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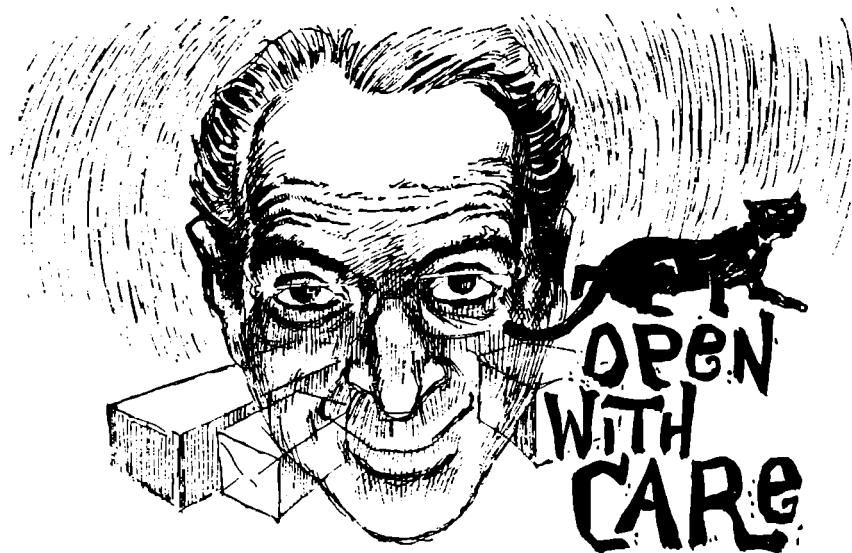
Illustrating *Plane Jane*

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By BOYD CORRELL

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*What woman hasn't claimed to see through
her husband for one reason or another? In the
case of Emily Staub this was no idle boast.*

EMILY STAUB peered closer at her husband. It seemed to her that he was becoming transparent. She could see the dancing flames of the fireplace through him, or at least through part of him.

Her husband, preoccupied with his own thoughts, was not even conscious of her presence. Since

leaving the Commission, his mind was on his experiments to the exclusion of everything else, including his wife. His forced retirement had changed him.

Dr. Andrew Staub had participated in the first nuclear experiments when he was only twenty-seven. Because of his age, his genius was not publicized,

public opinion being what it was at that time, the government feared to let the people know that such youth had a hand in the then awe-inspiring and fearful development.

Of course, when World War III came along in 1965, Dr. Staub had reached the more mature age of forty-seven. He was duly recognized and acclaimed for his discovery of control of the mutational effects of the progeny of human beings exposed to radioactive blasts. In fact the Commission—though never the Army, Navy, or Air Force—gave direct credit to him for winning World War III. The enemy, their intelligence having ferreted out the fact that we could control the physical and mental make-up of their next generations, decided to throw in the towel. Even the ambitious, live-for-the-moment generals, could not face the prospects of their children or grandchildren making their earthly debut in the shape of jelly fish with the mentalities of uni-valves.

Dr. Staub was not especially impressed by this outstanding achievement. His main interest was in isotopes. He had a theory, and his war-time accomplishment was merely a primary step towards its perfection. He called this project his Great Experiment and revealed it to no one. It was based on the fact that

isotopes are almost identical with the original element.

So for two more decades Dr. Staub raced into new discoveries which pleased the Commission greatly until he let drop to a colleague that he was nearing the key to mutation of *the present* generation by the use of isotopes made from certain fissionable elements and properly applied to a fellow human being.

This information, reaching the Top, quickly called for a secret meeting for consideration of when the course of certain things should be brought to a halt. The prospects of Staub's latest enterprise had about the same frightening effect on them as his earlier one had had on the enemy during World War III. It was hastily decided to retire the Commission's greatest scientist.

SO Dr. Staub was put to pasture with proper decorations, a staggeringly generous pension, an ultimatum that he was not to experiment on his fellow human beings, and a thinly veiled suggestion that he turn his efforts towards horticulture or the raising of turkeys. Dr. Staub did not care for the suggestion, accepted the pension, bowed to the ultimatum, and proceeded to build himself a laboratory on his country estate where he could do as he pleased. It was not

necessary for him to continue on the mutation of the present generation project because, during this research, he had learned what he needed to further his progress toward the Great Experiment.

