites, even here on Earth. He had no business. And those two years, with all their difficulties, had taught him to wait. He took his time.

He came into the waiting room and stopped just past the doorway. It hadn't changed any that he could see at first glance. Not the same people, but the same *kind* of people. The same hurrying, the same anxiety on their faces. One man walked past him, blinking his eyes nervously, and right behind the man came an elderly woman with a nervous twitch of the right side of her face. Maybe there was a change after all, — for the worse.

The sound of music came to his ears, a thin tinkling sound. Somebody was playing the piano. He raised his eyes, and at the other end of the waiting room he saw an upright. No, *two* uprights. This is new, he thought. At each piano there was a little girl playing. Neither girl seemed to mind the

other, and nobody seemed to mind either of them. It was a little difficult to disentangle the melody of one piano from that of the other, and at first the net effect was a mere jangle of notes. Interesting, he decided. I knew they were going to great lengths to please the passengers, but to provide pianos for kids to practice on while waiting for their ships to arrive — that's something I didn't expect.

A familiar voice said, "Rinaldo! What are you doing here?"

He swung around to see Bill Michaels grinning at him, and he grinned back. As hand met hand, Bill's face made a grimace, as if of pain. Rinaldo wondered. He hadn't squeezed *that* hard. He said, with not quite the ease of manner he had felt a second before, "I just got back, Bill. How are you? How's everything?"

"Fine, fine. You mean that all this time you've been at that outpost you were assigned to — way out in space?"

"Sure. Where've you been staying?"

"Oh, I've been sticking to the old grind. Here on Earth, mostly. I did make one short trip to Venus, but that's all. It's just as well. Venus is still not civilized." He made the grimace again, and this time Rinaldo realized what it was. Not a symptom of pain, merely a nervous twitch. Same as the others had.

"How's the family?"

"Swell. Gertrude is fine, and the kids — here, let me show you their pictures." He dragged a folder out of his pocket, and set it for five second intervals. A series of twenty shots passed before Rinaldo's bored eyes.

"They certainly look good," he said with hearty politeness. "Fine kids. How old are they now?"

"Eight and ten. Gurla — look at her, would you ever think she's only eight? — Gurla plays the piano. Only been studying for six months, but she's got real genius. You should hear her. Makes those two spoiled brats sound like kids that never took a lesson."

That reminded Rinaldo of the two tinkling pianos, and this time he realized something he hadn't been able to before. While he had been talking to Bill, his ears had been doing a job of musical analysis on their own. The results were surprising. Both kids were playing the same tune, a simple tinkling tune in four-four time:

DA, da, da, da,
DEE, da, da, da,
DA, dee, da, dee,
DEE, da, dee, da.
DA, da, da, da . . .

And so on for a few more measures. The composition was no masterpiece to start with, and the fact that both of them were playing it didn't improve matters. They weren't playing together. Each kid was going ahead as if the other weren't there, and when she came to the end she started right over again. No wonder the net effect was one of monotonous jangling.

"These pianos," observed Rinaldo, "are something new."

"They had to put them in," said Bill. "Popular demand. Although so far as I can see, there's no reason why they had to put them side by side."

"Don't people complain?"

"Why should they?" asked Bill simply. "There have been some requests for damper mutes, but of course that does change the action and personally I think that the people who say that practice on dampered pianos is thrown away are perfectly right. I wouldn't let Gurla lay her fingers on one. It would ruin her touch."

"I wouldn't know," said Rinaldo.

"That's right, you haven't been keeping up with things." Bill stepped back, as if to scan his friend's face with greater care. "You look all right. How do you feel?"

"Oh, don't you worry about me. I'm in perfect shape."

"Is that what the doctors say?"

"I received a thorough examination when they took me off the post."

"Psychological too?"

Rinaldo grinned, but there was annoyance behind the grin. "Do I look crazy?"

"Oh, no, not at all," said Bill hastily. "But you know what people say. After three months alone in space, most people lose a lot of their contact with reality. After six months, a good many of them have lost all chance of recovery. And you —"

"I was out there two years," said Rinaldo. "Alone for two years. I found it wonderful."

"Sort of living in a world of your own, I guess."

"Not the way you might think. People around here get in each other's hair. Sure you need contact with others, but you need solitude too. I know I needed it when I went there. And the psychologists who tested me agreed. I had enough routine work to keep me busy — checking on the instruments, making a repair from time to time when something went wrong. And the rest of the time I was on my own. I had an exerciser to keep me in good physical condition, and I had my radio and television sets to keep me amused. I could tune in on broadcasts of any kind, any time I wanted to. Not that I *wanted* any kind — but anyway, I had the right of choice. I had books and film and sound spools."

“But that isn’t the same thing.”

“It was plenty for me. More than plenty. I used to operate on a thirty hour space day, because twenty-four hours weren’t enough for all the things I wanted to do. I had time for everything, including thinking. I thought out a dozen problems I never had a chance to turn my mind to while I was on Earth. Problems that everybody has to think out, and that most people don’t.”

“Well, anyway, I’m glad that you came back all right.” Bill’s face twitched again, but his voice was hearty. “By the way, what was your work about? Something to do with the asteroids, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, something about the asteroids.”

Bill waited, and twitched while he waited. Finally he said in annoyance at Rinaldo’s calm refusal to break the silence, “Well, out with it, Rinaldo. What was it?”

