

SATELLITE

science fiction

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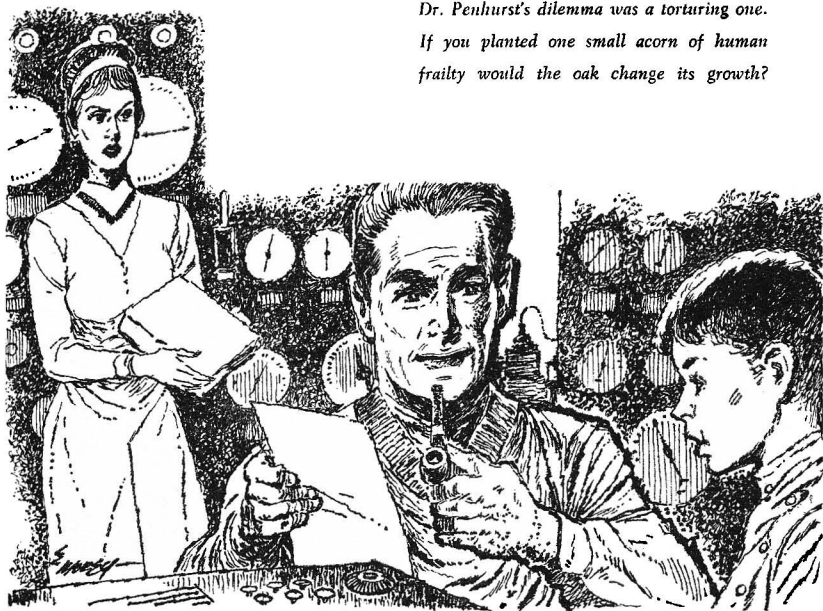
FRANK B. LONG, Associate Editor

KEITH AYLING, Article Editor

Cover Painting by
RAY PIOCH

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*Dr. Penhurst's dilemma was a torturing one.
If you planted one small acorn of human
frailty would the oak change its growth?*



PATIENT 926

by
ROBERT WICKS

THE COAL GLOWED CHERRY RED in the bowl of Dr. Penhurst's pipe. He exhaled a stream of gray tobacco smoke and watched it drift in a lazy cloud between his eyes and the file folder on his desk. Finally he fanned the smoke away and stared again at the title on the cover of the folder.

Patient 926.

He opened the folder and stared in disbelief at the carefully prepared, heavily documented report.

"Fantastic!" he said aloud to the empty cavern of his office, as his eyes scanned a page.

He had read of such cases in medical school. But that was history. The last recorded case was forty years ago—in the late 1980's, if he remembered correctly.

He studied the report carefully—read and re-read it.

"Utterly fantastic!" he reiterated.

He depressed a crystal button on the master control panel at the edge of his desk.

"Send in patient Nine twenty-six," he said to the desk.

"Yes, sir," replied an efficient feminine voice.

Penhurst removed his pipe from his mouth and looked into the bowl reflectively. Of course, he decided, it still happened in some isolated societies of South America, Africa and perhaps the islands of the Pacific. But even there the missionaries had wiped most of it out.

Machinery hummed and the door slid into the

wall. Penhurst swiveled around in his chair. The frail figure of a small boy was framed in the doorway, clad in a yellow, one-piece school uniform two sizes too big for him. A blue numeral on his thin chest indicated that he was in the fifth grade.

"Come in, Nine twenty-six," Penhurst said.

The boy hesitated, finally stepped into the room. The door whirled shut behind him.

"Come in, come in," Penhurst repeated. "You may sit in that chair." He indicated a large armchair on the other side of the desk. The boy crossed the room and climbed up into the chair. He sat very still, watching the doctor.

Penhurst quickly re-read the report in the file, occasionally stealing a glance at the patient. At last he looked up.

"Do you like school, Nine twenty-six?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," answered 926 in a weak voice.

"Do you prefer the teletutor screens or the personal counseling sessions with—what's her name?"

"Miss Sedgewick," the boy supplied. "I like talking to Miss Sedgewick best of all."

Dr. Penhurst looked down at the report again. Miss Sedgewick should have spotted it much earlier. Either she was an incompetent counselor or she had deliberately failed to report the symptoms. It had remained for the child's parents to notice it when 926 went home for the holidays.

"What do you talk about?" he asked the boy.

"All kinds of things."

"Can you remember something you discussed recently?"

"Fairy stories."

"Fairy—?"

"She told me about Rumpelstiltskin."

"Rumpel-what?"

"Rumpelstiltskin. You see, there was this little man—"

As the boy's voice droned on, Dr. Penhurst tamped the tobacco in his pipe with a finger. Nothing wrong with discussing ancient literature, he thought, provided it was carefully divorced from reality. He applied his desk lighter to the pipe. The yellow flame licked up and down as he puffed.

"—and Rumpelstiltskin was so mad he grabbed his left leg with both hands and tore himself asunder in the middle." The boy stopped talking.

"He did what?" asked the doctor between puffs.

"He tore himself asunder in the middle."

