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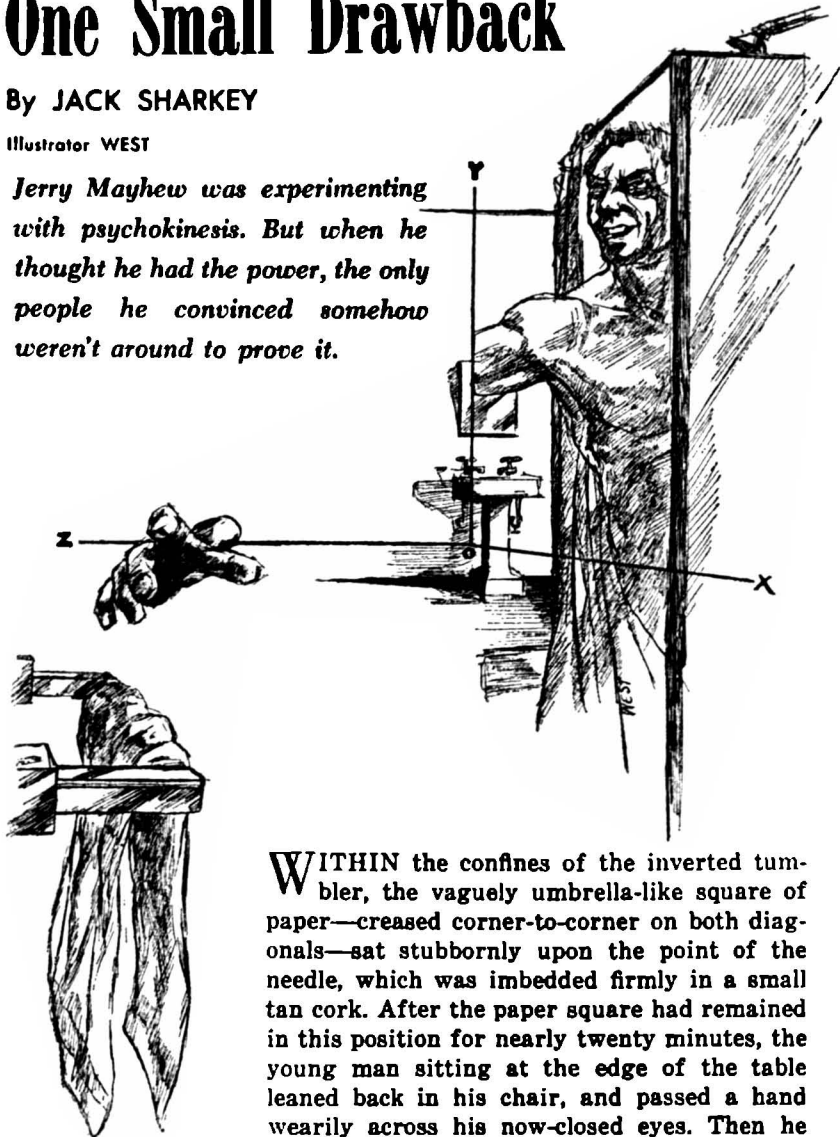
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# One Small Drawback

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator WEST

*Jerry Mayhew was experimenting with psychokinesis. But when he thought he had the power, the only people he convinced somehow weren't around to prove it.*



**W**ITHIN the confines of the inverted tumbler, the vaguely umbrella-like square of paper—creased corner-to-corner on both diagonals—sat stubbornly upon the point of the needle, which was imbedded firmly in a small tan cork. After the paper square had remained in this position for nearly twenty minutes, the young man sitting at the edge of the table leaned back in his chair, and passed a hand wearily across his now-closed eyes. Then he peeked across his knuckles at his companion.

"Well," grinned Jerry Mayhew, "that seems to be that."

"You haven't been at it even half an hour," his vis-a-vis observed with a smile in which the frank humor softened the mockery. "Most people give it at least an hour."

"With what result?" asked Jerry, with open sarcasm.

The other man laughed. "Much the same, I'm afraid. After all —" He lifted the tumbler, and the motion set to stirring an eddy of air that sufficed to twirl the delicately balanced paper square. "—it's still only a theory. For all we so-called psychic 'experts' know, this approach to the problem only makes things tougher. Perhaps the ideal beginning for a novice should be with a brick; a cornerstone, even."

The young man raised another tumbler to his lips, and took a long pull at the iced liquid therein, his eyes distant and thoughtful. Then he set it down upon the table once more, and said, "Tell me honestly, doctor; do *you* think psychokinesis is possible?"