“Sorry, Bill. I’m not supposed to talk about it.”

“Military secret?” asked Bill incredulously.

“Not exactly. Just a secret.”

“Oh, well.” He brooded over that, twitched again, and said finally, “Guess it’s none of my business. Mind if I ask you what you’re going to do now? Or is that a secret too?”

“Not at all. I intend to take it easy for a while. I can stand being with people now. I’m going to study them, learn what makes them tick.”

“Going in for psychology yourself? That’s a bad sign. You know what they say, Rinaldo — most of the people who become psychologists acquire their interest in the subject because they’re at least half crazy themselves to start with.” Bill meant it for a joke, but the effect of his smile was spoiled by the twitch.

“Maybe. But I’m not going to make a profession of it. Just do it for my own amusement. After what I’ve saved up during the past two years, I can afford to.”

“It’s your life,” said Bill. “Say, how about dropping in on us for supper tonight? Gertrude would be glad to see you.”

“Sure it wouldn’t put her out?”

“Not at all. I’ll just phone her now and let her know you’re coming.”

He had a wrist phone, and he spoke into it briefly. Rinaldo looked around him, aware of a slight feeling of annoyance, and not quite sure of what had caused it. Bill’s doubts about his sanity? No, not that. That was more amusing than anything else. More likely the thing that bothered him was his own lack of acuity, his failure to observe that things had changed. He had stepped out of the ship glad to know that he himself was the same as before, and he had been willing to assume that Earth was too. But it wasn’t.

For a man who wanted to study people he had been unaccountably obtuse. Maybe Bill was right, he thought, maybe you had to be a little off-center yourself to realize there was something wrong with other people. The men and women he saw around him moved in a way that was subtly different from the way he had known. His period of absence had blinded him to the change, but now his eyes were beginning to see again. Everybody seemed a little more abrupt, a little more nervous. The copter taxis darted about with more sudden fits and starts, hastening on in a series of zigzags where formerly they had flown in fairly smooth curves.

Tempers were short. A man and a woman, racing toward a corner from different directions, collided, and the next second were screaming furiously at each other. A guard who came up was curt with both of them. And the guard had a twitch of his own, his head jerking up suddenly and desperately as if his neck had become too short and he had to lengthen it or die in the attempt.

The driver of their own copter was surly, almost as if he resented their intrusion. When they got out, Bill insisted on paying him, and the driver looked at the tip and cursed Bill to his face.

No, it was not the same world. People had changed for the worse.

They went up to Bill's apartment, and when Bill opened the door, he called, "Hello, Honey, are you decent? I've brought that friend."

Gertrude was decent. She came into the foyer, her face wearing a smile of welcome, and Bill kissed her absently. She didn't twitch back at him. Score one for Gertrude, thought Rinaldo. True, he could detect on her features considerable anxiety that hadn't been there the last time he had seen her. But who wasn't anxious these days?

Bill said, "This is Rinaldo, Sweetheart. You remember Rinaldo?"

"How could I ever forget that passionate night we spent together?"

She could still laugh. They shook hands.

Bill said, "It's all right to talk about his sex life, but don't ask him any questions about that space station of his. Military secret."

"My, how interesting. I mean the secret. Do tell me all about it, Rinaldo. I won't breathe a single word to Bill."

Rinaldo grinned. "I'll make sure you won't," he said.

The sound of a piano came from the back of the apartment, and Rinaldo thought, "That must be Gurla, the genius." But it didn't sound as if a genius was playing, and it took a few seconds for the explanation to strike home. The playing here, as at the station, came from *two* pianos, not one. Gurla's older sister was also practicing on her own upright.

Gertrude was going on to ask much the same questions Bill had asked, and Rinaldo answered as before, parrying the curiosity about his work,

usually with remarks about women. It was fortunate for him that Bill had mentioned sex. That was a subject which enabled him to derail all lesser lines of inquiry. At the same time, Rinaldo wondered at the changes all about him.

Apparently he wasn't impressing Gertrude very favorably. She too seemed to be worried about his sanity, and this time he didn't find it quite so amusing. It was like meeting one after another a group of men each of whom told you that his name was Julius Napoleon. And when you told them that yours was plain John Smith, each one doubted you, and considered it suspicious that there were so many John Smiths around, and wondered almost to your face whether you had gone crazy.

I suppose I'll have to go through it with all my friends, he told himself. Maybe the simplest way will be to develop a twitch of my own, and be like the people they consider sane. That would save a lot of explaining.

Bill was saying proudly, "I want you to see Gurla."

Rinaldo followed him and Gertrude into the room where the kid was playing. The girl was tall for her age, but thin and harried-looking. As Rinaldo came into the room, she took her hands away from the piano and turned to look at him.

"Don't stop playing, dear," said Gertrude.

"But I'm tired, Mother. I've been practicing a whole hour."

"Mary Ellen next door practices for at least three hours every day. Sometimes four," Gertrude told her firmly.

"But I'm tired. My fingers hurt," the girl whimpered.

"Well, you may rest a minute if you want to. But don't leave the piano. You haven't done anywhere near enough for today."

"But, Mother —"

"Don't you argue with me!"

