

Astounding SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME LVIII • NUMBER 6

February 1957

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COVER BY FREAS • Illustrations by Freas and van Dongen

SYMBOL: Common Proposition in Geometry.

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Astounding SCIENCE FICTION published monthly by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated at 575 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Arthur Z. Gray, President; Ralph B. Whittaker, Jr., Executive Vice-President; Arthur P. Lawlor, Vice-President and Secretary; Thomas H. Kaiser, Treasurer. © 1957 by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., in the United States and countries signatory to the Berne Convention and Pan American Convention. Entered as Second-Class matter at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Subscription \$3.50 for one year and \$6.00 for two years in United States, Possessions and Canada; \$4.75 for one year and \$8.00 for two years in Pan American Union, Philippine Islands and Spain. Elsewhere \$5.00 for one year and \$8.50 for two years. When possible allow four weeks for change of address. Give old address and new address when notifying us. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or art work. Any material submitted must include return postage. All subscriptions should be addressed to Subscription Dept., Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 304 East 45th Street, New York 17, New York.

\$3.50 per Year in U. S. A.

Printed in  173 the U. S. A.

35 cents per Copy



THE MAN WITH THE CORKSCREW MIND

He was very sure that a telepath was not a “man with a corkscrew mind” who could drag ideas out of another man’s head. And he should have known; he was a telepath himself. But...“should” isn’t “does”!

BY STANLEY MULLEN

Illustrated by Freas

"Remember me," the voice said.

"Remember me, remember me, remember me?" The same words repeated over and over, the sound between a bleat and a whimper, sometimes a question, sometimes not.

It came like words forming in your brain. Or like bodiless voices, like thought-images, or occasionally like symbols which seemed to have distorted meanings. You could not reach out and connect with them, but if you relaxed, thoughts came through to you. But you have to be in just the right receptive state, he told himself. Then, if your own thoughts and emotions do not get in the way, you start receiving.

In the ward lights went out promptly at nine o'clock. It was like the army, but worse. Like both hospital and jail, and you never knew whether to consider yourself patient or prisoner. There was dead-ly routine and monotony, no privacy of any kind, just bleak surroundings and blank faces, food which might be nourishing, but was certainly nothing else.

They took away your watch and billfold, your keys and knife and any other small tools and necessary niceties. They provided for you, after their own fashion and on their own terms. You ceased to be a whole and responsible human being when they took away your sense of identity. You were just a fish in a bowl, with other fish around you and a world of staring fishy eyes outside the bowl—the eyes studying

and weighing your personality and finding it wanting in the essentials. You wondered what kind of scales they used, and how the brains behind the staring eyes expected to discover anything about the real you in such unnatural surroundings.

You felt little interest in the other beings who shared your unhappy state. Even trying to remember that you were supposed to have an interest in them became difficult. Though they were all individuals and different, they all seemed alike, and you realized that to outsiders you, too, would seem indistinguishable from the others.

It was worse than prison, for there at least all issues were clear-cut, with you and the rest like you on one side of the fence, and a world too easily convinced of your wrongness on the other. Here, even if you were not convinced of your wrongness, you soon would be. The rest of mankind had set you temporarily apart, and you waited, waited, waited for society to make up its mind about you. That was the normal order, of course, but for you it was different. Like all the others you were certain that you were here for a special, mystical purpose, not by default, or because you were suspected of mental deviation.

But even that might be a delusion.

The place was full of delusion, and you were part of it. How could you be sure that you were set apart? How could you be sure that **THEY**—that common term for the ab-

stract and mysterious beings who run things as they are—had not simply mousetrapped you? They came with their wild tale that no child in a civilized world would believe, and expected you to perform this idiotic mission for them, and because of one pressure or another, you went along and believed the yarn. You landed here, and here was nowhere, and the shadowy creatures around you were nothings.

Thought back upon coldly, in such surroundings, the whole project was insane; and since you were, reluctantly, part of it, you were probably insane, too. You could explain it to yourself, try to follow out in detail what had happened to you, but try to analyze it, or believe any part of it, and you were cooked.

THEY came to you. THEY stood in your quiet study and talked to you. And saner men than you have been locked up for believing a lot more believable things.

THEY came to you and wanted to know who you were, and if you could prove it, then how and why and when and a lot of other screwy approaches to undermining your confidence in yourself and your identity. It was some satisfaction to remember that you had turned the tables on them, that you had asked for their cards and credentials, and had made phone calls to the right government agencies, and made them stand right there and wait while you took time to check on them thoroughly.

"All right," you said warily, glancing from one to the other of THEM and reflecting uneasily that an announced drop-in by a pair of government agents might be a prelude to serious trouble. "All right, gentlemen. I'm convinced you're what you say you are. Now what can I do for you?"

So THEY reversed the ritual on you, to put you in your place for doubting their credentials.

"First," answered the younger of the pair, "you can try convincing us that you're Emmet FitzGerald."

Our civilization thrives on suspicion. It is taken for granted that a man without sixteen identification cards, a driver's license with fingerprints, a bank-signature record, and four copies each of front, profile, and three-quarter photographs is a solar myth. You not only have to be yourself, but be able to prove it to a bunch of bureaucrats on demand.