The man addressed—Dr. Edmund Baird, of the Norval University Research Board—tilted head and shoulders forward just slightly enough to imply a shrug and the smallest of nods. "I *like* to think it is. Let me put it that way. Oh, I know it hasn't so far been demonstrable, but neither

has the theory that a man will die on the face of the sun."

"*Theory!*?" Jerry scoffed.

Baird raised thin grey eyebrows. "That's all it is, you know, until the day some poor astronaut *does* die on the face of the sun. But that's what I mean: Because a thing is not demonstrable, it does not therefore disprove the thing as possible, not by a long shot."

"And you believe that if I sat and stared at that square of paper hard enough, and long enough, I could eventually make it twirl with mind-power alone? And then move on to self-teleportation and continent-lifting?"

"The staring is not necessary, so far as I know, save for its being simply an aid to concentration. And then again—" A rueful quirk twisted the side of his mouth. "—perhaps the concentration is wrong, too. For all I know, the easiest way to influence an object physically with one's mind is to do it by reflex, as it were. A half-hearted, half-thought-out, half-projected thought might shatter a concrete pillbox, so long as the thinker actually believed he could do it."

"Oooh," Jerry groaned, shutting his eyes, "please don't start that again! We only start talking in circles!"

"It's a circular problem," said

Baird. "To do it, one must believe he can; to believe he can, one must know it is possible; to know that, one must have been able to do it. I didn't promise you it would be easy, Jerry."

"You didn't promise it would be possible, either."

Baird laughed again. "I can hardly promise that, since I still don't know, myself. But I *did* promise my wife I'd be home by midnight, and it's ten to now."

**B**AIRD rose from his chair, waving off Jerry's automatic offer of assistance, and with his cane made a three-legged movement to the door. Jerry was there before him, and helped him on with his hat and topcoat.

"Thank you for an attentive, comfortable evening," Baird said at the door. "I wish I were as comfortable lecturing in the classroom— And that you were half so attentive."

"Your own theoretical talks are a lot more interesting than the psychology course, I'm afraid, sir."

Baird tendered the younger man a wink. "I feel the same way," he said, then went out into the night. At the end of the walk, guiding his faltering steps with the light that spilled from the still-open door, he turned and said, "You know, Jerry . . . Hypnosis might help— In conditioning the mind, I mean. Re-

mind me, next time I stop over, to have a whack at the problem from your *subconscious*."

Jerry promised he would, then returned to the dining room of the fraternity house for the empty glasses. As he carried them out to the kitchen for the freshman "pledge" to wash in the morning, his young face was creased with thought.

Leaving the glassware carelessly on the drainboard of the sink, he climbed the stairs to the room he shared with Brad Melik, another senior at Norval. Inside the room, he found Brad snoring lightly in the lower bunk bed. Brad's radio was playing some soft FM pop tunes in the darkened corner by the window, and Jerry crossed the floor and snapped the switch off, gently.

The ensuing quiet, punctuated contrapuntally by a mild muffled snoring from his roommate's bunk, felt like warm velvet pressing in upon his ears. Jerry glanced at his watch, noted the near approach of midnight, then set his gaze upon a pen-and-ink class schedule taped on the wall above his desk. The following day was Friday. He had no morning classes.

"Good," said Jerry, aloud. He slid into the armchair beside his desk, adjusted the gooseneck lamp to angle its light down over his shoulder, then ripped open a fresh pack of cigarettes and lit

one. After a few thoughtful puffs, he stretched out a long arm to the bookshelf on the wall, snagged the upper rim of a thick volume, and tugged it tilting out into his hand. Scanning the index rapidly, he found the pages he sought, and slumped down further on the end of his spine and started reading.

His cigarette was lying dead in the ashtray, two-thirds of its length undisturbed cylindrical white ash, when he closed the book and scowled.

"I wonder if I could," he mused, in a half-sounded whisper. According to the book, auto-hypnosis was even simpler than getting suggestion from outside sources, if one just knew how to achieve it. The trick was to let the mind relax, to let awareness of surroundings fade away, to cut off all sensory sensation, be it sound, the feel of the chair beneath his body, or the appearance of the room. Then, when the mind was sufficiently dissociated from the body, the *will* took over, and simply gave the body its orders. If the book were correct, the orders would be obeyed.

"But will my *mind* take orders from my *mind*?" Jerry asked himself. The book hadn't quite covered that part of auto-hypnosis to his satisfaction. There was mention made of things like achieving mental tranquillity, or of teaching oneself to awaken at

a given hour without benefit of alarm clock, or how to increase one's power of memory. Not, however, a damned thing about the release of a man's psychokinetic powers. If any.