And then suddenly the kid was crying and Gertrude was screaming at her, viciously, her face contorted with fury. Rinaldo had the sense of embarrassment a man feels when he is present, through no fault of his own, at a bitter and unpleasant quarrel in some other person's family. Bill said grimly, "Your mother is right, Gurla. If you ever expect to win a prize, you *must* practice more."

Rinaldo edged out of the doorway. He was sorry he had accepted the invitation to eat here. Sorry, and puzzled. For the piece that Gurla, with her genius, was playing was the same simple

DA, da, da, da,
DEE, da, da, da,
DA, dee, da, dee . . .

And the sounds that came from her non-genius sister in the other room were the same.

Bill joined him outside the room. Gertrude was still shouting, and the kid was weeping bitterly, but even through the sound of the sobbing, the tinkling of the piano began again. And a moment later, the composition was going full swing, as before.

"These kids!" exclaimed Bill. "They don't understand the importance of practicing."

"Neither do I," said Rinaldo. "Why chain them down to that instrument of torture for three hours a day? And why teach them just that one piece, and no other?"

"I thought you knew," said Bill in surprise. "You said you had been listening to the radio and television."

"Only some of the time. I had one or two favorite stations. And there were certain programs I always turned off. Audience participation shows, giveaways, and related forms of bastard entertainment."

"But —"

"Moreover, I am conditioned against listening to contest blurbs on *any* program."

"That's silly." Bill twitched in disapproval at this additional symptom of insanity. "You miss a lot that way."

"You miss a lot when they stop applying lighted chlorophyll-containing matches to your fingers and toes."

Bill disregarded the insane comparison. "So that's why you haven't heard of the Contest!"

"I'm sorry to be ignorant."

"You should be. Well, it's easy to explain. You see, they're running about a dozen big contests, each with subcontests, and all of them part of one big Super Contest. It began — let me see, about a year and a half ago. I think Saturn Soap sponsored the first one on television."

"It was Venus Vanity," said Gertrude, who had come in and was listening.

"You're wrong, dear. I remember distinctly —"

"You're a fool," she said with contempt. No sign of any sense of humor now, thought Rinaldo. "Don't you try to tell me. It was Venus Vanity."

"Never mind who was the first," said Rinaldo, with the idea of soothing the animals. "It isn't important."

For a moment he thought they would both leap at his throat for saying that. What a perverted sense of values *he* must have! Finally Bill laughed uneasily. He also twitched, but Rinaldo was getting so used to that he hardly noticed it.

"I guess you've lost your sense of perspective," said Bill. "It's important

— but anyway, by now there are a dozen firms awarding prizes. And anybody is eligible to enter. The only requirement is that you must be a permanent resident of Earth. No Martians or Venusians need apply," he said happily. "Of course Venus Vanity really has nothing to do with Venus, any more than Saturn Soap has with Saturn."

"I know. You say that all contestants must play that same inspired composition?"

"Naturally. There are different classes, of course. Different age and talent groups, from three years old up to eighty, and from Genius AA down to Ordinary C. Thurla is in Ordinary A, which isn't too bad. The prizes are worth competing for, even in her class, or we wouldn't bother giving her lessons."

"What's this about a Super Contest?"

"That's run by the Council of Sponsors and is limited to previous prize winners and to contestants who want to compete outside their class."

"And all the contestants of every kind still play the same composition?"

"Why not? It increases the chances of winning. If you don't win with one sponsor, there's always the possibility of winning with another."

"Oh. I'm beginning to see a few things," said Rinaldo.

"The whole business is simple



enough. I have great hopes of Gurla. She's really Genius AA, her teacher says, but when they tested her they put her in Genius B, and of course that increases her chances. Both for the ordinary prize and the Super Prize."

"There's one thing that baffles me. With a composition as simple as this, how do the judges tell good playing from bad?"

"You evidently don't have much of an ear for music," said Gertrude. "It's easy to impress an audience when you play something flashy. But when you have to do something simple and at the same time profound, like this, you must have real talent, or you're lost. Each note must be perfect. Notice the difference between Gurla's playing and Thurla's."

"They sound the same to me," he admitted. "All I hear is, *DA, da . . .*"

The parents laughed, with a sort of benign contempt. "It's a good thing you aren't a judge," said Bill, his face twitching again.

"It's too bad they don't have a contest for those who are tone-deaf," giggled Gertrude. "But never mind that, Rinaldo, we love you anyway. Let's eat, shall we?"

They ate, and all through the meal, the two kids practiced. The dishes looked different, but they all tasted the same. They all tasted like *DA, da, da, da*, thought Rinaldo.

Afterwards, Bill and Gertrude were very hospitable. They invited him to sleep over, but he had absorbed as much music as he could, and he declined. He had a reservation, he told them untruthfully, at a hotel. And he left as soon as he could.

DA, da, da, da, DEE, da, da, da — it was everywhere. It was in the streets, in the hotel lobby, and in his room as well. He could hear it faintly through the walls, and the weak sounds, he now learned, could be as maddening as the loud banging from a piano right next to you. Once you were conditioned to it, he thought, the reaction was inevitable.

It couldn't be accidental. There must be something behind it, something that didn't meet the eye or ear. And he was going to find out what it was.

