

Astounding SCIENCE FICTION

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NUMBER NINE

BY CLEVE CARTMILL

His active trouble began on that afternoon when Jackson Andrews caught rabbit Number Nine reading the textbook on optical glass.

His first thought, naturally, was that Number Nine had somehow got out of her cage and hopped up on the laboratory desk where a head of lettuce had been put down absently and forgotten. The book, propped against the desk lamp so that the rabbit could see it with one eye, could also have been a piece of absent-mindedness.

Then, as he stood in the doorway touching these possibilities with the edges of his mind, Number Nine turned a page and continued to munch on the head of lettuce.

Certain oddities then began to agitate Jackson's consciousness. The lettuce was Iceberg in variety, and he knew for a fact that the only head in the house had been in his refrigerator.

But Jackson was not one to jump to conclusions. He was young, to be sure, but his was the scientific method: careful accumulation of data over a long period of time, the meticulous classification of same, and even then the drawing only of conclusions which seemed inevitable.

He looked back at the rabbit. It continued to nibble the diminishing

head of lettuce, and did not seem to display any interest in the textbook. But even as he watched, Number Nine reached out a paw and flipped another page.

Slow reader, Jackson thought inanely, and backed out of the doorway. He would check first on the lettuce. He didn't want to go into the laboratory—yet. His mind refused to examine the reasons why, perhaps because he could not possibly call them scientific reasons.

The refrigerator was closed, but one of the kitchen chairs stood suggestively close to the door. Jackson firmly put aside any contemplation of this and opened the box. The lettuce was gone.

He closed the door and went aimlessly out the back way to the garage. He wasn't sure just what he was going to do, but he wanted to go some place where he wouldn't be alone with his own thoughts.

He started his car, and it seemed to drive itself to Cynthia's apartment house. He went up to the top floor in the elevator and knocked on a door. It was answered by an elf.

That's what he thought in the first jolt of realization, but the elf became a little girl in costume.

"Are you coming to my party?" she asked.

The human race developed the trick of intelligence to survive; the rabbit race survived by sheer reproduction. Wherefore Number Nine looked like a first-rate menace!

Illustrated by Brush



Jackson looked up at the number on the door. "Imagine that," he said to the little girl, and turned toward the stairway. He could feel her eyes on his back as he started down.

He descended two floors, knocked at the right number, and it was Cynthia who greeted him this time. She said, "Oh, nuts!" and fled. "Come in and shut the door," she called over her shoulder. He caught the sheen of metal on her dark hair as she vanished into the bathroom in a swirl of terry cloth.

He entered the room and oozed into a chair, from which he gazed vacantly at a spot in space halfway between him and the nearest wall.

"Of course," she said, through the bathroom door, "you wouldn't think to call and let me know you were coming. Not dressed, curlers, no make-up. Well, you can just sit for a while. There's fresh coffee on the stove."

Coffee, he thought with sudden desire. A cup of coffee would go good right now. Help settle his nerves. He got to his feet, went out of the apartment with no thought in mind but coffee. Black. But maybe with just a touch of rum.

He summoned the elevator, presently got into his car and drove home. He parked at the curb in front, but went around to the kitchen door. Before he did anything else, he took the kitchen chair from beside the icebox and set it on the back porch. With a ball of twine from a service cupboard he tied the chair

to the drain pipe underneath one of the laundry tubs.

He put fire under the coffee pot and set the table with a clean cup, saucer, spoon and his emergency bottle of rum. He waited until the pot made hot-enough noises, turned off the fire, and filled the cup with rum. He sat down and stirred the rum absently, tasted a spoonful and, finding the temperature lukewarm, drank the rest in two swallows.

He rinsed the cup, turned it upside down on the drain board, and walked into the living room. He switched on the radio and went to the big front window. With his handkerchief he cleaned off an area of dusty glass and stared unseeingly at the front lawn.

He didn't want to think, but slivers of thought penetrated his consciousness despite himself. Number Nine . . . notes on treatment . . . neural pathology . . . reaction times . . . he ought to get his notes, but they were in There . . .

He squared his shoulders and started toward the laboratory. The telephone rang. Cynthia.

"What are you doing home?" she demanded.

"Huh?" he said vaguely. "Me?"

"Yes, you. I thought you were getting a cup of coffee."

"Oh. Oh, yes. I just had one, thanks. My mawn needs lowing."