But this story is about Emily Staub, the doctor's wife. Emily was thirty years younger than her husband and, because his was strictly a scientific mind which never entered the realm of society and very seldom that of domestic biology, lived a rather sad and lonely life.

Eighty now, and a complete recluse, Staub spent practically all his waking hours in the laboratory. When he did come into his home fairly early in the evening he usually went directly to his study at the rear of the house—a room forbidden to Emily except to clean; he not trusting any servants within this ivory tower of his.

For the past few years, being so completely absorbed in his Great Experiment, he had rarely spoken to his wife except at mealtime when, for instance, he could not reach the salt.

Emily, long resigned to this strange man whose mind was so full of scientific formulae that to break through his continuous concentration was next to impossible, turned her thoughts inward for contemplation very much as certain Tibetans alleg-

edly stare at their navels. She actually sought desperately for some ailment on which she might concentrate and find diversion. And also, perhaps if she suffered an illness it might throw some of her husband's thoughts toward her.

But she was remarkably healthy for a woman of fifty. Not even a skip in her heartbeat which could give her an excuse for checking her pulse during his presence. Nor could she discover any aches, pains, or even nerve twinges to think about and wonder if they were indicative of more serious affliction elsewhere within her system. As a hypochondriac she was a failure until Dr. Staub began bringing home the packages.

HE brought home one a week; where from, she did not know, but they must have been from his laboratory for that was his world from which he never wandered. The packages were never the same sizes, and they were wrapped in heavy brown paper. Staub would go straight to his study with these and there he would leave them. A day or so later they would disappear. Although Emily knew quite well that she was to touch nothing in the sacred study, Staub broke his usual silence long enough to warn her, when he brought in the first one, that

they were not to be moved, lifted, or even dusted. He seemed strangely excited.

This almost unprecedeted bow of words touched Emily deeply and her eyes clouded momentarily from sheer joy. It was then that she discovered, or thought she discovered, something peculiar about her sight. She wiped away the tears quickly and blinked but still there seemed a cloudy vision. It was when her husband walked between her and the open fireplace that she noticed the apparent illusion—she could see through his left foot!

She heard herself giggle, and was startled by the rather idiotic sound. It must have been provoked by sub-conscious happiness at finding something wrong with herself, something which might give her time-consuming thought during the long days.

At dinner Staub's feet were concealed beneath the table so Emily concentrated her efforts to prove that perhaps she was going blind by squinting sharply at objects in the room, closing one eye and then the other until anyone more perceptive than Staub would have noticed and concluded the poor woman was either afflicted with a nervous tic or had become addicted to narcotics.

But Emily now was happy.

That night she lay in bed with her bedside light on and stared at the ceiling and the chairs and the curtains so intently that at last she felt a dull pain in the back of her head which proved conclusively, to her, that some disease was attacking her eyes. For a physicist's wife she sadly lacked scientific or medical knowledge and the only malady she knew of which effected sight was glaucoma. She remembered, as a small girl, her mother telling her about an aunt who had glaucoma. The first noticeable manifestation, she recalled, was that the eye-balls become hard.

Tentatively, Emily pushed on the closed lid of one eye. It did feel hard, giving very little to the pressure, and she tried the other eye. Both seemed to possess the same lack of elasticity. Emily opened her eyes and the room was a blur for a few moments. A bad sign, she was sure. She wished she had someone with whom she could compare the hardness of her eyes. Her husband was in his study, but she did not dare disturb him. She thought of the cat, and slipped out of bed and into the sitting room.

DOLYGAMOUS sat before the dying fire sleeping softly, a gentle purr ruffling his throat. He was really Dr. Staub's cat, spending more time at the labo-

ratory than at home. Emily approached him gently. With one finger she pressed against her own eye for comparison, then reached down and pushed against one of Polygamous's closed eyes. Polygamous came awake with a start and backed off indignantly from the probing finger. He almost backed into the fire until he became oriented and that was when Emily noticed that she appeared to see through him.