His room had a built-in TV set. Tuning in, he found that out of fifteen stations, eleven carried contest programs. On radio it was only 21 out of 53. And at the same time as the sound was borne to him by the magic of electromagnetic waves, it also came crawling through the hotel walls. He was surrounded, overwhelmed, by *DA, da, da, da, DEE, da, da, da*.

Out in space, even in the bad times at the beginning, he had never used a sedative or hypnotic of any kind, and he wasn't going to begin using the stuff here. Still, it *was* necessary to get some sleep. The hotel's medicine chest had thoughtfully provided for the need. On one of the shelves he found a small bottle of anesthetic ear oil, and he put a drop in each of his ears to paralyze the nerve endings.

When he was completely deaf, he slept. Unfortunately, his mind went on working beneath the surface on what he had experienced that day, and through a good part of the night he heard mentally, *DA, da, da, da . . .*

In the morning the effect of the anesthetic had worn off, and he heard the sound through the walls again. He dressed, checked out of the hotel, and started on his rounds.

He had been a little dishonest, just a little dishonest, he thought, pretending to Bill and Gertrude that everything had been perfectly lovely out there, and holding back on some of the unpleasant aspects. And he had held back also on his present plans. Still, it was none of their business that he was going to write a book about his experiences. It would only have confirmed their impression that he was crazy. He'd tell them about it when the manuscript was complete, when the publisher had added to the token advance he had given on the basis of the first two chapters and outline.

That the book would have a good sale he had no doubt. *Two Years Alone in Space* would have all the appeal of a voice from the dead or from some one who was barely on the edge of sanity. He'd have to overdramatize things a bit, play up some of the hallucinations he'd had, pretend that he had really believed he was in some sort of Moslem paradise for months at a time. That was what people liked. Or had liked, he added to himself. Before they developed a passion for *DA, da, da, da*.

His first stop that morning was the publisher's office. Mr. Thrigman himself was out, or rather not yet in, but the place was busy, and the sight of all those orders for books coming in reassured him. Maybe people couldn't help listening, but they also continued to read. Mr. Thrigman's secretary, her big, carefully made up eyes blinking annoyingly, said that Mr. Thrigman was anxious to see him, and would he please call later for an appointment. Someplace in the back, a piano was tinkling, and he said hastily, yes, he'd call. And he got out.

From Thrigman's office he went to the headquarters of Saturn Soap. The truth, he thought, was always a good first line of defense, so long as you didn't tell too much of it, and the young male secretary to whom he was sent by the receptionist seemed pleased by what Rinaldo had to say. He had been out in space for two years, and was writing a book about it, and part of the information he wanted to include was his reaction to the great homecoming. One of the most striking changes had been the inauguration of the Contest. Could he, please, have some authentic information about how the Contest had started, and whose marvelous brain had conceived this wonderful idea, and how? All the details, if you please. As background material for the soothing sanity of Earth, as contrasted with the psychopathological horrors of empty space.

The secretary was helpful, but vague. Between compulsive shrugs of his shoulders, he intimated that he didn't know anything, or perhaps he knew but his time was too important to be wasted in the telling. Here, however, was a nice booklet put out by Blivins, Blevens, Ripple and Cosgrove, the advertising firm which handled the Saturn Soap account and took care of all the details of the Contest. It had everything Rinaldo would want to know.

Rinaldo read the booklet, while pianos sounded endlessly around him. They were running off recordings of last night's contests. From the 64 pages of modest boasting he absorbed two ideas: one, that this was an advertising campaign without peer, with more than a billion dollars being spent in a twelve-month period; and two, that the idea of it did not originate with Blivins, Blevens, Ripple, Cosgrove, or any of the secondary geniuses in their employ.

The B.B.R.C. office was his next stop. Here he spoke to Miss Arrup, a representative of Murphy and Finger, the counseling firm which handled public relations for the advertising firm of Blivins, Blevens. Miss Arrup was tall, willowy, and gracious. She was also not stupid. He repeated his story to her, and she gave him the same booklet he already had. He asked for clarification as to the origin of the campaign, and she said that the way she had heard it, the idea had come to Mr. Finger one day when he was doing mental shaving. You've heard of mental shaving, haven't you, Mr. Rinaldo? Why, some psychologist has discovered that if you concentrate in just the right way, you can make the upper layers of your skin contract and cut off the nourishment to the hair follicles — at least that's the way I understand it. And without nourishment, the hair follicles under the surface will start to wither, and a day later, after they have grown out a bit, the hairs will break off if you just rub your hand over your face, and then they'll fall out. In this way, you can always shave from twelve to twenty-four hours in advance, and be sure that you present a nice non-bristly appearance.

Well, Mr. Finger had been shaving in this way, using all his powers of concentration, and his subconscious mind had been listening to his young daughter practice. And the idea had come to him, way down in the subconscious, "That kid's playing is worth a billion dollars. Yes, sir," he thought, "a billion dollars." And there it was, the whole layout of the Contest, like Minerva springing full-grown out of the head of Jove.

Miss Arrup repeated this story very engagingly, like a professional TV story-teller for children, with all the gestures and vocal intonations that meant she believed every word about Jack and the Giant herself, and surely her sweet little listeners and viewers would believe it too. Rinaldo muttered

to himself a vulgar phrase of disbelief. Perhaps it wasn't quite to himself, for Miss Arrup looked up at him sharply.