Penhurst replaced the lighter on his desk. "Do you believe in fairies?"

"No sir." The boy's answer was hesitant.

"Does Miss Sedgewick believe in them?"

"No, sir." This time the answer was more certain.

"What else do you talk about?"

"Music, art and books."

"Do you ever discuss electricity, atomic energy or gravitation?"

"We used to."

"But not any more."

"Not for a long time."

"Nine twenty-six, what is the universe?"

The boy thought for a moment. "It's—uh—an electro-magnetic field of force—uh—across which—hydrogen—." He looked helplessly at the doctor.

"You're ten years old, Nine twenty-six."

"Nine and a half," the boy corrected.

"How many nine-and-a-half-year-old boys are there, do you suppose, who cannot answer that question?" Penhurst asked.

"Not many," 926 admitted. "The teletutor screen tells us about that every once in awhile."

Penhurst leaned forward in his chair and looked directly at 926. "Who was the Mad Hatter?"

The boy's face brightened. "Oh, he was in *Alice in Wonderland* and—"

"That'll do," Penhurst interrupted.

926 settled back in the huge chair.

"Do you ever daydream?" the doctor asked.

The boy's brow wrinkled in thought.

"What I mean is, do you ever make up little adventures in your mind?"

926 nodded.

"Do you like to draw?"

"Yes, sir."

Penhurst depressed the crystal button on his desk.

"Miss Appleton, do we have any examples of art work by patient Nine twenty-six?"

"Yes, sir," the efficient voice replied.

Almost at once the door whirled open and Miss Appleton stepped into the room. She was a severe looking woman of about thirty-five, dressed in a neatly-tailored uniform and wearing no makeup. She handed the doctor another file folder labeled, *Patient 926, Exhibits*.

"You're very efficient, Miss Appleton," he said. "I don't know what I'd do without you." Then she was gone, the door slipping in place behind her.

Penhurst removed from the folder a crude crayon drawing in brilliant colors. It was nothing more than abstract pattern of wavy lines and geometric shapes. But there was something about it that was quite disturbing to the doctor. He held it up for the boy to see.

"What is it supposed to be?" he asked.

"Nothing in particular," 926 answered. "I just sort of drew it the way I felt it."

Penhurst studied the drawing again. He turned it one way, then another. Somehow it was reminiscent of the maniacal paintings of the mid-twentieth century that now hung in museums. It was most disturbing.

"The other children draw houses and trees," he said.

"I don't like to draw houses and trees."

"Art is a mirror to nature," Penhurst observed. "You'll have to learn to draw things as they are in reality, if you wish to be a painter when you grow up."

"But I don't want to be a painter," the boy insisted.

"What do you want to be?"

"A writer."

"What kind of writer—journalism, history, science?"

"I want to write fairy tales."

Penhurst slapped his hand on the desk. He stood up and began to pace the room. The boy watched him closely.

"Nine twenty-six," said the doctor, "do you know what is meant by abnormal?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it isn't a word one hears in this day and age. Long before you were born there were many abnormal people in the world. Some were locked up in institutions, others roamed loose in society. Many were painters, writers, musicians, actors and what were then called inventors."

"Were they bad people?" the boy asked.

"Well, at the time it was felt their creative contributions added to the progress of civilization. Today we know that uncontrolled technological progress is an unhealthy condition. An unhealthy society is caused by unhealthy individuals."

"But we have writers and people like that," the boy protested.

"Yes, but they do realistic work—normal creations rather than abnormal ones. You see, since the vaccination—"

"Which vaccination?" 926 asked.

Dr. Penhurst sighed. There were over a hundred vaccinations required by law. "The sanity vaccination," he said.

The boy fidgeted in his chair.

"It had its roots in the mid-nineteen hundreds," Penhurst explained. "Something called tranquilizer pills were introduced and soon a great many people were taking them."

"Tranquilizer pills?"

"Confound it all! It doesn't matter how it started. The point is, it finally developed into a vaccination which gives life-long protection. Now we are no longer plagued with abnormal personalities with overly active imaginations." Penhurst turned to face the boy. "You have an overly active imagination."

"Is that wrong?" 926 ask, wide-eyed.

"Back in the twentieth century it led to a restless society that was forever changing—unbelievably inefficient government, something called crime and war. I'm sure you've heard of war."

"Yes, sir. Yesterday, on the teletutor—"

Penhurst talked right over the boy's words. "The widespread use of tranquilizer drugs made abnormal men become normal. The mad pace of civilization slowed. Finally the requirement of the sanity vaccination by law stopped civilization at it's present level of perfection. Now we have harmony. No more insane wars or abnormal behavior. We are all of one mind, one purpose—the fullest enjoyment of life."

"But I still want to write fairy tales," said 926.

"No one would read them," the doctor insisted. "Normal people do not indulge in unrealistic thinking."

Patient 926 hung his head.

"We all receive our vaccination at age six," Penhurst continued. "Perhaps through some clerical error, you missed yours."