That settled it. Something was definitely wrong. Excitedly hugging her now proven ailment to her bosom, Emily went back into her bedroom, not seeing her husband standing in the shadows of the hallway observing her thoughtfully between narrowing eyes. When she closed her door he gathered up Polygamous and carried him to his study.

Emily slept and was neither conscious of, nor disturbed by, the dull thudding of a pick digging in the garden behind the house.

As the weeks passed Emily became more and more absorbed in her condition, but the novelty and diversion it gave her were now changing to concern. Though she would not at first admit it, she was becoming somewhat frightened. Pushing against her eyes periodically throughout the day to check their hardness naturally devel-

oped a functional disorder, and half the time she was either seeing double or conscious of different colored light-rings around objects. And along with these phenomena her husband's anatomy apparently became more and more transparent.

Starting with the left foot, this transparency spread to the right, and then up both legs. At the end of seven weeks she was somewhat shaken to note that, with the exception of Dr. Staub's head, she could see completely through him when he passed between her and a strong light and, more disconcerting still, he would practically disappear from sight when he sat in a darkened part of the room.

Emily went to an oculist.

In his examination room she described her symptoms. The doctor raised an eyebrow.

"You actually see through your husband?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes," said Emily. "And the cat, too—" With a start she realized that she had not seen Polygamous since the night she attempted to check her eyes with his.

"H-m-m-m," said the Doctor. He turned on a bright light and stood in front of it. "Do you—ah—see through me, Mrs. Staub?"

Emily stared hard at the oculist, trying to shake off a chill which had suddenly possessed her. "No," she said. "No. But

there seems to be a double outline around you—as though you were standing in two different places."

"I see," said the Doctor. "Ah—how far apart am I?"

"Oh, just a fraction of an inch. More like a wavy line around a light through a foggy window."

HE pushed back her head and examined her eyes closely, a pencil of light from an instrument on his forehead blinding her.

"Do you rub your eyes much, Mrs. Staub?"

"Rub? No. That is, I have been pushing against them with my fingers, checking them for hardness."

"Often?"

"Oh, yes. All through the day," said Emily. "Would that cause things to seem transparent?"

"No," said the Doctor firmly. "But it would cause distortion." He wiggled a finger about even with her ear and some inches from her head. "Do you see that?" he asked.

Emily nodded. "You're wiggling your fingers."

"You haven't got glaucoma. It starts by effecting side-vision, and yours is perfect. I'd suggest you stop worry and also stop pushing your eyes . . ." He looked at her shrewdly. "And I would like to see Dr. Staub."

"Oh, he doesn't see anybody," said Emily. "Not since he left the Commission."

"He has no assistants in his laboratory?"

"No. We don't even have servants in the house. My husband doesn't trust them."

The oculist decided that he wanted to be done with the Staubs. He was no psychiatrist. He escorted Emily to the door, repeated his advice against worry and rubbing, and bowed her out. When she was gone he went to a shelf and took down a *Who's Who* and looked up "Staub, Andrew—nuclear scientist" and discovered he had been retired from Government work in 1991.

"A good thing," thought the Doctor. He poured himself a drink.

IT was after midnight of Saturday, the end of the eighth week since the first package was brought in by Dr. Staub. A touch of joy had been brought into her life a few weeks ago on her birthday. She had found on the breakfast table a velvet jeweler's box in which were an exquisite pair of diamond earrings and a matching pendant. Beneath the box was a card on which Dr. Staub had written "A Happy Birthday—Andrew."

Emily had cried a little and had put on the jewelry and never taken it off. On very depressing

days she would touch her ears and fondle the pendant around her neck. She was fondling the pendant this Saturday night in bed as she lay there, unable to sleep. She had not seen her husband since her visit to the oculist, though there were signs each morning that he had come into the house, apparently leaving before she awoke.

Tonight she was determined to make sure her ailment was imaginary. Her hand reached from the pendant to push against an eye, but she jerked it down. The oculist had convinced her that this constant irritation had caused her blurred vision. Since she had stopped this habit things seemed normal again: nothing appeared transparent which shouldn't be transparent. If only she could catch a glimpse of Polygamous or the doctor it would prove . . .