There was a long silence.

"Well, good-by," Jackson said finally, and hung up. Another cup

of coffee before mowing the lawn, he thought with pleasure.

He heated the coffee and had another cupful of rum. He sipped it this time, for the temperature seemed about right. He thought, with smug self-approval, that he had turned the fire off just in time. A minute longer and it would have been too hot. That's what practice does for you, he thought.

He eyed the level in the bottle. Just one more cup left, he thought. If he drank it immediately, it would still be the right temperature and he wouldn't have to waste gas in heating it again.

He emptied the bottle into his cup and raised it to his lips. Number Nine trotted through the kitchen at this moment.

Jackson set the cup down and bowed. The rabbit waved a negligent paw at him and went out onto the back porch. Jackson sipped at his cup and listened to rummaging sounds on the porch. He got up and went to the doorway.

"Can I help?" he asked politely.

Number Nine was standing on her hind feet, apparently trying to reach one of the objects on a window ledge.

She pointed at a small crucible which Jackson had used in some forgotten experiment and he gave it to the rabbit.

Number Nine held it in her front paws and hopped away on her hind feet. Jackson took his seat at the

table and finished his drink. It occurred to him again that he should get his notes from the laboratory, but he decided against it. Number Nine was apparently busy, and Jackson, innately polite, hated to interrupt.

His telephone rang again.

After some difficulty in distinguishing between transmitter and receiver, Jackson answered.

"Dr. Andrews?" said a male voice. "This is Carroll at Trans-America Aircraft."

"Oh, yesh. Hello."

"You expected to have some kind of results by now, doctor. Are you in a position to discuss the matter?"

"Definitely, yesh."

Mr. Carroll's voice grew warmer. "Good, good. I told you at our last meeting that the Board was intensely interested in your plan to speed up reaction time in our pilots and other personnel. And the Board meets tomorrow. Could you come out and bring your data this afternoon?"

"Why—" Jackson hesitated, and his subconscious took over.

If the treatment on Number Nine, it told him, could achieve in a rabbit the results he had been ignoring consciously, think what it could do in intelligent human beings. The current concept of genius would be relegated to moronic levels. He hadn't tested Number Nine's reaction times, but that was a minor matter. What had happened to Number Nine mentally was not only tremendous and earth-shaking, it could bring him a fortune.

He snapped back to the present and tried to frame a sentence without sibilants, for he was beginning to realize what had thickened his tongue. "I'll bring out my reshul—Uh, I'll come over right away."

"Fine, doctor. I'll be waiting."

Jackson hung up and went out to the kitchen. He verified his suspicions by the emptiness of the bottle and fullness of the pot, and knew he needed a quick shot of B-1 and a cold shower.

He came out of the shower in comparative sobriety and considerable dismay. He fought his reluctance, which had returned two-fold, to enter the laboratory, and the battle was a stalemate until the thought of great riches tipped the scales.

He dressed, combed his hair, squared his shoulders and went to the laboratory.

Number Nine was crouched at ease on the desk, with another book propped directly in front of her this time. She looked like any tame rabbit from behind, even though a little larger than most. Still, there was something, a gleam—

Jackson caught his breath and strode over to the desk. Number Nine waved what looked like a greeting and continued reading. But Number Nine was reading through spectacles.

Not spectacles, exactly, but a pair of prisms which had been in a spectrograph, now fastened to frames

which had been bent to conform to the contours of Number Nine's head and eye structure. Jackson remembered the frames—an old pair discarded when he bought rimless reading glasses.

"Excuse me," Jackson said tentatively, "but can you understand what I say?"

Number Nine turned full face to Jackson, her pink eyes magnified through the prisms, and nodded gravely.

"Can you really read?" Another nod. "Did you fix up those spectacles?" Again, the affirmative inclination.

Jackson thought a moment, went to his files, and took the notes on Number Nine's treatment. He laid the carbon copy on his desk. He tucked the original in his pocket and Number Nine under one arm. "We're going places," he said. "And I mean Places," he added with sudden glee.

He placed Number Nine beside him on the seat of his convertible, took keys from his pocket, and fumbled at the ignition switch for some time before he discovered he was trying to put the key in it upside down.

When he turned the key, Number Nine promptly jumped over the right-hand door to the sidewalk and looked back at Jackson pinkly.