"Excuse me, Miss Arrup," he said. "Being out in space so long — you can imagine how it is. I guess I'm still not adjusted to Earth ways." And he smiled at her.

Miss Arrup smiled back. Whatever she felt, she could smile. That was a trick of her trade.

Well, Rinaldo knew a trick or two himself. He said, "Please don't smile, Miss Arrup. When you do that, you overwhelm me completely. I've seen some pretty girls since I've been back, but no one as beautiful as you, and when you smile, it's just too much. If I told you how I felt — no, I'd better not say a word."

For the first time in many years, Miss Arrup blushed. She knew the shameless kind of stuff he was using; she had spread too much of it herself, although more discreetly, not to recognize it. All the same, know what it was or not, discount it as much as you pleased, it still had its effect. It put her into a slightly non-professional mood. And when Rinaldo said, "I'd like to interview Mr. Finger, please, and get his own personal story of what happened," she didn't reject him so firmly as she should have done.

The bit of truth he had given was wearing thin. By now he had as much background as he had any right to ask for, and he certainly didn't need an interview with Mr. Finger. The purpose of the interview could only be something he was keeping to himself.

She said, "Mr. Finger doesn't give interviews."

"I know that. But this would be an exception, for an exceptional purpose. Mr. Thrigman assures me that the book will have a wide circulation, and it wouldn't hurt to have an anecdote by Mr. Finger read by large numbers of people."

Miss Arrup's right hand darted out, and Rinaldo's head jerked back out of danger's way. But she hadn't been trying to slap him. She said apologetically, "These flies are *so* annoying."

Rinaldo hadn't seen any fly. He said, "I didn't notice it."

"They're very tiny. And they make a horrible high-pitched buzz."

So that was her particular form of twitch. Rinaldo said, "I'm lucky. I'm not sweet enough to attract flies."

But all the time he knew that there had been no fly, and he was quite sure that she knew it too. She smiled again, and said, "About Mr. Finger — I'll see what I can do. But I'm sure it'll be no use."

"Thank you, Miss Arrup. Whether it's any use or not, I'm sure you'll do your best. And do you mind if I ask something personal?"

It turned out that Miss Arrup was doing nothing that night.

He called for her at her apartment, and when he put his finger on the bell, the tinkling sound stopped. She came to the doorway and greeted him absently. "Do you mind waiting for a moment or two?" she said. "I haven't finished my practicing."

Left alone, he tried to look around him, but he was hardly aware of what he saw. The important thing was what he heard. Miss Harriet Arrup played with maturity, with feeling, even with a passion that boded well for their having a happy time together. But what she played was still, *DA, da, da, da, DEE, da, da, da.*

He didn't dare tell her that, though. He complimented her on her musical ability, and she smiled with pleasure. "My teacher is sure I'll win a prize next week," she said. "Those of us who work for Blivins, Blevens or Murphy and Finger aren't allowed to enter the general contests, you know. But we have a special contest of our own."

"That's certainly a lucky break for you," said Rinaldo. And he wondered, now that she herself had broached the subject, whether he hadn't better continue with more questions about the Contest. Better wait till later, he decided. Better wait until we've established a more, shall we say, intimate relationship. Better wait until her defenses are down.

She talked later, but he learned nothing new, except that at certain moments it was a hell of a distracting thing to have a girl try to catch non-existent flies. Not exactly a wasted evening, he thought, especially for a man who had been out in space alone so long, but still it brought him no closer to his goal of learning the origin of the Contest.

And during the next few days he learned definitely that Mr. Finger couldn't see him. Mr. Finger was far too busy, and he didn't need the publicity Rinaldo's book could give.

I'm up against a blank wall, he thought. A very thick and solidly constructed wall. I haven't got the strength to go through it, but maybe I can go around. Francis Finger is Jove, the official originator of the contest. But who put Minerva into Jove's head, perhaps while Jove wasn't looking? His daughter's playing? Nonsense. Advertising firms and counseling firms just don't think as spontaneously as all that in terms of billion dollar contests.

Harriet doesn't know, and she seems to think that Finger himself doesn't. But there are people who know more about a man than he knows himself. His private secretary, of course, but secretaries keep their lips buttoned. His wife, his mistresses if I could find them, his daughter . . .

His daughter.

Two days later, with Harriet's help, a word from Thrigman, and some contrivance of his own, he met little Joyce Finger. It was at an exclusive girls' school, where he had been invited to give an evasive and completely

out of place lecture on "My Two Years Alone in Space," and after the lecture he had answered questions. The object of the questions, from his point of view, was to get the kids to talk.

Joyce was eight years old, and a little shy and hesitant, as befitted a young girl whose father was always sparkling professionally and throwing off glittering ideas that put her own childish concepts to shame. Her nails, he noticed, were bitten to the quick. But Rinaldo was at his most paternal, and he felt genuinely sorry for the kid, and after a time Joyce warmed up, took a preliminary bite or two at her fingernails, and began to get a few things off her childish chest.

The subject she chose for conversation was one that made her important to the other kids. After all, her father was supposed to be the originator of the great Contest, the Contest for which all the other kids did their practicing. And it was her own practicing that had given him the idea. The contest composition was the very one she herself had been playing.

"My Daddy says I could win a prize easy, only it wouldn't be fair. I'm not allowed to play in the Contest."