FitzGerald laughed, but THEY did not even smile. THEY never smile. Humorless types, these two, possibly from seeing too many G-Man movies or TV shows. Fitz shrugged wearily.

"Driver's license." He slapped the card-folder on the desk. "The prints could be faked, of course." He reached a copy of his book from the shelf. "There's a glamor-type photo of me on the jacket. I suppose I could write you a check and the bank would pay out the money, but that would take a little time. Have you any other suggestions?"

The younger agent whose name

was Southey asked glumly: "Do you mind giving us a print to match this one on the driver's license photostat?"

"Would it matter if I minded?"

Fitz inked a fingertip and smudged a print on a clean sheet of typing paper. Lamont, the older frozen-faced character, snatched up the paper and held both old and new prints up to the light, comparing.

FitzGerald leaned back in his chair and studied his visitors. Nothing to learn from their faces. And he was in no mood to try for contact with their minds, which in any case would be professionally trained to blankness.

Southey glanced up sourly from the dust-jacket photo.

"Doesn't look too much like you," he observed.

"They never do. Retouched and glamored-up. People seem to expect writers to look like writers. Do you imagine for a holy minute that anyone would be masquerading as me?"

"It could happen."

"That's not a recent picture. A friend of mine, guy I knew in the war, became a camera fiend. I was handy, and he took a lot of casual mini-cam shots. Really candid, some of them."

"We've already checked your army records. And other records. This is just a formality."

"Why be formal? Why be polite at all? I gather that this is not a

social call, So what happens now? Do I call my lawyer, or what?"

"Don't bother, unless you want," said Lamont. "The prints check. I thought they would. As for your lawyer, we've already called him, made certain arrangements. You did write the book, 'The Mature Telepath,' didn't you?"

"Of course I wrote it. No ghosts. No nothing. Just me and my little typewriter. Is it against federal law to write a serious non-fiction study of telepathy?"

Southey almost smiled, but not quite. "It might be if the politicians ever heard about it. But so far, no law that I know of. Are the statements you made in that book true? Literally true?"

FitzGerald's first wave of fear had subsided, only to be replaced now with a flash of artistic indignation.

"Literally true," he stormed. "If you had bothered to read the book, you'd know that the appendix contains photostats of notarized depositions, by me, and by several noted scientists who witnessed demonstrations. Men whose professional and personal integrity are beyond question."

Lamont said quietly, "In that case, we are here to consult you professionally. Your profession, not ours. We need a mind reader."

FitzGerald contained his blazing anger, trying to answer calmly.

"I'm afraid I can't help you, gentlemen. The science of telepathy is too new and too erratic to be

acceptable evidence in a court of law. Besides, I wouldn't stoop to using my quaintly abnormal senses to spy on people's delinquencies. You have to find another quack to compare people's mental reservations with the statements they make on income tax forms. I never claimed to read minds."

"What, exactly, do you claim?" asked Southey.

"ESP, or Psi if you prefer, is merely a study of certain abilities of the human animal not accounted for by the five senses which are obvious and acceptable to science. Telepathy is only one of these talents which I believe to be latent in the human race. Some individuals have this potential ability more highly developed or more sensitive than the average. But there is nothing mysterious, supernatural, or abnormal about it. Everyone has the powers and perceptions grouped under the terms of Psi, but most people are too dull, stupid, or lazy to use their abilities or even be aware of them."

"But you can use yours?" The pressure again.

"Within limits. Nothing suited to cloak and dagger stuff, I'm sure. I don't read minds. I don't think anyone does. The general public seems to imagine that a telepath's mind is a kind of corkscrew, pulling out corks and letting the thoughts pour forth, drinking up thoughts from anyone as it strikes his fancy. It's nothing like that. My brain, or yours, is a sensitive receiving instru-

ment. Other brains may or may not be transmitting. At best, and only rarely, I can receive vagrant thoughts from another person. Usually only fragments of thoughts, and often nothing that makes sense to me. What I think someone is thinking is not evidence. That is what I claimed, and all I claim."

"I see," commented Lamont. Southey nodded dubiously.

In character, they were silent, as if thinking long, long thoughts, a leathery, thin-lipped, prosperous-looking pair, like a couple of well-off lawyers, or just errand boys for the government which they claimed to be.

"Maybe a real live mind reader is more what we had in mind," said Southey, breaking the silence. "But it's possible you can help us anyhow." He glanced at his partner as if for a suggestion how to proceed. Lamont shook his head, then appeared to reconsider. Both acted as if feeling their way on unfamiliar ground.

"I'm not sure I care about helping you," said Fitz sharply, "even if I could."

"Don't be hasty about that, Fitz-Gerald," cautioned Lamont. "We got off on the wrong foot with you. But in unusual situations, you have to use unusual methods. We had to be extra careful about your identity. For a good reason, but I'm willing to apologize for that. We have a situation we're not geared to handle. Maybe you are. If not, we're no

worse off. I'll lay it on the line for you. We have a cold trail, and we'd like you to have a try at warming it up for us."

"I'll listen, but no pressure."

"No pressure," agreed Lamont. "You tell him about it, Southey. You were there."

"Right." So without preliminaries, Southey plunged in.

"Our investigations of you, FitzGerald, show that you've read science fiction. In that case, you won't be shocked by the mention of a spaceship, and the possibility of an alien from outer space."