The doctor stared at the wall. A horrible thought crossed his mind. Or perhaps, patient 926 had developed some sort of immunity to the vaccination. That had happened to the hiccup vaccination with dire results.

Again, he pushed the button.

"Miss Appleton, bring me the medical record on patient Nine twenty-six."

"Right away, sir," was the prompt answer.

Penhurst sighed. It was good to have an efficient secretary like Miss Appleton.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," he told her again as she handed him still another file folder. As she stepped from the room, Penhurst ran his finger down a list of shots and vaccinations given to patient 926.

"Tetanus, typhoid, the common cold, asthma, hay fever, baldness—" he read aloud. Beside each was the date and the witnessing health authority. There was no indication of a sanity vaccination. He glanced down the list again to make certain.

"At least," he said, "it's not an immunity."

"For a moment," the doctor explained, "I was afraid that the human race might be developing an immunity to the serum. I was afraid there might be a few other persons who want to write fairy stories."

It was a bad joke. The boy's eyes moistened.

Penhurst depressed the button again.

"Do you have any sanity serum in the dispensary?"

"I think so, sir," Miss Appleton replied.

"How would you like to have your vaccination now?" he said to the patient.

"Could I still be a writer when I grow up?"

"Certainly. And you would have a clearness of mind and a sense of reality that would make you a fine writer."

"Could I write fairy tales?"

"Well, I doubt if you'd want to. You'd want to write much more important things, in harmony with our society."

A tear rolled down the cheek of patient 926. "But I want to write fairy stories." Another tear joined the first one.

"Here now," said Dr. Penhurst. "We don't cry after age six." Then he remembered, "Oh, that's right, you haven't had the vaccination."

The boy clasped his hands over his eyes and began to sob. His whole body quivered and tears dripped from between his fingers. He made little gasping sounds that the doctor had heard only from very young children.

"Confound it!" the doctor said. "Now don't do that!" The doctor's stern voice served to pry more tears from the boy. Soon he was sobbing with uncontrolled abandon.

Penhurst's trained mind considered the problem. "We must stop that spasmodic heaving of your chest," he told the boy. "Take a few deep breaths and exhale slowly."

But the spasms persisted.

Penhurst tried his best professional tone. "Now, I want you to grip the arms of the chair firmly with your hands. This will help you get firm grip on your emotions."

It didn't.

"You're an extremely serious case, Nine twenty-six," he told the boy. Then he began to wonder. Maybe the patient was about to break down completely like the severe cases of the twentieth century.

He tried a mild tone. "You wouldn't want Miss Appleton to come in here and see you carrying on like that, would you?"

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"No!" sobbed 926, looking up.

"Confound it, your nose is running!" Penhurst stood there uncertainly. Handkerchiefs hadn't been carried since the conquest of hay fever and the common cold. Maybe Miss Appleton would have a tissue. Women carried them to blot their lipstick, he thought. But, no, not Miss Appleton, she didn't wear lipstick. A paper towel, he thought, crossing to a wash stand on the wall behind his desk.

"Blow!" he said holding the stiff paper towel to the patient's nose.

"Brrraaack!" went the boy. He snuffed a couple of times and looked at the doctor with his unblinking, sad eyes.

"I just want to write—"

"I know, I know!" said the doctor. "It's out of the question!" But a doubt was creeping into his mind.

926 began to cry again, this time with even more abandon.

"You don't want to be outside the pale," Penhurst said. "Don't you want to be like all the other little boys—level-headed, practical, realistic?"

"No!" wailed the boy.

Three paper towels later, Penhurst had the situation under control. The patient seemed completely cried out.

But the doctor was doing a lot of thinking. There must be room for a small boy who wants to write little fantasies. What was wrong with a tiny bit of creative talent in the world? Certainly, the patient wasn't so abnormal as to create wars and

social disharmony. One person could hardly start civilization on another mad spiral of social evolution. He looked at the frail figure.

"The law says you must have the vaccination," he said. 926 seemed resolved to his fate.

Maybe, thought Penhurst, I could give him another cold shot instead. I could enter in his medical record that he had received his sanity vaccination. Then the law would be satisfied.

There was an exhilarating satisfaction to the idea. Somehow, it was a gratifying rebellion to the confounded order of society. He could even have the boy transferred under his auspices or possibly have a talk with his counselor, Miss Sedgewick. Apparently she had already seen fit to keep quiet about the boy's creative bent.

"Yes," he said aloud. He broke into a smile as he emptied the ashes of his pipe into an ashtray. Reaching across with the stem of his pipe, he touched the crystal button.

"Would you step in here for a moment, Miss Appleton."

Machinery whirled, the door slid into the wall, and Miss Appleton strode up to the desk. She was carrying something in her hand.

"There was just one vial of sanity serum on hand, doctor," she said holding up a full hypodermic needle. Penhurst felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. He sighed. A great forbidding wall of official "Thou shall not" rose up before him.

"Roll up your sleeve, Nine twenty-six," he said.

Miss Appleton handed him the needle.

"You're very efficient, Miss Appleton," he said. "I don't know what I'd do without you."