"Hey, come on back here!"

Number Nine backed off a couple of paces and shook her head. Jackson scratched his.

"You mean you're scared to ride in a car?" She shook her head again. "Well, come on, then." Another negative. Jackson scratched his nose. "Are you scared to ride with me, then?" This brought a decided affirmative. "You think I'm not sober enough." Agreement to this was emphatic.

Well, Jackson reflected, maybe Number Nine was right. Here was a grown man arguing in public with a rabbit wearing spectacles, and taking it calmly.

"Will you go on a bus?"

Number Nine agreed. Jackson pocketed his keys, got out and tucked Number Nine under his arm again, and began the two-block walk to the bus stop.

He met and passed a few pedestrians, but they seemed intent on their own business and none gave the spectacled rabbit a second glance. If they only knew, Jackson thought, thinking of tomorrow's headlines and fame. For he intended to go from the aircraft company to a newspaper office. Perhaps the company would arrange a press conference.

But if the pedestrians were indifferent or unaware, the bus driver was not. "No rabbits," he said firmly, "without they're in a box. Or a silk hat," he added with a chuckle, giving the blonde two seats back an arch glance.

"But your sign only says no dogs," Jackson protested.

"The sign ain't drivin'," the driver

said, with another backward glance.

Jackson stood at the curb, after the bus was gone, in low spirits which were not the result alone of the bus driver's animal discrimination. His recent debauch contributed its share, too. He was on the verge of getting a hangover.

A nearby Neon sign gave him ideas. The sign read "Scotty's."

He set Number Nine on the bar, and Scotty gave him a one-sided smile. "What's the matter with the rabbit, nearsighted?"

"Reading glasses, so she can read with both eyes at once," Jackson said. "Give me a double rum, and give her a side order of lettuce and today's paper, if you have it."

Scotty filled the order with the air of a man who is never surprised.

"Will you stay here and read while I make a phone call?" Jackson asked Number Nine. A nod sent him to a wall telephone at the back. He called Cynthia.

"I've got an important appointment at Trans-America," he said. "Will you drive me?"

"Well, . . . yes," she answered hesitantly. "But why don't you drive yourself?"

"My rabbit won't ride with me."

"Did you say—?" She broke off helplessly.

"Yeah, my rabbit won't ride with me."

"Hm-m-m. I... see. Where are you?"

"Scotty's."

"I thought so," Cynthia said grimly. "I'll be right over."

He went back to the bar and found Number Nine semicircled by a small group of patrons.

"If I didn't know better," a tall man said, "I'd say that rabbit was reading the paper."

"It sure is a good trick," admitted a truck driver. "Oh, here comes the guy what belongs to it. I never heard of a rabbit doin' tricks. Thought they was too dumb."

"It's no trick," Jackson said, swallowing half his rum.

"Don't gimme that. He ain't really readin'."

"She," Jackson corrected. He glanced at the paper. "Show the man the word 'Russia' in that top headline," he said.

Number Nine, munching a leaf of lettuce, put a paw on the word.

Dead silence fell, except for Scotty's washing of glasses at the far end of the bar.

"Signals yet," the tall man said in disgust.

"You try it," Jackson invited.

The tall man showed Number Nine a press card. He looked up at the ceiling and said in a bored voice, "All right, show me the paragraph which says, 'Sources close to administration leaders, who declined to be quoted, said the impending crisis is one which will—'"

Number Nine put her paw on a paragraph in the middle of the right-hand column.

"Coincidence," the tall man said, but in a shaken voice. "Let's try again. Show me the item which says, 'Vivisection Held Boon To Science.'"

Number Nine looked up at the tall man, then turned her back on him with a shudder.

"You hurt her feelings," Jackson said sharply.

"Yeah," said a red-haired man who seemed to be holding up the bar with his paunch. "Talking about that Vivian. She's jealous."

Scotty came down the bar with his lopsided smile. "Another round, gents?"

"I'll buy," the newspaper man said. "Put it down, Scotty, till pay day. And give the lady another lettuce."

"Did you see that rabbit read, Scotty?" the truck driver asked.

"I got no time for reading," Scotty said. "Except the sport pages."

"She's awful sensitive," the red-haired man said, "and any guy that'd make her feel bad ought to be ashamed."

"I'm awfully sorry," the newspaper man said. "No offense intended."

