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W. W. Scott — Editor

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THE PAINTED GHOST

by RICHARD R. SMITH

illustrated by EMSH

A being made of pure energy, a being you could throw a stone right through without hurting it. Such was an inhabitant of Ceres. How then to communicate with it?

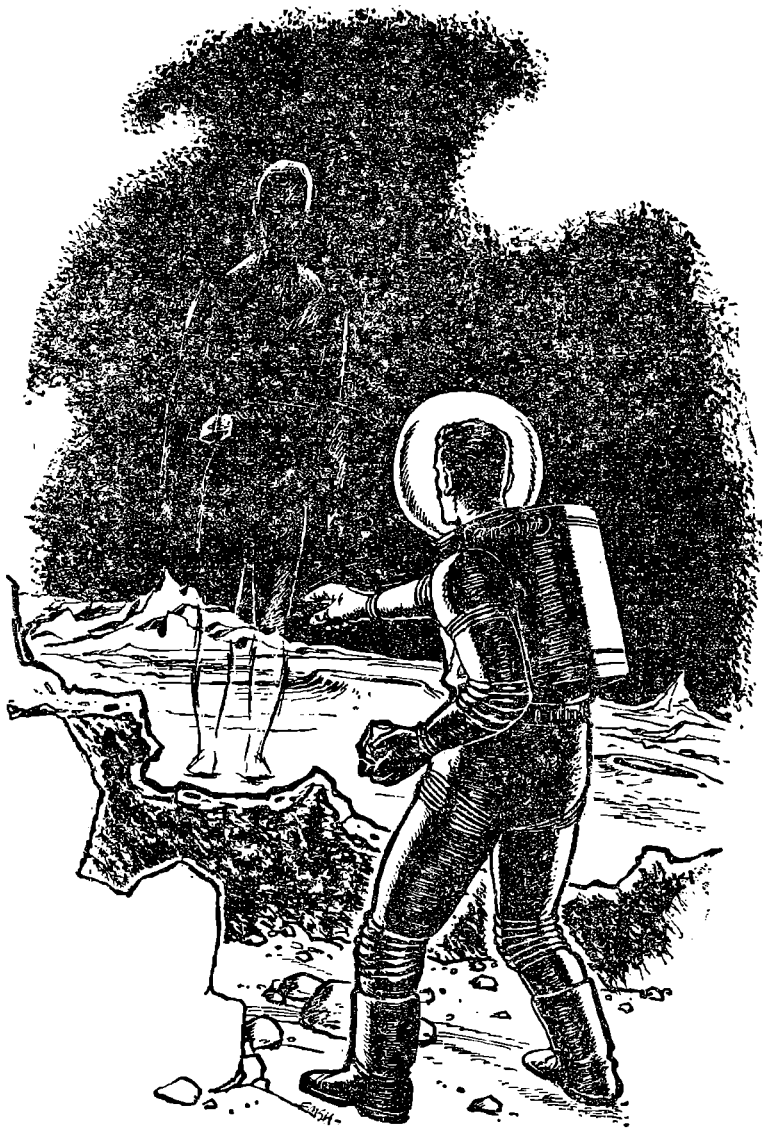
THE human race makes a mistake now and then. The classic example, I suppose, is Columbus. Everyone thought he was crazy when he said the world was round.

Sam Weeks was like Columbus in a way. He had a theory and everyone would have laughed but, unlike Columbus, he didn't tell anyone.

To understand how it happened, you'll have to remember how it was in those days. Space travel had just been perfected and mankind had gone wild with its new power. We had explored Mars and although they were a dying race, we had learned numerous things from the Martians. At the height of their civilization, they had de-

veloped a technology of machines with incredibly few moving parts and radioactive alloys sensitive to thought-waves. We had adapted the technology to our own purposes and profited tremendously. After that incentive, we went on to Arcturus and discovered evidence of a dead race. Almost every week an archaeologist on Arcturus uncovered a device such as an antigravity machine or a matter-converter.

Every government on Earth was spending every dollar it could on the construction of spaceships and exploration of outer space. And everywhere mankind went, it hoped to find another civilization similar to



the Martians or the Arcturians.

Then someone got the bright idea we should explore our own back yard before we went too deep in space. And we landed on Ceres in the asteroid belt and found the— Well, I don't think they were ever given a scientific name. If they were, I never heard it. We called them *Ghosts* because they looked like ghosts.

Our survey team studied them for a month and it was an interesting month to say the least. The Ghosts, we discovered, didn't have physical substance. Instead, their bodies were composed of energy and it was the energy that gave them the shimmering, ghost-like appearance. They were sentient. That is, they could think and they moved about under their own volition.

None of those discoveries startled us. Anyone who traveled in space had to meet certain prerequisites and one of the main prerequisites was imagination. We had learned through trial and error that a man without it was a handicap in outer space. Some people can't understand how a low imagination ratio cuts down a

man's reflexes, but I know. On Mars I saw a man stare at a *Schkal*—one of the weirdest animals alive—and say over and over, "It can't be!" Before he convinced himself the danger was real and raised his rifle, the *Schkal* killed him.

