

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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THE LEAGUE OF LEFT-HANDED MEN

BY RUSSELL BRANCH

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

Maybe the universe is inside Doctor Freeman, and the League of Left-Handed have no business on Earth. If so, it's all because a right-handed reporter answered a left-handed ad!

The ad was in my overcoat pocket—the left-hand pocket. I pulled it out with my left hand, and checked the number again. It was this gloomy old brownstone, then, with the landscaping of weeds.

A sign on the door said "Enter," and the bare dark hall inside was already lined with waiting applicants. Some of them were obviously Skid row bums, the rest were merely "unemployed" like me. They looked at me in hostile silence and then dropped their eyes again. It was cheerful as a dentist's waiting room.

A faint murmur of conversation came from behind one of the closed doors down the hall, but I couldn't make it out. I

shoved my hands in my coat pockets and concentrated on what I had to remember. *Left hand . . . left hand . . . left hand . . .*

Then I was aware that the voices had grown louder, as if in anger, or closer, or both. The door at the end of the hallway opened suddenly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Carter. There's not a thing I can do, and I'm very busy."

The voice was as final and pleasant as a dentist's drill, but it was the girl who got my attention. My pals stared too, with appreciative leers.

She was about as big as a kitten and twice as cute. Jet-black hair under a tiny leopard-trimmed hat, and a face like a

hot-house flower. Tight-fitted leopard jacket that hugged her bust in happy amazement, and a wide-flaring skirt that flirted with a pair of lovely legs. Living proof of my theory that the best things come in the smallest packages—not to mention the most expensive.

I would have married her on the spot, but she tripped past the lot of us with a glance that was equal parts despair and scorn.

I wanted to run after her and comfort her. I wanted to take her into my arms and tell her I was no part of this gloomy old dump or this crumby crew, and that I would cherish her forever. In fact, I had already turned, but a sudden commotion snapped me out of it.

It sounded as if someone had hit the jackpot in a one-armed bandit, but what had really happened was that the man with the voice had spilled a handful of change. My pals were scrambling after it like helpful dumb bunnies—and eliminating themselves from the competition. I carefully retrieved a dime with my left hand and gave it back to him while most of them were still standing with extended right hands and sheepish expressions. There were only three of us left when he had dismissed the fakers.

We came in for a long silent scrutiny, and I returned the favor. He was about forty-five, plump and pink and tweedy, but with a pair of frosty blue eyes that matched his voice. My fellow winners were a twenty-year old delinquent who needed a haircut, and a shabby old man who needed a shave. He took the kid first, and told the old man and me to wait.

We sat down and time dragged on. The old fellow was deaf and fell asleep after we had decided it most likely was going to snow. I took another look at the ad which I had torn from the morning paper.

WANTED:

LEFT-HANDED MEN

\$25 PER DAY FOR

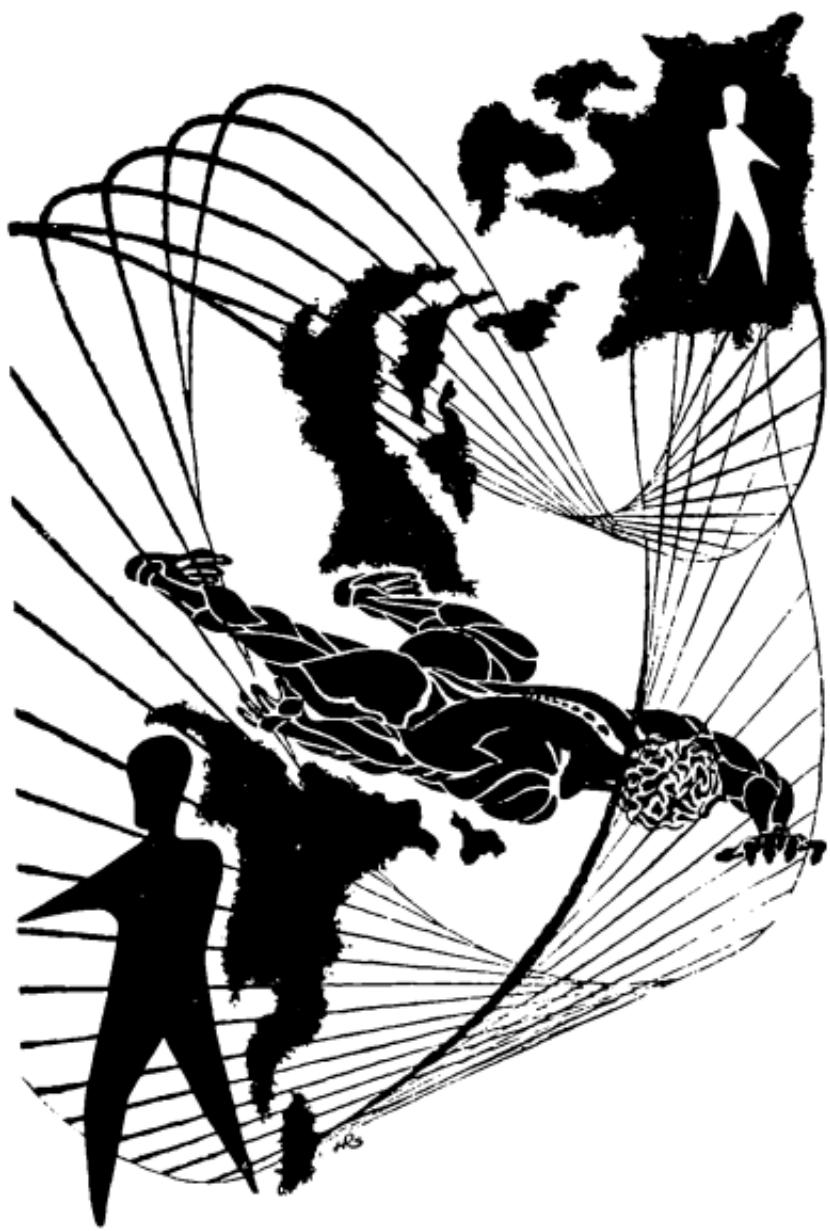
BONA FIDES

AMBIDEXTERS NEED

NOT APPLY

It told me as much it had the first time I read it, so I put it back in my left-hand pocket. I wondered what the kid was finding out, and I wondered still more when the tweedy character returned without him. The old man was next, looking a bit doubtful, and I went back to waiting. For twenty-five bucks I could sit hours on end.

Actually it was something over an hour before I finally got my chance. My employer's office was cluttered and comfortably



shabby, with a coal fire glowing in the fireplace grate. He nodded me into a leather chair and asked me some vague questions about my marital and family status. Then, before I could protest, he took both of my hands in his.

"I'd like to know a little more about this job first," I told him uneasily.

He spread out my hands and then ran his fingers over my arms. "Hmm . . . muscular development about even." He looked at me suspiciously. "How about your heart? Which side is it on?"

"The right side," I said in surprise. "I mean, the *left*."

He settled that with a stethoscope, no less. Then he stood frowning down at me. "What do you do? What's your business?"

I had a hunch. I already knew he was a crackpot, and telling him I was a newspaperman would probably queer the deal. Even an *ex*-newspaperman . . . he wouldn't believe me. So I just grinned wryly. "I'm not doing anything now. That's why I'm here. I lost my last job because I went on a bender."

My pseudo-frankness threw him off just as I hoped it would. He grunted something about whether I could stay sober for three or four days, and I said I certainly could for twenty-five

per, and that seemed to satisfy him. He went around his desk, sat down, and then deliberately shoved a glass ashtray off in my direction.

I neatly fielded it with my left hand and put it back on his desk without blinking an eye.

He leaned back and made a careful steeple with his chubby fingers. His words were careful too. "Naturally, you're curious as to what this is all about. You're a cut above my other applicants."

"Naturally," I said, ambiguously and politely.

"I'm Doctor Freeman," he said, as if that explained everything. As a matter of fact, it did mean something. A scientist . . . Professor of Physics . . . kicked out of the University several years ago under some sort of a cloud. I seemed to remember the phrase, "brilliant but unstable."

But "unstable" was the wrong word for those cold blue eyes boring into mine. They were all *too* stable: the fixed, fanatical eyes of a man with a Mission.