"At least," he thought, wearily, "I have nothing to lose. The worst that can happen is I'll fall asleep in the chair." He lifted the volume once more, and checked to reassure himself that a person simply left in hypnotic "sleep" would drift soon into normal sleep, and awaken "unusually refreshed".

"What the hell," said Jerry. "I can't go wrong."

That decided, he set to work trying self-hypnosis.

THE sense of sight was easily submerged by closing his eyes. Sound was a bit harder, but then Brad twisted around in bed and ceased snoring, and there was nothing more for Jerry to hear but the enveloping silence of the night. And, he found, by lying relaxed and letting himself just sag, his bodily sensations grew tenuous and began to ebb away. Final departure of all sensory experience was reached by beginning his strong-willed concentration on his subconscious mind, and thus distracting himself from any sensory messages he might otherwise have received. He pushed his mind toward Knowledge.

He was floating. He, Jerry, himself, the ego that was Jerry Mayhew hovered isolated in an inky void. He let his thoughts lie calm and dormant for many minutes, then let the tiniest particle of concentration formulate the inner-eye image of a door. The door hung against the void, guarding the pathway to the knowledge he sought. Slowly, carefully, his will reached out and tried to move the door ajar. It remained steady, its position as firmly fixed as though its edges had been fused with cement. Again he tried, and again the door remained shut.

Carefully, Jerry made his will relax its efforts. It was obvious that force of thought was not the answer. He let his will float idly before that singular door in the empty darkness, while he reasoned out the problem. It would seem that the secrets lying in wait beyond the door were not to be pried from their refuge. But—a spark flared in his mind, exciting his consciousness— But if the knowledge could not be taken out . . . Could his mind, perhaps, simply enter *in*?

Again his mind approached the door, the door which gave familiar form to the barrier-ness that it actually was. This time, he did not try to move the door ajar. Instead, he let his mind lean upon it, let his inner self gently press its psychic inertia

upon the portal, concentrating on the thought of—not moving it—but on the thought of simply *passing* it . . .

And then he was within. And he suddenly Knew.

JERRY blinked his eyes against the warm yellow light, then squinted through them, and finally opened them wide. His back, the lower part of his spine barely still upon the forward edge of the chair, felt as though it were encased in plaster, and his head throbbed dully near the base of his skull where it had propped itself against the upper surface of the chair-back. With an effort, and a few soft curses, he managed to get to his feet, where he arched his back toward normal concavity, and stretched some of the tension from his shoulders.

It was morning, and he'd slept in the chair all the night long. On the floor, the fallen volume caught his eye. He grunted and aimed a kick at it, then reconsidered and simply replaced it upon the bookshelf.

"*That* was a waste," he decided, rubbing the short bristles on his jaw. As always, when he slept in his clothes, he was damp with perspiration. Yawning lustily, and rolling his head on his neck to take out the lingering kinks, he stripped, wrapped a towel about his waist, and—after

grabbing his soap and shaving gear from his locker, stepped into his Japanese-style shower sandals and padded down the hall toward the frat-house wash-room, already crowded.

The shower-spray was hard, hot and stimulating upon his skin, and he turned himself vertically upon an imaginary spit, savoring the blood-stirring tingle of the hissing water. A thin cascade of soap film from his scrubbed forehead slithered down maliciously into his eyes, and stung them unmercifully.

"Yo!" he hollered, wagging a bare arm out of the shower stall toward whoever might still be performing his morning ablutions at the sink. "Gimme th' tow'l, damn it!"

His fingers closed over the thick absorbent pile of the towel, and he muttered his thanks as he sopped the painful suds from his eyes. He blinked them open experimentally, gave a final dab to one inner corner, and said, "Damn near burned my—" He stopped, then, because there was nobody to talk to. He looked at the double-hinged door to the corridor, but it wasn't even swinging. Puzzled, still wiping mechanically at his face with the towel, he squelched in his wet sandals across the tiles to the door and looked outside. At the very end of the hall, Brad was just coming out of their room,

unshaven and unshowered, heading toward him.

"You could have *called me*—" Brad complained, as he squeezed past Jerry in the doorway. "I have classes this morning, if you don't . . . Oh, say, can I borrow your soap? Forgot mine."

Jerry bemusedly handed the bar over to his roommate, then slowly made his way back toward their room. He knew, as surely as he knew that one of the other men might have given him the towel on his way out of the wash-room, that no one had done that at all.