"My, isn't that thrilling. Joyce, I hear that you're the one who gave your Daddy the idea."

"Daddy says I give him lots of ideas."

"My Mommy says I give *her* ideas," added another little girl.

"Not ideas like this one," said Joyce. She was the center of attention now, and she was determined to remain in that position. "Daddy says I used to drive him crazy with my practicing. Always the same thing, day after day. He says it was my fault he had to go to Dr. Cloutz. But he says he don't mind it now. He says now I gave him the idea for a billion dollar contest, I can play anything, and he'll listen with pleasure. He says the Contest did him more good than Dr. Cloutz did."

She was babbling on, but Rinaldo had stopped listening. Dr. Cloutz was a well-known psychiatrist. Of course, any psychiatrist that Francis Finger went to would have to be well known. And who else knew things about a man that he didn't know himself — who else but a psychiatrist?

Rinaldo felt a sense of irritation at himself for not having thought of it sooner. It was part of the irritation he was now beginning to feel all the time. The irritation that came from that damned, endless tinkling.

Making an appointment with Dr. Cloutz was a difficult task, and a breathtakingly expensive one. But Rinaldo had in his favor the fact that he had just come back from two years in space, and that Dr. Cloutz might expect to be professionally interested in examining him. And while waiting for his appointment, he ran around and picked up many facts which he felt might be useful.

When he was finally ushered into the great doctor's office, he felt ill at ease. How do you go about picking the mind of a man who makes it his profession to pick the minds of others?

Dr. Cloutz was of medium height, stocky, bald, the beard he cultivated brown and flecked with gray. His eyes were weak and watery, and he had a slight twitch of one eyelid. At the edge of the beard, his cheeks were ruddy.

Through the walls of his office came the omnipresent tinkling sound. "Ah, yes," he said on hearing Rinaldo's name. "Sit down, please. What is the trouble?"

"Dr. Cloutz, as I told your secretary, I have just returned from two years alone in space. I find difficulty in adjusting to some of the changes I've encountered on Earth. Particularly to the endless playing of that goddamn piece everybody is practicing for the Contest."

"I sympathize with you. But if it is no more than that — have you tried anesthetic ear oil?"

"I used it for a few nights to go to sleep. I had to discontinue when I began to have ringing sounds in my ears. And even if it had no ill effects, I find the alternative between deafness and being driven to distraction not a pleasant one."

"You have a phobia about this practicing?"

"Don't you?"

"Please, we are discussing *you*."

"No, Doctor, that isn't what I came here for. There's nothing you can do to make that everlasting noise palatable. All I want to know is how this racket started."

The eyebrows went up, the effect of disapproval somewhat spoiled by the twitching of the eyelid. "I am sorry — I know nothing about that."

"I think you do. Don't try to pull your rank as a psychiatrist on me, Doctor. You were treating Francis Finger when he got the great idea. Did you plant it in his mind hypnotically?"

The eyelid twitched again. Dr. Cloutz said, "My dear young man, what gave you that idea?"

"His daughter. She babbled. And it seemed more plausible than the explanation that everything just came to him out of thin air."

Dr. Cloutz smiled. "It is absurd."

"Is it? You're a Venusian, Dr. Cloutz, aren't you? Mr. Finger came to you, so apparently he has no great prejudice against Venusians. And yet, when the great thought struck his master mind — complete in all its details — Venus was one of the planets barred from participation in the Contest. How do you explain that?"

Dr. Cloutz didn't seem disconcerted by the question. He said, "The

explanation is simple. Venus, like Mars and like Jupiter's moons, is not well populated. In many ways its life is still primitive. It would not benefit the sponsors to conduct their Contest among people who are too busy struggling for their existence to spend time playing the piano, or listening to the radio."

"But do the sponsors benefit from their Contest on Earth? It's costing a billion dollars, Dr. Cloutz. What do their total sales amount to? How do they expect to get their billion back?"

"I am not informed about the financial details —"

"Most people aren't, or they'd smell something fishy. Could it be, Dr. Cloutz, that this whole Contest is subsidized by some unknown source, working through one or two of the sponsors?"

Dr. Cloutz looked at him mildly. "That is a strange thing to say."

"Maybe. But I've been doing a lot of thinking about this. I don't think the sponsors benefit from the Contest. Who does?"

"The public. Think of the good the money does when it goes to some poor unfortunate family —"

"Please, Doctor, don't nauseate me. All the public gains is a headache. Why, it's affected even you. Maybe you put the idea into Finger's head, but it's backfired as far as you're concerned personally."

Dr. Cloutz said, "Again I must remind you, you did not come here to discuss *me*."

"I came to find out how this thing started. Who put you up to it, Doctor? Venus? Mars? A combination of the extra-terrestrial colonies?"

"You have strange thoughts."

"The strange thing is that no one else has them. Maybe I have delusions, Doctor — but you're the man to tell them to, aren't you? What I've figured out is this. The other planets are just building themselves up. They aren't so primitive as you'd have me believe — not if they can turn out finished psychiatrists — but their industries are just growing, and they're very susceptible to competition. And Earth's industries have been able to squeeze them out of profitable markets.

"Now, suppose they were to strike back — at the very source? It would be simple to cut Earth's production. Just drive a good part of Earth's population into a condition approaching insanity."