FitzGerald grinned suddenly. "Not shocked, no. But a good deal less gullible than the man in the street. I know how unlikely such a possibility is. I've never heard of a science-fiction fan being scared by that Orson Welles radio broadcast of Martian invasion. When you know the stock plots, and know the mathematical odds against intelligent life on other worlds—"

"I'm not talking about mathematical odds, or imaginative fantasies. I'm talking cold, hard, unpleasant, frightening facts. We have the spaceship. We know that an alien form of life lived through a crash landing of that spaceship. We know he is loose, hiding out, right here on Earth. We don't know where he came from, or why, but we know roughly what he is like, and we think we know where he is. There may be more than one, which complicates the problem, but if we can put our finger on one,

that will help. He can tell us something about himself, and what his intentions are, whether he wants to or not."

"I see," FitzGerald commented soberly. "But I notice you said we 'know' these things, instead of the usual we 'have reason to believe.' Is it as positive as that?"

Southey's face set slightly, as if he had told the story and been disbelieved before.

"The evidence is real enough. We have the spaceship, and everything about it baffles experts. The alien has been seen and described to us. First, as a man in a weird kind of suiting like a spacesuit, transparent dome and all. Then after he had rid himself of the suit as a man whose actions were odd enough to attract attention. He acted crazy. He left a trail a blind man could follow. And when he went into hiding, he picked a place that was perfectly logical. We 'have reason to believe' that our alien is in Fairbridge General Hospital, in the psychopathic ward."

"Why don't you pick him up then?"

Southey sighed. "We don't know which patient he is—the trail is cold. Nobody believed the reports at first, so our agents were called off too soon. It does sound crazy. Even the people who saw the guy in the spacesuit thought he was advertising a current shocker movie. You could march green dragons up and down Main Street anywhere, and nobody would turn a head if

you put signboards on them. But that spaceship. *Whew!* I've seen it, and the thing scares me—"

"Couldn't it be a fake, a mock-up of some kind?"

"Couldn't be. Experts say there are alloys of metals not found on Earth. Technical gadgets that work, and we don't know how. And there's a general feeling and aspect of authentic alien-quality I can't describe, though I've seen and felt it. I know my emotional reaction is not evidence, but—"

"There's been nothing in the papers. No broadcasts."

"Did you think there would be? We'd have a real panic if we dared hint what we know. Some facts did get out and got printed, but we keep a staff of tame experts to laugh them down. So the hardened and

cynical newsreading public is convinced that this new rumor is just nonsense. Human inertia is a wonderful force, except when you're trying to work against it. How many people believe the stuff in your book?"

FitzGerald smiled ruefully. "Not many. I don't have enough alphabet soup in my academic background to get a hearing from serious scientists. And nobody really wants to believe in telepathy. If you confuse it with mind reading, it's too embarrassing. But that's my problem. I'd like to hear more about yours. What about this alien? I would expect a little green man from Mars to stick out like a sore thumb. What kind of monster is he?"

"Worse than a monster," admit-



ted Southey. "Apparently he looks just like us. Enough to pass as human. Enough to lose himself in the passing throngs of humanity."

"That's not too surprising. There's a definite school of thought that intelligent life would develop along the same or similar lines wherever conditions made life possible. The human form is fairly efficient, especially the hand with four fingers and an opposed thumb. And it may be that a carbon-jelly biped is a major goal, or an important way station, with the blueprints for it inherent in the material. Of course, the mathematical possibilities are infinite, and different conditions might produce totally different reactions to them. You could get the protoplasm shape-changer who was a standard character in the horror tales."

"We're not interested in theories, FitzGerald. The fact is, the alien survived. Somehow, he adapted to conditions on Earth, if he had to adapt. He's among us now, a greater potential menace than the cobalt bomb. We have to hunt him down."

"But why come to me? Surely you don't think I'm your alien—"

"I wish it were as simple as that. Actually, we want you to smell him out for us, if the term applies to faculties you claim you have. If you can sense his mental images, thoughts or words, symbols or even nonhuman memories, you could point him out to us. That's all we ask."

FitzGerald hesitated, thinking hard. He hesitated.

"It's a great deal to ask," he said slowly. "We don't know that his mental or physical processes are any different from ours. If his body is enough like ours to fool anyone, his mind may be enough like ours to fool me. And a simple course of mind discipline would make him a closed book to me. I can't reach in and probe for what I want. I can only catch the overflow, and that only if he is not aware he is transmitting, or is consciously trying to get a message to me."

Lamont shrugged. "This is not a game to us. It's a deadly business. We think we know where he is. We don't know what he looks like, because he looks so much like one of us. The ordinary, individual differences don't matter, because we all have some. Even his peculiarities and slip-ups won't show, because he has sense enough to hide in a place where screwball behavior is normal. The mental observation ward of a state hospital. We're either dealing with a shrewd, dangerous character, or accident is working overtime on his side."

"Wait a minute," FitzGerald argued. "People don't just apply for admission to a nuthouse. How did your alien manage to slip in a place that's locked inside and out? He might as well try to hide out in the Mint."