Number Nine turned around at this, and put a shy paw on the vivisection item.

"I'm forgiven!" the newspaper

man crowed. "I won't do it again, old girl. Now show me the paragraph—"

"Dr. Andrews," said a cold voice, obviously sifted between clenched teeth.

The semicircle parted for Cynthia. She looked at the rabbit, the rum, the men, and finally at Jackson.

"You called me?"

The onlookers, who had apparently heard this tone before, drifted away.

Both persuasive endearments and demonstrations by Number Nine were required to mollify Cynthia. But when she comprehended, her dark eyes sparkled and she consented to a rum collins. Number Nine thumped the paper.

"What's the matter?" Jackson asked.

Number Nine placed a paw on an item which had to do with driving.

Jackson sighed. "No drink for you, I guess." He picked up the rabbit. "Bluenose," he snorted. "Let's go."

"So long, Miss Rabbitt," the newspaper man called.

Cynthia chattered away about a church wedding and houses in the country, with scads of money earned by Number Nine, on the way to Trans-America. She patted the rabbit occasionally. She discussed certain phrases in the marriage ceremony as she drove between fields of grain which bordered the aircraft property. She sent Jackson into the

administration building with a quick but meaningful kiss.

Mr. Carroll, the grizzled personnel manager, listened attentively to Jackson's account of his experiments, examined the notes on Number Nine's treatment with alert but expressionless gray eyes, but his square face became graver and graver as the rabbit went through her paces at Jackson's request.

"It won't do, Dr. Andrews," he said at last. "My advice to you is to destroy both rabbit and notes and go fishing."

Jackson reacted with openmouthed astonishment. Number Nine turned her back coldly on both men.

"In the interests of efficiency," Mr. Carroll explained, "we were interested in speeding the reaction times of certain classifications of personnel. Your work and research along those lines is well-known, and we asked you to try to find a way of speeding up reaction to outside stimulus. But this"—he pointed to Number Nine's rigid back—"is dangerous."

"But, but," Jackson stammered, "this completion I've experimented . . . I mean, well, anyway . . . has world-wide significance."

"Exactly," Mr. Carroll said dryly. "If the intelligence capacity of a few—only a few—pilots were raised as high above the norm as this rabbit's has been above its norm, they'd not only take over the company, they'd take over the country, too. Maybe the world."

Jackson thought it over. "Yes, I

see what you mean. I'm sorry, Number Nine," he said, getting up.

Cynthia took one look at his long face as he folded his legs into the car and placed Number Nine on his lap. "Well?" she demanded. "What did he say?"

"A lot of things," Jackson replied. "I got to think for a while. Let me work it out in my own head first. Let's go."

Cynthia U-turned and drove back between the grain fields that were beginning to turn purple with dusk. Jackson rolled down the window on his side to let in the cool breeze. Number Nine looked ahead, her ears folded.

Her ears suddenly shot up as a wild rabbit bounded across the road some fifty yards ahead, and without warning she flung herself through the open window and hit the pavement running. She disappeared into the grain in a few bounds on a course calculated to intercept the rabbit ahead.

"Stop!" Jackson cried, and was out of the car while the tires were still whining, and off after Number Nine.

He coursed through the knee-high grain like a hunting dog, and wished he had one. He found Number Nine's spectacles, discarded, he suspected, for less intellectual pursuits.

He tried cajolery. "Here, Num-

ber Nine! Here, baby! I won't kill you. Come back, please, little rabbit!"

He returned in dejection to the edge of the field where Cynthia stood. She took it well.

"After all," she said, "it's just another rabbit. You can repeat the treatment on a new one."

Jackson grunted as she started the car.

"Maybe," he said, "but just maybe, she won't pass her characteristics to the next generation. But she knows the treatment."

"So what?" Cynthia said lightly. "Where to?"

"I'm hungry."

They had a sandwich and coffee at a drive-in. Jackson gloomed in silence, and Cynthia let him alone.

"Now where?" she asked, when they were on their way again.

"Let's stop at my place first. I left the radio on."

He left Cynthia at the curb while he ran into the house. He turned off the radio, and noticed the laboratory door was open, the light on. He went to it, not daring to hope.

His pessimism was justified: Not only was the carbon copy of his notes gone, but so also was every chemical he had used in the treatment of Number Nine.

And rabbits, he thought with real fear, multiply.

THE END