She heard the front door open and she quickly slipped out of bed and went to the door of her room and peered through the slight opening she had left into the living room. The light in the far corner was the only one burning—she always left it for her husband's convenience and he would turn it out on retiring. That was one of the definite signs that he had been coming home nights: the light was always off in the morning.

As she looked through the

crack, a wispy blur swept past—a blur so slight and intangible that she was not at all sure there had been one. But watching, she saw the outline of her husband going towards the light. And now he was completely transparent, his figure, except for his head, disappearing entirely for a moment as he walked around the lamp. In his hand he carried the eighth package; a square parcel wrapped in brown paper. It seemed to float through the air, then all movement vanished and blackness took over as the light snapped off. Soft footsteps sounded across the floor and towards the study.

Emily crept back into bed, bewildered, and with an odd weakness. She could not sleep and was up earlier than usual the next morning. She knew Dr. Staub had not left because she would have heard the door open and close. And, lying awake, she had half convinced herself that the shadows of night had merely caused another illusion; the oculist had been *so* convincing.

She waited patiently but Staub did not come from his study.

AT eleven thirty she bravely walked to his quarters: a bedroom and dressing room connected with the study. She peered into the bedroom and at the bed, but the blinds were closed and the room almost in

darkness. She allowed her eyes to become accustomed to the gloom and studied the bed. She could see no one there yet there was an indentation the shape of a human's body, and the bed-clothes were strangely piled up as though covering a figure. The head of the figure could easily be hidden by a large, pushed-aside pillow.

The odd weakness, accompanied by fear, rose in her again and she felt panic. She turned and went swiftly through the back door and into her garden. She hadn't been in the garden for many days.

A hundred feet from the study window, shaded by a live oak tree, was a bed of tuberous begonias and to her dismay a mongrel dog was digging furiously in the center of it. For a moment she forgot her fear and shouted at the dog who stopped his digging and ran.

Emily approached to see the extent of damage to her flowers when she saw, at the bottom of the hole, a mass of fur, and less exposed, a smaller mass. She probed the exposed fur with a stick and disclosed the body of Polygamous. A nauseating odor assailed her nostrils and swept away her first feeling of pity for the cat as well as concern for Dr. Staub who was so fond of Polygamous. Ill, she started back into the house when she noticed seven

empty cartons and balled wads of brown paper shoved deep into the huge wood-box by the door. The paper was of the same type which covered the packages. Had Dr. Staub accidentally killed the cat and brought it home in a carton and then buried it? Then what had been in the other packages? Other animals? Dead animals her husband may have destroyed in experiments and also buried? She remembered the odd sizes—one box had been especially large, large enough to contain a shepherd dog.

For a long time she sat in the living room, watching the door to her husband's suite. She had left it slightly ajar when she made her hasty exit and through this opening she could see the foot of his bed. In the dimness of the room she thought she saw a light movement there, but it was so quick she could not be sure. Then, only moments later, something soft pressed against her leg. She managed not to scream and looked down.

Very faintly the outline of Polygamous brushed against the chair, glided to the fireplace.

EMILY closed her eyes against a darkness which pushed around her. The darkness passed and an irresistible force drew her to the partly opened door. She had to see what was in the eighth package.

She crept past the disordered bed and into the study and up to the library table. On it was the square parcel she had seen the night before, and over it she could see into the bedroom.

She reached for the box, still watching the bed. She unfolded the brown paper, trying to hush the rustling noise. The carton inside was of considerable weight and thumped as she turned it over.

There was violent movement in the bed. The covers were thrown back and the window shade lifted. Against the light she clearly saw Dr. Staub's head as he rose to glare at her.

Then his glare turned to a monstrous grin of victory. He leapt to his feet in the bed and bounced like a school boy except that his head was like a pumpkin on a string with no body to support it.

In a hoarse whisper that was like a shout he said to the ceiling:

"It works; It works! the pendant properly applied the isotopes! The whole body can live!"

His dangling head, his insane grin, the bed responding in jerks to no visible force was too terrifying for Emily to watch and she dropped her gaze to the box her fingers had automatically opened.

Inside the box was her own head.

THE END

OPEN WITH CARE