Southey flushed. "That was our

mistake. Nobody believes in ghosts. Or in spaceships, or alien spacemen. So we ran into official blockades and red tape. By the time somebody who gives orders got convinced, the trail was cold. We've had an army of men out, questioning everyone, checking backgrounds. The best we could hope for was to round up all the possibles, then start eliminating. We've done that as well as possible. But time had passed. We've run down the most fantastic leads, and traced nobodies back to the gleam in their parents' eyes. And eliminated all but five men who were picked up during a three-week period in the state capital."

"I get it," gasped FitzGerald. "All five are men who just happened to get caught in the butterfly nets."

"And all five are men without histories. Derelicts from Skid Row. Possible criminals who have covered their pasts. Maybe men who really don't know or care who they are. Four of them are human, and the fifth—"

"May be something else."

"Right. Will you help us, FitzGerald? It'll be like a police line-up, four innocents and one man to be identified. We can have you thrown with them, as another patient, so as not to put our alien on his guard. You can study him and the others and reach your own conclusions."

"I don't know. It's all so fantastic."

"No more so than that spaceship.

I've seen it. There's nothing like it on this world. Maybe you can make a real contact with him. Find out who he is and what he wants. Where he came from, how to operate those gadgets on his ship. Interested?"

FitzGerald whistled. "Interested, yes. But scared, too. You don't know what you're asking. I've stayed clear of crackpots, because off-beat thoughts get me all scrambled mentally. I don't know what a session in a laughing academy with real lunatics might do to me. If I made contact, the images and impulses might not mean anything to me. And again, they might tangle me up so I could never straighten out. Let alone what a contact with a truly alien mind could do. There's only one reason I'm considering it."

"What's that?" Pressure again.

FitzGerald laughed bitterly. "I'm thinking that an alien might be just a harmless tourist, or a cast-away spaceman who wants only to get home. What then? If you catch him, and your boys work him over, it will be pretty nasty. Imagine a shipwrecked sailor among cannibals and you'll see what I mean. His friends could come for him, and they might not like what they found."

"We're just doing our job. We have to find him and ask some questions, that's all. If you won't help us, we'll have to work over all five of them, or figure out some better way. And none of them may be the alien. If you prefer it that way, suit yourself. It's still a free coun-

try, and we can't force you to cooperate with us."

FitzGerald's eyes narrowed. "It's a free country, and I'd like to keep it that way. You just forced me—"

"Let's go," said Southey. "We'll give you three days."

FitzGerald grimaced as he jerked the unfinished page of his new book from the typewriter and crumpled it. He wondered if he would ever have a chance to finish *Opus II*, and if it would matter whether he did or not.

"Just like that," he muttered. "Not even time to straighten out my affairs. Not even time for thinking about it, or wondering—"

Lamont thawed slightly. "As the man said when shaking hands with a tiger, 'I don't mind giving you a hand, Bud, but I'd like to be sure of getting my hand back.' Don't worry, FitzGerald, we'll give you all the protection possible. There's a doctor who knows all about this. Allan—"

"Let's go," FitzGerald said unhappily, wondering what new and eerie material he would have for his next writings, if he had a chance to write again. Wondering—

It was the second night, late. Very late. You sensed the others around you, the heavy breathing, the restless tossing, the creak of beds. Someone is actually asleep, for there is audible, insistent snoring, and that vague flickering in your brain which is another's dreaming. But the others, like you, lie there

quietly, staring at darkness, thinking, or trying not to think.

A guy could go really nuts just thinking about it.

Or just thinking. Brain-weary, you refused the struggle and settled back into a comfortable state of not-thinking. A kind of self-hypnosis actually, trancelike.

Relax. Just relax and lie there.

Thoughts come beating at you through the darkness, some on gauzy wings, others hammering. Thoughts. Their thoughts? Or did you just imagine in some other life that you were telepathic? That sometimes thoughts not your own came to you, unasked and often unwanted. You never knew quite where they came from, and out of context, thoughts of other people rarely made sense.

You could catch fragments here and there, like moths on the wing, but if you touched them, they crumbled into dust. They became dead and broken things if you tried to seize them and make them your own. But if you lay back quietly and let darkness seep into you along with them, you could enjoy their passing just as you might the casual patterns of luminous butterflies weaving meaningless abstractions upon the blackness.

Sometimes it was just emotion you sensed. A powerful emotion like thirst. No words, not even pictures, no image of a sticky bottle of rotgut whiskey, no cool and frosty glass of beer. No anything. But someone was caught in the grip

of terrible emotion. Thirst. Just thirst that was pure agony—bitter burning in the throat and a resined bow drawn squeakily across taut nerves. Body and soul screamed for a drink. Just a drink. A little thing to ask. Just one—

FitzGerald shuddered and tried to tune it out. But repelling an emotion from the mind is not turning a dial. He tried to withdraw himself from its agony, from its whining insistence. If your mind was sensitive enough, you were trapped. You tried in vain to escape. It was no longer just a message received across the never-never land between the minds, but a real and sharp and definite emotion of his own. You did not merely share the agony of thirst, the terrible impulse to limited self-destruction—it was yours. Nobody could be an onlooker with other people's thoughts and emotions, with their ideas and cravings and fears—you gave them the opening, and they moved in, took over. That was the penalty.