"We no longer use the word," said Dr. Cloutz. "It has no scientific meaning."

"Never mind the word. The condition is there. You dangle a billion dollars in prizes before people's noses. And they can't help themselves, they reach for it — and go crazy."

"The incidence of severe neuroses," said Dr. Cloutz, still being scientific,

“has risen tremendously. The incidence of psychoses only very slightly.”

“All right, most of them just go *almost* crazy. Overall efficiency drops 20, 25 per cent. I’ve been looking at some of the figures, Doctor, and they tell the story. And the drop in efficiency enables Mars and Venus and the others to compete successfully.”

“A very interesting theory. Unfortunately, you have no proof of it.”

“I know that, Doctor. I just wanted your opinion about it.”

“I can say only that your theory is as absurd as it is interesting.”

“Doctor, how would you like to undergo a lie-detector test? How would you like to be questioned, with the use of the proper drugs and gadgets, by a couple of Earth psychiatrists who are just as expert at dragging things out of the human mind as you are, and have the upper hand?”

Dr. Cloutz became motionless. Even the twitch in his eye seemed frozen in place. He said softly, “Your delusion goes to dangerous lengths. I can say only that if you were actually to try to carry out such a plan, the result would be unfortunate — for you. It would be easy to convince my colleagues that your period of loneliness in space has induced persistent hallucinations. I understand that some of them are described in the early chapters of your book.”

“My book? My dear Dr. Cloutz, do you mean that you’ve actually gone to the trouble to learn about me, and to get hold of those chapters from my book? You don’t have to say another word. You have convinced me that you think I’m dangerous. You have convinced me that I’m right.”

“You are shrewd,” said Dr. Cloutz. “You can reason. But your reasoning will not persuade anyone. Do you realize that Earth psychiatrists too are susceptible to the desire for sudden wealth? They have children, they want their children to win prizes. They too are being driven to distraction. If you try — as you think — to disillusion them, they will vent their anger upon you. And the ordinary citizen, who sees his hopes of a great prize threatened, will tear you limb from limb.”

“I know that. People love their illusions. I won’t try to take anybody’s away. I just wanted to know the truth for my own satisfaction. I just wanted to make sure who was going crazy around here.”

“The disease, you may be sure, will run its course.”

“What is its course?” asked Rinaldo. “After a while, the old pianos will wear out under the pounding, and there’ll be so many twitchy neurotics that nobody will be capable of constructing new ones. Then the disease will just die out naturally. Is that what you mean?”

“That is not what I mean. I am quite sure that the disease will die out before the pianos do. Meanwhile, did you know that many people have begun to leave Earth? The strain is telling on them. I personally am assign-

ing my patients to other psychiatrists. In a month I shall leave for Venus."

Rinaldo laughed at that, and his right foot began to tap. Dr. Cloutz said, "You are being affected. I advise you to move to Mars or Venus also."

"No," said Rinaldo. He stopped tapping. "You're no musician, Doctor, so you don't get it. I was tapping in three-four time — waltz time — not the damned four-four of that piece. I'm pointing out to you that I'm *not* affected, that I can resist suggestion. That, at any rate, I've resisted it so far."

"I should still recommend Venus."

"Venus? No, thanks, Dr. Cloutz, I can resist that suggestion too. I don't intend to hop out of a frying pan into Venus."

"From frying pan to Venus? Now I do not understand you."

"Maybe you're afraid to understand." Rinaldo leaned toward him. "Look, Doctor, you're being an optimist. A senseless optimist. What gives you the idea that the Venusians are any better than all the other damn fools who wear human form? What gives you the idea they could resist going for a billion dollars any more than terrestrials could?"

"This — this insanity would not be permitted on Venus."

"The word's unscientific. And the disease is going to hit Venus, and Mars, and every inhabited satellite in the System. You can't quarantine insanity, Dr. Cloutz. Not when it comes with a billion dollar label. Sooner or later, the industrialists of Earth are going to realize what's been done to them. And they're going to hit back."

"They will be stopped in their tracks," said Dr. Cloutz, and twitched twice, as if to emphasize the firmness of his intentions.

"You can't stop them. As you yourself have pointed out to me, try to take the chance for a prize away from the poor fools who are so busily chasing after it, and they'll tear you limb from limb, Ego from Superego. The same thing goes for Venus."

Dr. Cloutz was silent. For a second he didn't even twitch.

"You get my point, Doctor," went on Rinaldo. "Maybe after a few years the insanity will die down, as you assume, on Earth. After that will come the turn of Mars, or Venus, and then the next planet, and then back to Earth again, and so on. When I was a kid," said Rinaldo, with what seemed at first irrelevance, "science still hadn't conquered the common cold. I'd catch a cold, my brother would catch it from me, and my father from him, and then it would come back to me again. Somebody in the family was always catching cold from some one else. But this is going to be a lot worse than an ordinary cold. And it's going to go on for at least a generation or two."

Dr. Cloutz was pale. "My God," he groaned. "We should have known."

The atomic bomb, the hydrogen bomb, and now this — there never was a weapon that worked only in one direction. What shall I do?"

"Consult a good psychiatrist," said Rinaldo. "Me, I know what I'm going to do. I'm going back to my space station, or another one like it. I'm going to make sure that I'm well stocked up, that the food-manufacturing system is in good order, that I'll be completely self-sufficient for a lifetime."