The hair prickled slightly on the nape of his neck as he considered the alternative to human agency giving him that towel. The towel-rack was five feet from the mouth of the stall, a tough stretch for one arm, even if he'd leaned out of the stall. And he hadn't. He'd hollered for a towel, reached—And had gotten a towel.

Still enfolded in that towel, he stood in the center of his room, thinking back to his mental exertions of the previous night. Beyond his final success in penetrating that imaginary doorway, his memory failed him. He'd gone in, and then . . . He'd Known . . .

"Known *what*, though?" he muttered. "What did I find out in there, anyhow?"

He scrubbed at his drooling

hair with the towel, then flung it aside on the bed and commenced dressing. Dr. Baird had a free period coming up in half an hour, and Jerry had a lot he wanted to find out.

AND you're positive that none of your fraternity brothers could have handed you the towel just as he was leaving the room?" asked Baird, his eyes bright and glittery behind his thin spectacles.

Jerry shook his head. "No, sir. Not *that* positive, if you know what I mean. It's just that whoever gave it to me would've had to move like a lightning bolt to get back into his room without my seeing him. Or at least hearing him moving away from the washroom."

Save for themselves, the faculty lounge was empty, though clouded blue with cigarette smoke near the ceiling. Baird leaned back in a leatherette armchair, tapping the tips of his stubby fingers together, thinking.

"Think you could do it again?" he asked, abruptly.

"That's just it, sir," Jerry sighed, nudging his fist into his opened palm, and grinding angrily with the middle knuckle. "I *did* try 'again', after I got back to my room. Felt like an ass, asking Brad's soap to jump into the dish. Especially when it did-

n't. And my shoes and socks got onto my feet the usual way, too."

"Maybe," Baird observed dryly, "it won't work unless you have soap in your eyes."

"Aw, come on, sir—!"

Baird grinned. "Seriously, though, it might have been the fact that your eyes were shut, and thereby *unable* to tell your brain that you *couldn't* get that towel. It gave you the necessary factor of *belief*."

The sudden jangle of a bell in the corridor was followed by the slamming-open of many doors, and the heavy pounding of hurrying feet. Baird grunted gloomily, then got up slowly from his chair, his hand gripping the cane tightly.

"Sorry, son. I have to get to class, now. But I am interested; very interested. I wish we could talk more of this right now, while it's still fresh in your mind, and unembroidered by fancy, but— Can you meet me in the psychology lab tonight, say about seven?"

"Well, I—I *have* a date, sir, but— Ah, hell, she's not that important. I can break it."

"Good," nodded Baird. "Excellent. I'll see you then, Jerry."

After the door had closed behind the older man, Jerry recalled that students were not permitted in the lounge unless actually consulting a teacher, so he went to the door, one hand fum-



bling at the breast pocket of his sportshirt for a cigarette. Only then did he remember that he had—in his eagerness to see Baird—left them back in his room on the desk.

"Holy hell!" he choked, shaken.

Because his fingers, uninformed by his briefly forgetful mind that they could not find the cigarettes in his pocket, had gone ahead and found them there. He stood frozen in the doorway for one short second, then he was springing after Baird down the length of the hall.

He nearly knocked the older man down in his haste, and when he'd blurted out this second occurrence—to the intrigued glances of passing students, who caught his monumental excitement if not his exact words—Jerry was surprised to see, not delight, but sharp suspicion in Baird's bright grey eyes.

"Sir, you— You *believe* me, don't you?" he faltered.

"Yes . . ." said Baird, his voice at once commiserating and clinically aloof. "That is to say, I believe that *you* believe you." Pausing just long enough to let the unnerving implication of this statement register on the young man, he added, "I think my class can wait, after all, Jerry." A pale smile tweaked the corners of his mouth. "I doubt if there will be many tears shed at my unaccustomed absence. Coffee at the

Union Building is—as I recall my own undergraduate days—much more fun than fifty-five minutes of note-taking. Come with me."

"But sir— You don't think I'm . . ."

"Nuts? Well, perhaps, but don't let it worry you. Every man, in his own way, is slightly screwy. Now come along. Madge will be doing the shopping about now, and we'll have my house to ourselves for a few hours."

"But your classes, sir—"

"Only important because one goes there to acquire knowledge. I consider my own acquisition of knowledge as vital a matter as my students'. They want to learn from me; I want to learn from you. Not another word, now, Jerry. Come along."

AFTER filling Dr. Baird in on even the most trivial details concerning the two separate occurrences, Jerry added, uneasily, "But if you believe the possibility of psychokinesis, sir, why are you going to such great lengths to doubt what seem to be two demonstrations?"