Other thoughts and feelings then. Crowding. Rushing out of their lairs, exploring, thrusting, conquering, invading his mind as if they drew both strength and courage from the darkness. By a conscious effort, FitzGerald withdrew from the mental melee. He concentrated his thoughts elsewhere, striving desperately to remain aloof and untrammelled long enough to get back his balance. In that jeweled second of withdrawal, it came again—

Suddenly tendrils of alien thought and feeling brushed against FitzGerald's mind. Really alien. Not bizarre, exotic. Not friendly. Not malignant. Not any emotion that could be named, identified, pigeonholed. Just a sudden twinge of feeling and thought that was subtly different. Something like a questing ghost, not completely sensed, then gone like a ghost, leaving an uncanny impression of distance and strangeness.

Knowing better, FitzGerald still tried to capture the fleeting sensation. But it was like snatching at a sunbeam, he could connect with nothing solid. Nothing as tangible as a real thought. Hardly even a flash of disconnected emotion. An idea of searching, of frustration which was not necessarily an alien emotion in such surroundings.

Baffled, FitzGerald tried to analyze his impression. What about it had been alien, what had he sensed not normal to his own kind? Unearthly suggestion, yes. But how, why, what?

Familiar things became suddenly unfamiliar. As if the everyday facts one took for granted had suddenly come alive, squirming out of grasp like a greased, rubbery doorknob as one reached out to it.

The everyday facts. But what were facts? Just the individual items in the pattern of ritually accepted lies and half-truths agreed upon by the society one happened to be born into. Everyday facts and everyday objects. What were those sacred ob-

jects? The feel of things you knew about you. A conspiracy of accepted and familiar aspects. But what did one ever really know about his surroundings? We admit, under pressure, that none of those familiar things are actually like what we think we see. Symbols, that is all.

And even the symbols, doubtful. We know that our brains see our surroundings only by a certain range of light vibrations bounced from them to us. We know nothing of their real colors, but only the colors of light falling upon them. And the science of optics tells us that actually we see our own world upside down—that our brains are habit-accustomed to turning it rightside up for us. Or maybe it is as topsyturvy as we see it, and our brains are just kidding us with helpful delusions. What is this real world, and how real is it? Why not just another unreal set of facts we agree to accept because we are taught that is the safest way? A tempering of reality into comfortable fantasy, or fantasy into reality.

How far can I trust my senses? The five accepted ones, and those borderline senses most people dare not admit they have? What are these senses, what is taste, sight, smell, hearing and touch, where does one leave off and another begin? My contacts with reality, and how reliable are they. Dealers in illusion, all of them, and illusion is the gateway to madness. In a mad world, no man is sane.

So substance, solidity, everything,

vanishes in a whirl of atoms, and atoms are reasoned away as dimensionless points of energy in space, which is only a word for emptiness and nothingness. Space around me. Space, full of dimensions and energies, full of forms and limitations, full of nothing, but with everything interlocked, co-existing, overlapping, piled together and hopelessly tangled, universes within universes, a boundless but limited nothingness, a pattern of lines leading into infinity. But when you reach infinity, where are you. Alone, as you were in the beginning. Alone, again and forever.

Alone, alone among madmen. Six of them, since you came. Your kind. Madmen. But still you are alone. FitzGerald wondered sharply how anyone, even an alien, could feel more alien than he felt. More alone.

He cleared his mind, blanking out everything, just as one clears a business machine to start over.

Start with a simple fact, he advised himself. Something you're sure of.

The darkness. Darkness around you. Stare into it and conjure up monsters of nightmare, dreadful things which cannot live in light.

Relax, and let the monsters at you. The monstrous thoughts and fears and cravings of the other madmen. For one of them may not be mad, and may not even be a man. And if you find out which is which, what will you do then? Call the

police and turn that lone and hunted thing over to a pressure group? Call in THEM.

Again strange tendrils brush against your thoughts, questing, exploring, hoping. Then, as you tense in repulsion and dismay, they withdraw quickly, quietly. Relax. Relax, and let those alien thoughts find you. Let them fall into your trap.

Once more, the contact, and—

A scream splits the silence like an explosion. A scream like a soul in torment. A scream of delirium.

That alcoholic again. The tattooed carnival man, in the throes of his delirium tremens.

Suddenly the darkness is full of movement. Of violence. A heavy bulk crashes upon you. Spinters of shock and pain burst in your brain, and run through your body like streams of colored fireworks. You wrench upward, fighting, heaving against the weight. Instinct, the ancient fear of a trap, of suffocation, fight with you. Grimly you struggle in the dark, avoiding the storming blows, the savage claws, striving to hinder and maim your assailant, getting some damage and doing some.

You jerk and wrench and heave convulsively. You feel the sideslip of your foe's body. Then still tangled, both of you hit the floor, falling, sliding, rolling. The weight is gone. You break free, fight to your knees. Free again. Free and alone. But now there is light. Light everywhere, a blinding, punishing glare.

Orderlies are there, helping and holding you.

Sprawled on the floor is a threshing, kicking thing, not a man so much as a wild animal caught by hunters, desperately trying to get away. It screams and screams, and the cry is that of a man screaming, not a beast, but still a tortured, hunted, hopeless thing. Its thoughts crash at you, and it is the wordless, formless, craving thought of thirst which you have sensed before. But the orderlies beat it down and hold it, and it works out its violence against them. It subsides, the force of thought dwindles as if going on and on and on into infinite distance, but the idea of thirst remains like a silent scream in your brain.