"I will tell you my theory. I hope, being one of us chosen few, that you will swear yourself to secrecy. But they wouldn't believe you anyway, in this right-handed world of theirs."

He sighed and picked up a long narrow ribbon of paper

from the top of his desk. "First, a simple little demonstration of the properties of space. This represents a plane surface." He gave the ribbon one twist and joined the ends with a paper clip. It now formed a ring, but with a twist in it like a belt you have carefully fastened.

"This is our plane surface with a turn in it—the so-called surface of Möbius. Now we will take this little paper doll, representing a two-dimensional man with only a right arm. Move him around our twisted plane—and see what happens!"

It was quite obvious what had happened. The little doll with the right arm had mysteriously acquired a left one instead. I tried it myself, with the same results. True, he ended up upside down—but still left-handed. The only way to make him right-handed again was to remove him from the surface and turn him over in space—or else send him through the twist again. I got the point even while Doctor Freeman was making it.

"That, my friend, is the result of a twisted, two-dimensional surface. Imagine a comparable twist in three-dimensions—and you'll see why I say that we left-handed beings are a world apart. *We have already gone through the Möbius twist of space!*"

"Maybe so," I said diplomati-

ically. "I can't see what difference it makes, except it's sometimes damned inconvenient."

"Inconvenient! It's a calculated conspiracy, with us the victims! Normal people fear us, knowing us instinctively as superior beings from another world. Parents and teachers plague left-handed children. Probably ninety per cent of the automobiles in the world are made for right-handed drivers. It's worth your life to sit at a crowded dinner party, or to buy a set of golf clubs or a left-handed shotgun. That isn't mere inconvenience, but deliberate persecution!"

I thought of some southpaw pitchers who had done pretty well, but for twenty-five bucks I could humor him. "Well, we've always been a minority in a right-handed world, and you know how it goes with any minority."

"Superior beings are always in the minority! Consider the motion of the universe itself—the rotation of the planets, as well as their orbits. All counter-clockwise, or left-handed! The clock itself is a prime example of right-handed hostility. They have even set up 'right' as a synonym for 'correct.' Is it any wonder I say now that we should form a left-handed league and

claim our proper place in the scheme of things?"

I answered cautiously, "That's all I have to do for my twenty-five bucks—join this southpaw league of yours?"

My question seemed to snap him out of some dream of his own. He nodded vaguely. "That—and act as a subject for an experiment."

"Experiment?" I looked at the paper doll who had lost an arm, and wondered what had happened to my two predecessors.

He picked up the doll and the twisted ring again. "Nothing more exciting or dangerous than moving you through a three-dimensional tunnel—like this. It shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes."

Twenty-five bucks for fifteen minutes! I stuck out my hand to seal the bargain—my left hand, and he looked very pleased.

We went out through a rear door which undoubtedly—I told myself—explained the disappearance of the other two "subjects." In fact, I asked him about them and got the casual answer: "They weren't satisfactory, and I let them go. I've made some revisions for your experiment."

The rear yard of the old joint was almost completely taken up by a long low shed like an oversized Quonset. We stepped inside and I blinked my eyes. This

was quite different from playing with paper dolls.

The "three-dimensional tunnel" filled the shed from end to end and from ground to ceiling. It seemed to be made of ordinary three-foot galvanized drainage pipe, but so intricately whorled and looped as to defy the eye. It made me dizzy just to try to follow it, and it seemed to close back upon itself without end or beginning.

"You mean I've got to crawl through *that*?"

He removed a side section that was fitted with clamps. Inside was a slender round framework of tubing, about six feet long. It was fitted with bearings on every side and it rolled at his touch.

"You stretch out inside that. There's a compression seal fore and aft, and an air pump outside here does the pulling. When you're ready to go, you pull that little lever."

"Yeah—like a vacuum tube in a department store. But what if the seals leak? What do I use for air?"

"It takes less than a minute. Surely you can hold your breath for that long?"

"Suppose I get stuck?"

"You won't, and there's an emergency valve anyway." He was getting impatient. "It's not any worse than a roller coaster

or a loop-the-loop at an amusement park. Make up your mind."