"I was thinking only of your mind, son," said Baird, not unkindly. "I don't mean, at all, the fact that you might be self-deluded. I mean the fact that if these things *do* happen, but happen only when no one else is there to observe them, *you* might

begin to suspect your sanity. Auto-hypnosis is no toy. Last night, you meddled with a power that even experts approach on tiptoe, as it were. You see, Jerry, if there *isn't* a hidden power in your mind, and you have hypnotically commanded yourself to *find* this power—Well, your subconscious might well be forced to *invent* these so-called 'occurrences'."

"You mean that, if I find I can do all sorts of things to objects—influence them physically with my mind—I won't be able to tell if I'm doing the things for real, or simply imagining they are occurring . . . Is that it, sir?"

Baird nodded solemnly. "And that is why I am so deeply concerned. If your manifestations are true, or if they are false, your mind will have no way of knowing. It will not be able to trust what it perceives through the medium of your senses. And, conceivably, the state may be reached in which if *nothing* untoward occurs, you will begin to doubt *that*."

"How so, sir?" asked Jerry, both fascinated and repelled by the statement.

"If you reach for an apple, say, and pick it up in your hand, you might wonder if you actually *have* used your hand, or if your subconscious—sensing that you dread believing in your newfound power—has merely delud-

ed you into *thinking* you are lifting the apple manually, when actually it has flown from the fruit-bowl right to your lips. Do you see?"

Jerry nodded, grimly. "It means that I could start driving myself nuts *whatever* happens. Like I bought me a one-way ticket to the funny-farm."

"Exactly," said Baird. "Which is why it is now imperative that you demonstrate this power of yours for an *outside* viewer. Myself. If *I* witness the occurrence, then we'll know you're all right. But if you alone see the thing happen, I can tell you so, and we'll know what to do for you."

"We will?" said Jerry, who'd begun to feel cold and afraid until the older man's final statement.

"Why, certainly. Nothing simpler. If it turns out that you are simply self-deluded, then *I* will hypnotize you, and remove the suggestion you gave your brain last night. But if the power *does* function—" A devilish grin creased Baird's friendly face. "—then it's heigh-ho for *Life* Magazine's cover, the Nobel Prize, and our accepting payola from the Federal Government for the favor of not teleporting the ingots out of Fort Knox!"

Jerry, taken unawares by the man's sudden surge of youthful glee, burst into laughter. It felt good to laugh.

"Now, now," said Baird, composing himself. "No celebrating yet. First we'll have to see a demonstration."

"But how can we—?" Jerry began.

"Ssh!" Baird flailed an agitated hand at Jerry. "I'm thinking . . . Let me see, now. It seems that both these events occurred when you were completely unaware that they could *not* occur, correct?"

Jerry nodded, his eyes bright with suppressed excitement.

". . . Ah!" Baird snapped his fingers sharply. "I have it! Close your eyes . . . There, that's it. Now, I'll just—uh—reach over here on the table and pick up a magazine . . . Now here is my—Keep the eyes *shut*—Here is my idea. I am going to hand you this magazine, Jerry. Or perhaps I am *not*. Do you follow me?"

Jerry, leaning back in the chair with his eyes tightly shut, grinned and nodded. "All I have to do is reach out for it, right? And, one way or the other, I should get it."

"Exactly. Now reach for it."

THE young man's hand stretched forward, fingers wide and ready, in the direction of the teacher's voice. In a second, he felt the brush of cool glossy paper against his fingertips, and gripped tightly. He opened his eyes.

The old man was gone and Jerry's eyes came to horrified focus on the stout wooden cane, still leaning against the arm of the chair. To Jerry's mind returned the words of Dr. Baird, with chill realization. . . .

"The fact . . ." the old man had said, "that these things happen only when no one else is there to observe them . . ."

It was not a corollary of the power; it was the result.

\* \* \*

Two students were found missing, later on. One whose shower-clogs and towel were found lying in the fraternity house wash-room where he'd last been seen, and the other—Brad Melik—who had vanished from his room where he'd gone to get a forgotten textbook at the moment Jerry had been reaching into his sport-shirt pocket for cigarettes that lay on the desk in his room.

When the terrible import of these disappearances came home to Jerry, he had "a complete nervous breakdown", and was sent to a sanitarium to recuperate.

A week later, when the physician drove out to check on his patient, he found his room empty, and his belongings missing, too. Jerry had wandered off from the "funny-farm".

The guards hadn't tried to stop him.

There weren't any guards. Not any more.

THE END