Then they take the quiet, limp thing away to poke the needles and drugs into it.

Another orderly—in prisons the inmates call them "screws"—looks at you as you might look at something in a zoo.

"Come on, you," he says in a voice which does not confuse invitation with command. "Doc wants to see you."

You stagger to your feet and stand tottering. "I don't think I need a doctor. I'm all right."

His laugh refutes your identity, your dignity as a human being.

"That's what you think, stupid. That's what you all think. There's nothing the matter with you. Come on. When Dr. Allan says come, you come. Understand?"

FitzGerald understood.

Dr. Allan was a short, stocky



man, with a fringe of thin gray hair, a weak chin, and a round face blank of expression. He could have been a comedy-relief character in a cheap movie, except for faded blue eyes which brooded calmly and coldly upon unpleasant things.

The doctor nodded to the orderly in dismissal, but the man lingered. "Sure you can handle this one, sir?"

Dr. Allan smiled sourly. "I don't think the patient will give me any trouble, will you, FitzGerald?"

FitzGerald shook his head and spoke out viciously, "When doc says go, you go. Understand, stupid?"

Glowing, the attendant retreated.

"Sit down, FitzGerald. I'm glad two days in this monastery of ours hasn't broken your spirit. Ugly business, isn't it?"

"Do you mean about the alien? Or the work you do in the hospital?"

"Both," Dr. Allan answered quickly. "There have been improvements in dealing with mental disorders, but it's still pretty bad. Never enough funds, pay scale too low to attract anything but thugs and sadists, the doctors try, but you can't do a good job with poor tools. About the alien. Are you having any luck at all?"

"I don't know," FitzGerald said numbly. "Several times I felt I almost had something. It was close, just before the ruckus started."

"Your friends outside were won-

dering. I've just had a phone call from them. I promised to call them back if you were doing any good."

"I'm not doing myself any good," complained FitzGerald. "I could just about qualify for admission here, for letting myself in on a deal like this."

"Sit down and relax. Pressure's off here. You hate pressure, don't you? Smoke?"

FitzGerald eased into the chair. "Yes to the first question. No, thanks, to the second. I don't smoke."

"Don't even talk unless you want to."

FitzGerald sat back and took in his surroundings. It was a real office, as real as things are. It might have been any doctor's office, anywhere. An unbarred window opened onto the green of manicured lawns, now a silvered and subdued pattern of moon-drenched planes and shadow-denseness. Real lawns. At least real enough to run upon with bare feet, feeling the tickle of grass-blades under the toes, the cool, pleasing dampness, the give and spring of turf. There was a world out there, a world of memories, of ordinary, uncomplicated people. Or were there any uncomplicated people?

"I don't mind talking," FitzGerald said, taking refuge in words. "It's just that I don't have anything to say."

"I've read your book, FitzGerald. Very interesting. Inconclusive, because of the subject matter. If I

were completely honest, I'd say your evidence would be convincing if your material dealt with any other subject. Training's against me. Training and feeling both. I can't accept telepathy, even if you prove it to me. In the last analysis, I'm afraid, science is as indefensible as superstition, and as bigoted.

"You aren't, or you wouldn't admit it. I can see your point, though. No scientist could believe in a ghost unless it had been weighed and evaluated in a laboratory under rigid scientific conditions. And no ghost would submit to them. It's a contradiction in terms.

"That gives it a name, but doesn't solve anything. The two agents who brought you here didn't really believe in an alien. They wouldn't if they saw one. They couldn't, even if he proved he was an alien. But they have to convince themselves they believe, because the evidence is too strong. Do you actually believe that one of those five patients is an alien?"

"I don't know if I do or not. As you say, I have to convince myself that I believe it, or I couldn't act. I guess I'm just playing along in the hope of convincing myself it isn't true. How about you, doctor? Do you believe it?"

"Frankly, no. But I'm just curious enough to go along with the experiment. Like those government agents, I have to know if someone landed here from a spaceship, but for different reasons. It's an up-to-

date variant of the old shell game, isn't it? Under which nutshell is the alien. One of five. Which one?"

"You guess," suggested FitzGerald.

Dr. Allan shrugged. "Two alcoholics, two schizophrenics, and a catatonic. How about one of the alcoholics, maybe the one who just got violent and attacked you? He could have realized you were a spy, and potentially dangerous to him. A mind-spy. He may be a better telepath than you are. Who knows what he may have read in your mind?"

FitzGerald grunted. "Who knows, if he read my mind? But I don't think he did. I read his, and there wasn't room in his brain for anything but thirst."

"If he's a true alien, he might have power to impress whatever thought he liked on your mind. But you're doing the picking, by government request. Who's your candidate?"

"I'd vote for the catatonic. Since he was brought here, he's been curled up in a ball. He doesn't talk, he won't eat unless he's fed forcibly, he doesn't do anything. It's a perfect set-up for an alien."

"Our alien might not need that. If he's advance man for an invasion, he'd know the language and have all the papers like any other spy. Imagine learning a language from monitored TV and radio programs. I shudder to think what his ideas of our civilization must be."