I'd already made up my mind. For twenty-five bucks I'd ride anything going. But first I wanted the money. "In case I don't see you again," I explained with a grin—to show him I was joking.

He nodded soberly and came across. I crawled into my little horizontal bird cage, and the panel was clamped back in place. Then I was in pitch-darkness, and I could feel the heavy throb of a powerful motor. I decided right then I didn't want to go through with it after all—but my yell was only a muffled, hollow echo.

For a moment nothing happened. I knew darned well I hadn't even touched the release lever—but there was a sudden *whoosh!* and then I was spinning in chaos. Unseen forces tore at my lungs and heart. My stomach seemed to be turning itself inside out. I lost all sense of direction and entity; in fact unconsciousness came as a glad relief . . .

Then suddenly I was blinking out into a patch of light, and my scientific friend was peering in at me. He seemed very disappointed. In fact, he quickly started to close the panel again.

"Oh no, you don't!" I said, and scrambled out.

He grabbed my arm, shaking it with anger. "You lied to me! You weren't left-handed at all! You've wasted the whole experiment!"

"You lied to me too, pal—so that makes us even."

"You can't leave now! I'll have to put you through the second stage."

He tried to hold me, twisting my arm. I settled that argument with a neat left hook, and left him sitting on the floor. Because I didn't know how else to reach the street, I went back in through the house again, and a good thing it was. One of my gloves was lying on the floor in the hall, by the chair where I'd dropped it.

At least I thought it was mine, until I tried to put it on. But this seemed to be a left-hand glove—just like the one already in my pocket. However, I didn't stop to worry about it then. I shoved them both back into my coat pocket and said good-bye to Dr. Freeman forever.

Or so I thought then . . .

Twenty-five bucks would pay my rent and buy a stack of groceries. But, I told myself, man cannot live by bread alone. I called my pal Ed, who's the best cameraman in the business and knows every beautiful dame in town. He gave me her first

name and her address and a capsule description: "Tagged the most glamorous deb a few seasons ago, but her old man lost his dough and knocked himself off. She's a hard-working model now; thinks all men come equipped with long bushy tails."

I told him I could understand that if she'd met up with him, and hung up while he was telling me how much I was missed. It was nice to hear that McKenzie wanted me back, but I had more important things in mind tonight.

Vivian Carter opened her apartment door a crack, and then started to close it again. That was hopeful in itself: it showed at least she remembered my face.

"Wait!" I pleaded, and turned my back. "See—no tail."

She looked confused. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to marry you," I said, inserting my toe. "But I'll settle for dinner and a quiet talk."

She hesitated. No woman, no matter how gorgeous, is completely immune to a strange male who proposes at sight. At least that has been my experience—and besides that, Vivian Carter looked like she could use a friend.

"I'm Lin. Pangborn, from the

Morning Herald. Eddie Black gave me your address."

She let me in. I restrained my natural impulses and looked around the apartment while she was closing the door. It was a nice apartment, but the view was not too hopeful. It included a photograph of a clean-cut lad and a few objects which were also indubitably male.

"Nice looking guy, but a bit young for you," I said, pointing at the photograph.

She bit her lip, and her little chin trembled. "What do you know about that Dr. Freeman?"

"Oh, that?" I wondered whether I dared to pat her shoulder. "All in a day's work. You see, he put a screwy ad in the paper for left-handed men, and—"

"I know. What did you find out?"

"Find out?" I wondered whether she'd let me comfort her, once the tears came. "Freeman's just a crackpot with some crazy theories about twisted space. Let's talk about us, which is much more interesting."

She buried her face in her hands, then, and I did what came so naturally. I sat her gently down on the couch, and sat down beside her, and forgot to take my arm away. She was so full of it she didn't even notice, but when I heard her story I began

to sit up and take notice myself.

It seemed that her kid brother had gone to answer Freeman's ad when it first appeared two days ago, and she hadn't seen him since. Freeman had denied that the kid had ever shewn up, and now she didn't know where to turn.

"The police—" I began, but she shook her head.

"I went to the police, but Dr. Freeman told them the same story. He said he'd never seen my brother, and the police told me not to worry because he'd probably turn up, but it just isn't like Bob to go off without a word."