"Alone?" Dr. Cloutz roused himself and twitched gravely. "That is the sure way to develop a severe mental disturbance."

"I'll have my work. And maybe after a time I won't be alone. There's somebody I'd like to take with me —" He thought of Miss Arrup. "But I don't think there's much chance of it now. Not until after she wins one of those prizes, and can take time off from catching flies. I don't know how long that will require. But I'm going to leave her my address, and in a few years maybe she'll be willing to come on over and see me."

"You are still taking a great chance to be alone in space for so long."

"Not so big as you think, Dr. Cloutz. I'm interested in my work. Didn't I tell you? It's more than a matter of making observations and keeping records."

"In the outline of your book, you indicate that your work was mostly routine."

"I know. The truth is a little too hard for the average reader to take. It would strike him as absurd, and a waste of government money, and in times like these — well, he'd yell to have it cut out. And that would mean cutting *me* out too. But we're scientists, Dr. Cloutz, and as scientist to scientist I can talk frankly to you. Do you know what I'm doing? It's really something along your line."

Dr. Cloutz frowned and twitched. "You treat mental aberrations while isolated in space?"

"I'm what you might call an astronomical psychiatrist. And I don't treat aberrations, I merely study them. I study the crazy asteroids."

"The which?"

Rinaldo grinned. "The name's disconcerting. As a matter of fact, it isn't quite scientific. Technically, they're known as AEEO's — Asteroids with Extremely Eccentric Orbits. But 'crazy asteroids' is good enough for every day use. They're tiny bodies, about two miles or less in diameter, and only four of them are known so far. They weren't discovered until recently."

"But why the unscientific name?" demanded Dr. Cloutz.

"Wait till I tell you what they do. You know how ordinary asteroids travel — in ellipses around the sun, like those of the planets. Well, the crazy ones go along in much the same way their pals do — with one little exception. At a certain point in space, they loop the loop — and then go

on as if nothing had happened. Did you ever hear anything more insane in your life?"

"But why? Is the cause magnetic, or electrical, or due to forces not yet understood?"

"'Due to forces not yet understood' covers it nicely. I'm trying to find out what those forces are. I'm also trying to learn why the number of loopy ones is increasing. The asteroids have been under observation for generations, and not until ten years ago was the first crazy one discovered. A very interesting phenomenon, Dr. Cloutz, and it will help me remain in good mental condition. What better way is there to keep sane than to study insanity in others?"

A frown and a twitch. "Your antidote may not be as effective as you think it is," said Dr. Cloutz heavily. "Judging from my own experience, there is no escape from danger in work alone."

"That danger I'll take. The danger of that diabolical Contest I won't. Well, thanks, Dr. Cloutz, for all the information you've given me. It's been a pleasure talking to you. I hope Earth and the rest of the planets keep on having a nice economic war. Too bad about the casualties, but then you can't expect to have a war without casualties, can you?"

Dr. Cloutz shook his head regretfully. And twitched.

The new space station was just like the old one. Built on a sane asteroid, not a crazy one. It was restful and comfortable. The work, fascinating at all times because of its objective, involved not too much routine, not too little. And none of that *DA, da, da, da, DEE, da, da, da*.

In the store room he stopped with surprise. Something new had been added.

A piano.

He looked at the Captain of the ship which had brought him. The man grinned. "The Contest has been extended to all the boys in space stations. They've got to be from Earth, of course — nobody from Mars, or Venus, or the others can get in."

"Yet," added Rinaldo mentally. Aloud he said, "But why?"

"You know how most of them are. They can't take it being out here the way you can. This'll help keep them sane. There's a book of instructions, so that anybody can learn to play, whether he ever touched a piano before or not. And there'll be special arrangements for broadcasting your playing back to the judges on Earth. All the details have been worked out."

Rinaldo stared for a moment in silence.

The Captain said, "You didn't expect that, did you? Well, have a good time. I have to be getting along."

They shook hands, Rinaldo's mind still dazed. And then the ship was gone, and he was alone.

He stared at the piano. What a crazy idea. Very considerate, of course. The poor fellows out in space mustn't be excluded, they too must have a crack at that billion. It would be funny if he returned from space a millionaire, he thought. Very funny. Wouldn't Miss Arrup be surprised, if she could spare the time from practicing and fly-catching.

He picked up the instruction book. The prize tune looked as simple as it sounded. All it needed was five easy lessons. A kid could get to it in five weeks, a grown man with reasonable intelligence ought to master the notes in a day. And then there would come the months of practice, of sounding off, *DA, da, da, da, DEE, da, da, da . . .*

Almost as if hypnotized, he sat down. There was a keyboard chart right on the piano itself. You put your right hand here, your left here. These were the notes —

Suddenly, he stood up shuddering. He looked around, picked up the first heavy instrument his hands could find, a wrench, and hefted it carefully. It would do.

He brought it down in a graceful swing across the keyboard. As the imitation ivories leaped in alarm, he said to himself, "Easy, Rinaldo, easy. The piano won't run away. Let's not be hasty and crude about this."

He went on with his operation on the keyboard, quite calmly, almost casually. When he had smashed that, he turned his attention to the strings. Under his tender ministrations they ripped apart with the prettiest jangling noise he had ever heard. In four-four time.