"It will be worse before he's

through with us," said FitzGerald grimly. "They'll find him, and pin him down, before he can put the finger on us. I don't like to think what they'll do to make him talk. I'm trying not to think as far ahead as that. Trying not to think at all—"

Dr. Allan studied FitzGerald closely. "If you want my advice, you'll shed that hair-shirt the hospital issues. Put on your own clothes and go quietly home. I'll tell your government friends it was no good. There won't be any trouble."

"No trouble," brooded FitzGerald aloud. "I'd like that. I'd like to go home and forget all about this. But I can't. I don't know why. Maybe I'm curious, too. Maybe I am scared, down deep. And maybe I feel responsible to the alien."

Dr. Allan stood up, shaking his head soberly. "I wish I could make it easier for you. But that would defeat your whole purpose here, wouldn't it. I guess you'd better resume your vigil, then. Get it finished, one way or another. I'll walk along, and see you safely back in the pressure cooker."

Footsteps echoed before them down the long, empty corridors. At night, the hospital seemed oddly deserted, just an abstraction of polished planes, repeated rectangles, light splashes at regular intervals. The corridor extended endlessly, a pattern of lines reaching out toward infinity. Behind each door was

a pattern of mind and emotion, all spaced like units of a vast, complex design, all troubled and uncertain and lost, each convinced of its own uniqueness and importance, each reaching out like the lines toward a dim infinity, but without conviction, without hope.

FitzGerald sensed about him, behind the myriad doors, a tangled skein of many thoughts, tenuous impressions of many personalities. He sensed people behind the doors, and other people behind each of those, like a terrible counterpoint of the linear motif. Everything, everybody, extending in all directions away from him into infinity. He alone, lost, without either lines or other people's emotions binding him to that unreachable goal.

The patterns dissolved around him. There was commotion in the corridor. Sudden, shattering violence.

From somewhere, from behind a door that should have been locked, or perhaps had been forced, burst a flailing figure. It ran, crouching low, bowling over the assembled opposition of nurses and orderlies like tenpins. It crashed against the doctor and FitzGerald, pinning them together, entangling them in its violence.

The tattooed man, the circus or carnival character, the frenzied alcoholic.

And his mind recalled the quivering, tortured dominant of thirst—

A knife appeared, threatened. A glittering fan of icy reflected light

like a juggler's toy. It pressed hard into the doctor's white jacket, but did not drive home. A hand, inhumanly strong, caught FitzGerald's wrist, wrenched it behind him, twisted. He was propelled bodily backward into Allan's office. The door crashed shut, and the lock clicked.

The tattooed man hurled FitzGerald into a corner. Dr. Allan was arched painfully across his desk while the knife puckered an indentation in his throat. A drop of blood formed around the point.

"Keys," demanded the tattooed man hoarsely.

He snatched the ring of jingling keys and began rifling the desk. In the second drawer he found the gun.

FitzGerald broke the spell of inaction that held him. Like a springing leopard, he flung himself. The gun swept up. Gunsight shredded FitzGerald's lip. He felt teeth break, and reeling backward, he saw the gun swing to Dr. Allan. Bloodshot eyes squinted meanly.

"Don't make me shoot," the man warned.

"What do you want?" asked Dr. Allan calmly.

The tattooed man laughed. "We're leaving here. All of us. All three—"

"You'll never make it," said FitzGerald, lipping through pulped lips.

"Yes I will. Don't you want out of here?"

"Of course."

"For a minute, I wondered whose side you were on. He'll go with us—partway. With a hostage, we'll make it."

"You can't run away from trouble inside yourself," said Dr. Allan softly.

"Don't talk. Move." Grimacing savagely, the tattooed man waved his weapon, shepherding his captive doctor toward the window.

The ground was a short drop away. Outside was freedom of a sort.

They set off across the neat lawns and into shadowing brush. The tattooed man set a stiff pace. FitzGerald, retching and spitting tooth-splinters, had trouble keeping up. They moved through bushes which slashed at them, under dense cover of trees, along broken cement walks, across open vacant lots. Above the distant spatter of city lights was a faint smear of luminosity, and about them cloud, troubled moonlight. Wind, cool and restless, stirred dry leaves to rustling.

FitzGerald felt painfully the idiocy of the project and the sheer insanity of their costume for it. He idled hopelessly with the thought that he lay on his bed, half-asleep, caught in a web of his own or another's dreaming.

But the dream continued, flowing about him like a film montage. Except that the solid ground underfoot was real, and the caress of wind felt like cool fluid on his fevered skin.

"Hurry up!" ordered the tattooed man.

"Hurry up—where?" FitzGerald demanded.

"You'll find out."

Tranced, FitzGerald stood by while the madman smashed a window from a parked car and rigged a jumper to the ignition. With FitzGerald at the wheel and Dr. Allan cowering beside him, the tattooed man lolling in the back seat and commanding by gestures with the gun, they took off.

Streets streamed past. In the distance, there were sirens, but no visible signs of pursuit appeared.

"Faster," said the tattooed man.

FitzGerald concentrated upon driving. In grim silence, they threaded mazes of darkened streets, taking less traveled thoroughfares and cutting through alleys. Ahead, linear perspectives took form, lines, everywhere moving patterns of lines, all leading away toward infinity. And this time, at a madman's whim, to the darkest, most unknown infinity.

"Stop here!"

FitzGerald dragged the car to a stop, brakes and tires screaming.

"Get out, both of you."