"Bob?" I asked, pointing at the photograph again. She nodded, and that much at least was off my mind.

Bob, it seemed, was a senior at the University. The ad had caught his eye both because he was a psychology major, and left-handed himself.

"I know that's where he went," she concluded. "He was completely fascinated by the ad, and he even put on some old clothes as sort of a disguise. He didn't have enough money for an impulsive trip—I know that because I'm helping him through college."

I got up and paced the floor, while Vivian watched me hopefully. Freeman had seemed

harmless and mild—at least until he had found out that I had tricked him. *But how had he known? Merely by looking at me after I had gone through his tunnel?*

My hands were back in my pocket again, and I found myself fingering that mis-matched pair of gloves. Or rather, not a pair—but two lefts! And they were both mine, because my initials were in both, although written backwards in one!

I reached for my wallet—and found myself doing it with my southside paw. My papers all looked like they'd been written in Arabic. I put the wallet back with a trembling hand and glanced at my watch. The dial was reversed, and the hands were running backward!

Vivian watched these feverish actions of mine with staring eyes. I stared back at her and remembered her words about her brother Bob being naturally left-handed. And I remembered the question I had just asked myself. *How had Freeman known, merely by looking at me? What sort of results had he expected?*

Then, inevitably, the next question occurred. What would be the results for a lad who had started out left-handed? Would it merely make him right-handed instead, or would it . . .

I stopped thinking and grabbed Vivian's hand. She came up light as a feather and under my chin, but I didn't stop then to explore the possibilities.

"Come on, honey, grab your coat! We're going to call on Dr. Freeman."

We found a taxi at the corner and hopped in the back. It was almost dark now, and I had time to wonder whether I was being completely wise. But my arm was still around Vivian's shoulder, and now if ever was the time to prove to her that I was a hero.

The cabbie grabbed my act a bit when we pulled up in front of the doctor's gloomy residence. I flourished my new twenty just to make an impression, but he handed it back to me with an indignant sneer. "What kinda funny money is that, bud?"

I looked at it in dismay. The five-spot wasn't any better—even Lincoln was facing the wrong way. Vivian paid the fare while I muttered in my beard.

Then we started up the crumbling front walk. Now was the time to stop acting the hero—but Vivian's hand was in mine and she didn't falter. "It's so nice to have a big strong man to depend upon, Mr. Pangborn."

"Call me Lin," I gulped.

"After all, we're practically married."

The front door still said "Enter," but the door was locked. The house seemed to be completely dark, and no one answered when I pounded on the door.

"Perhaps we'd better go get the police," I suggested.

But Vivian didn't think much of that idea. "We'd have to convince them first, and wait while they got a search warrant and everything else. I've got a horrible feeling that every minute counts—that something terrible has happened to Bob. Isn't there another way in?"

She was squeezing my hand and that was enough. I led her around the side, to the back door from the doctor's study, and that one yielded with a gentle shove. House-breaking was not enough, we had to enter besides.

Floors creaked and shadows moved as we tiptoed through the gloomy dump. Most of the rooms upstairs and down were devoid of even furniture, and the condition of the kitchen made it a good guess that Doctor Freeman had gone out to dinner.

Finally there remained but one locked door off the lower hall, and the laboratory shed out behind. I started out, but Vivian was nothing if not thorough.

"Why should this door be locked, if it only leads to the basement? At least I'll bet that's where it goes."

I sighed and put my shoulder to it. After all, what was one door more or less? The lock splintered out of the old frame on the second try, and then we were looking at a rough flight of stairs which unquestionably led to the dank, dark cellar.

I lit a match and started down. The match flickered out as I reached the bottom. I lit another and spotted the light bulb hanging near my head. But then I caught a glimpse of something else—and dropped the match.

Vivian heard my gasp as she edged down behind me. "What is it?"

"Nothing," I said in a strangled voice. "I just burned my finger. But don't you dare come down here! You run for the cops, and don't let anything stop you!"

She turned and ran back up the stairs without any argument, and I filed that away for future reference when I could think about such things. I waited until I heard the front door slam behind her. I waited even longer than that, shivering in the dark, and it took every last bit of will-power I had to reach

out for the bulb and pull the chain.