The madman followed them from the car. In a second of frozen horror, FitzGerald guessed—

"This is as far as we go," said the tattooed man.

"What are you planning to do with us?" asked Dr. Allan.

Grinning, the tattooed man raised the gun. "I'm trying to make up

my mind about that. Since you've jogged my elbow, you first. Start running—"

Unbelieving, the doctor took two backward steps, sagging as if the starch had run out of him. Then he turned and began to run, awkwardly, pitifully, a perfect running target. The madman aimed carefully.

FitzGerald moved, striking at the gunhand, standing in the way of the shot, grappling.

Memory flooded his brain. Not full memory. But he knew his most powerful weapon—his brain. He struck out with it, with the full force of mind.

And encountered steel. Pain burst explosively through him. Pain and partial awakening.

The tattooed man, laughing, threw away the gun.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were worth the trouble," said the tattooed man.

"Who are you?" asked FitzGerald. "What are you?"

"You still don't know? You wanted an alien. Well, you've found one. Do I come up to your expectations?"

FitzGerald shook his head in wonder and horror.

"Why did you want to kill the doctor?"

The alien smiled. "I couldn't kill him, and I know you couldn't stand by and let me kill him. I wanted to shock you and get past your guard. I couldn't be sure."

"Sure of what?"

"Sure about you. There's something poisonous about this planet. Mind-warping. Not chemical, of course, we had tested for that. But you can't test psychological effects. Not without the right kind of guinea pig. Something here on Earth twists a mind until you imagine you belong here, that you're of the native species. It did that to me, at first. But I'd been conditioned, posthypnotic suggestion, so I recovered fast. I knew who I was, and why I came here."

"Why are you here? For conquest? As a spy. Back in the hospital, I sensed alien thoughts. But those wild, desperate thirst cravings of yours blotted out everything."

The alien laughed. "Yes, thirst. You received only what I wanted you to receive. There was thirst, but it was only a thirst to get back home, where I belong. Where we belong."

"I?"

"I was the alien you were looking for. You were the one I had to find. Those in the first wave, like you, were not conditioned to remember, as I was. We did not know the danger then. You actually believed you were one of them, and you fit in so perfectly we could not locate you. We dared not risk hunting too openly. These humans are dangerous—"

"You don't know how dangerous," FitzGerald burst out. "They could never live side by side with another species. They have their

fatal pride and dignity and greed, all based on fear. They don't know how to live and work together for mutual advantage, not even with each other. With us, they'd have to rule—or it would be a fight to the death."

"We wouldn't have hurt them. We couldn't have. But it's just as well we found we can't live here. Too bad for them, though, but I don't think we could stand such neighbors."

The alien stumbled, half-falling. FitzGerald caught and held him.

"I've got to get back," came the thought. "This wretched synthetic body. Good enough to fool them, but . . . not good for much else. This world does something to us. I'm sick, and all mixed-up inside. They'll fix me up—when we get home."

A terrible thought struck FitzGerald. "The spaceship . . . they've found and dismantled it . . . it's gone—"

Terror blazed through him as he realized the trapped feeling in himself. Trapped, on an alien, hostile world. Today and yesterday they had been hunting the tattooed man. Tomorrow, he would be the quarry.

Swiftly came the reply, without need of speech. "They'll be hunting us, yes, but they won't find us. They were meant to find what they found. A fake, a mock-up spaceship. We built the false ship and led them to it. Bait on the trap. Since we could not locate you and could not look

openly, we made them bring you to us. We knew you would be telepathic, and not know any better than to reveal it."

"And all the time I was among these people just to betray them? I feel like a Judas goat—"

FitzGerald looked down at his arms and legs in the fretted moonlight. He tried to imagine his remembered face in the mirror. He wondered what he was really like, what kind of alien monster—

Laughter jeered in his brain. Knowing that the Other shared his thoughts at will, FitzGerald stubbornly persisted in trying to rebuild nostalgic impressions of the world he had known and believed his own. Briefly, memory touched a myriad of minor fragments—moonlight shining through clouds, wet streets after a rain shining like black oilcloth with light lying about in splashed pools, the smells of city and country, sounds from the roar of traffic, a sudden sharp awareness of bacon-smell and the aroma of coffee, the sigh of wind and patter of rain, the silence of snow—

"Small magics build a world, not the great, remembered movements of history," thought the Other, unsmiling.

Patterns. Patterns dwindling and fading away, and the sadness that such magical things had lost meaning.

They were in a tiny park. Trees parted before them.

"Not here, surely," FitzGerald's

mind protested. "Not right in the city. No spaceship—"

"You'll have to start thinking in other terms," chided the tattooed man. "And, please, not so violently. Who uses spaceships?"

Patterns shifting and rearranging themselves. Atoms and universes. Space. Lines leading away into infinity. Into a new infinity in which he might have a part.

Not a spaceship. Not big, metallic, mirror-bright and needle-shaped, as he had imagined. Not anything he had a name for. A luminous

framework, a hodgepodge of geometric patterns, a glowing, translucent phantom of webbing, half-seen, half-sensed with some other unearthly sense, a contrivance enclosing space.

Enclosing and transcending space.
Enclosing and transcending time.
Lines leading—somewhere.

Leading home. Nostalgic fragments began to come to him, remembered emotion and expanding joy. He was going home.

Remembering—

THE END