I'd seen a lot of messy things in my day as a reporter. I'd seen what fire could do to the human body, and head-on collisions, and chemicals and explosions. But never anything as bad as this. There was only one phrase to describe them, and that was *inside out* . . .

Six of them, lined up on rolling tables like horrible anatomical specimens from another world. All neatly tagged with dates and data—the League of Left-Handed Men! I took another long, shuddering look and discovered something which made it seem even more gruesome. Three of them were unmistakably dead, but hearts still beat on the other three!

I must have gone completely mad myself then. I found the outside cellar door, with the ramp which explained how Doctor Freeman had gotten them down here. It was padlocked from outside, but I splintered it open with a length of timber. The shed outside was also padlocked, but I forced the double doors open with the same piece of lumber used as a lever. I found the light switch, and the motor which operated the air pump, and the removable panel with the carriage inside the tunnel just as I had left it.

I did all this without conscious purpose—moving as if in some frantic nightmare. Then I went back and got the three *things* that still lived, rolling them into the shed one by one. I was sobbing to myself as I eased the first one into the round cradle, clamped shut the panel, and pulled the release.

My actions came without even thinking. All I had was a picture in my mind: a picture of a one-armed paper doll that could be reversed by moving it around a twisted surface.

The tunnel reverberated briefly with the passage of its missile, and then was silent. I cut the motor and opened the panel again with dread in my heart. A human being was in the cradle! A bleary old man who needed a shave! He blinked at me and climbed stiffly out. Then he caught sight of the other two guinea pigs—and promptly keeled over in a dead faint.

I didn't bother with him then. I was already loading another gruesome passenger. Another pull on the switch, another rumble. This one was the kid I'd seen that afternoon. He tumbled weakly out, and didn't even look around. He slumped to the floor, holding his head.

One last one to go, and a prayer was in my heart as I moved

to lift it. But even as I leaned over the table, something hit me from behind. Hands pulled me away, rained blows on me with insane fury. *Doctor Freeman had come home again!*

He fought like the madman he was, with a wildness and strength that was more than human. It was all I could do to cover myself, knowing that one more life still depended on me. I didn't even try to escape, but merely held him off and waited my chance. It finally came when he paused for breath, wide open and gasping, but still cursing me wildly. I gave it everything I had left, and he went down with a groan.

He wasn't finished yet, but he was out of the way for the time being. I lifted my last burden with my last bit of strength, and gently eased it home. Then I pulled the switch again, and turned back to attend to Freeman.

He was already on his feet and staggering toward the door. But Vivian Carter faced him there, her face white but determined, and that length of lumber raised in her hands. I shouted and ran to cut him off, and he darted aside around the dark end of the mass of the tunnel. I let him go. I reached Vivian and let her cling to me,

while sirens screamed to a halt on the street out front.

Then, while cops poured in behind I went slowly back to the panel in the tunnel and swung it aside. Bob Carter lay inside, unconscious but still breathing. Vivian rode with him to the hospital—but not before she had given me a kiss that was both a benediction and a promise.

We never did find Doctor Freeman, although he hadn't gotten out the door and there was no other way out. We found another hatch into the far side of the tunnel where he might have hidden—but we still didn't find him even after we had pulled his fiendish structure apart piece by piece.

We did find his notes in the safe in his study. Notes of his experiments and theories—notes which it required another physicist to translate. That expert followed them as far as he could, and then he gave up with a shrug.

"Gentlemen," he told the police late the next morning, "as

far as I can determine, Freeman had some theory about . . . well, you might almost call it a fifth dimension. He seemed to have some concept of putting himself 'outside'—of encompassing the whole universe, is the only way I can put it. But of course he was insane; it's obviously impossible."

And of course it was impossible, the police agreed. Those three *things* in the cellar were impossible, too, and they went to Potter's field in sealed caskets that were never opened. McKenzie said the same thing about the story I handed in, but he gave me my job back when he heard rumors that proved it wasn't my own delirium tremens.

I still wake up nights, with that horrible nightmare, but the warmth of Vivian next to me pulls me out of it. We may *all* be inside of Doctor Freeman, but as long as she's there too, everything's right . . .

Except that I'm still left-handed.