So all the men on our team were hand-picked; with a high imagination ratio. Nothing about the Ghosts startled us except one thing: they didn't do anything and they had nothing.

THEY had no buildings, machines, art, science or *anything*. They didn't sleep, but if they had slept, they would have slept right out in the open on Ceres' surface. One of the anthropologists told me it was due to their physiology. They didn't eat anything (They absorbed sunlight and it was food to them as sunlight is food to a plant), and because they didn't eat as we do, they didn't need an agriculture or anything related to an agriculture.

Nothing could harm them because of their nature and they didn't need shelters or weapons or any of the million

and one things that protect a creature from physical harm. They were, as far as we could tell, ageless and without disease. So they didn't need a science of medicine or any of the implements of that science.

And they didn't do anything. In the first place, I suppose, they didn't have anything to do anything with. In the second place, they— Well, anyway, they just walked around and outside of walking around, they apparently didn't do anything.

During breakfast one day, a cosmologist in our team explained how the Ghosts evolved. I didn't understand nine-tenths of it, but he had an elaborate theory that they had been created at the origin of the universe and had evolved slowly during billions of years. He said that the Ghosts' life-form was actually less complicated than a star's structure.

"If they're so simple," I said, "why don't we find them all over the galaxy?"

He said that Earth's oceans contain life-forms fewer in number than more complicated forms on Earth's surface and I

let the argument drop right there. Scientists have a habit of changing the subject and when you try to argue about one thing, you find yourself arguing about a dozen other things.

Complicated or simple, the Ghosts were the most interesting race we'd ever found. And the most useless. As I said before, this was in the days when mankind was exploring outer space and anxious to find alien civilizations.

But the Ghosts didn't do anything and they had nothing. So how could mankind benefit by studying them? They didn't have any science so no matter how long we studied them, we'd never uncover anything useful such as the antigravity machine we'd found on Arcturus or the thought-reactive alloy on Mars.

But when we radioed the information back to Earth, the Wheels decided we should learn more about the Ghosts even if they didn't have anything to offer. After all, they said, the Ghosts were a *completely* alien race and mankind should, in one way or another, benefit from a closer study.

Weeks, our linguist, stepped into the picture then. He volunteered to stay on Ceres and find a way to communicate with the Ghosts. And I volunteered to help him. I'm not a scientist but I'm a "Maintenance First Class" which is, more or less, a glorified Mechanic. I can take an interstellar radio apart and put it back together again. I can repair an oxygenating machine and almost any machine ever made except a spaceship's hyperdrive. And while Weeks stayed on Ceres and studied the Ghosts, he'd be dependent on the machines around him and would need a maintenance man.

Everyone on the survey team helped construct our quarters. They called them "quarters" but I called them *cubbyholes*: they were small compartments beneath Ceres' surface... compartments barely large enough to live in. And, I remember, everyone worked hard. They were anxious to leave Ceres; anxious to go deep in space where they'd have a chance to become rich and famous by finding an alien civilization.

And they were anxious to

leave the creatures that looked exactly like ghosts.

I spent most of the first month admiring the scenery. Ceres itself is nothing but a barren planetoid 485 miles in diameter but its surroundings comprise one of the most awe-inspiring sights in the universe.

Located in the asteroid belt, Ceres is surrounded by millions of asteroids ranging in size from Pallas which is 304 miles in diameter to the smallest asteroids only a few feet in diameter.

Against a backdrop of star-filled space and reflecting sunlight, they look like a million hurtling moons of all sizes. Any object on Ceres' surface has at least a dozen shadows—shadows that keep changing and the planetoid is a world of silence and shifting light and darkness.

Weeks studied the Ghosts. As I said before, they walked and— Well, not exactly *walked* since they didn't have legs but they kept moving and Weeks chased them like a guy chasing butterflies with a net. He flashed lights of various intensities at them, focused radio

beams on them and exposed them to radioactive rays and various gases. At times he even threw rocks at them. All in the hope that something would get a reaction from them.

If, for instance, the Ghosts reacted to electrical impulses of a certain intensity, he could have used that as a basic symbol and based a language on it. He told me once that if the Ghosts had reacted to a particular size of rock or substance passing through their bodies at a particular speed, he could have based a language on that and communicated with them by throwing rocks of various sizes at them. I never did figure out if he was pulling my leg or not.

But no matter what he did, he didn't make any progress and he told me once it was driving him crazy. "I'm a linguist," he said. "My job is to communicate with aliens. I've studied it and related fields all my life. But these... *these things!* They don't do anything. Their existence has no purpose, so how can you communicate with them? How can you communicate with some-

thing when you have *nothing* in common with it?"

I had my own theory. I decided that the Ghosts were sentient but stupid. We had seen no evidence that the Ghosts were intelligent, and how can you communicate with a creature if it's too stupid to understand?

But one day Weeks was lucky and a Ghost followed him into our underground quarters. And it didn't come through the air-lock while it was open. Weeks came in first, closed the door and then the Ghost followed him. It came through three inches of steel just like a ghost would.

Then Weeks went wild. He studied the Ghost day after day, working twenty four hours a day at times. He analyzed it until his notes resembled a small library and he did everything but stand on his head in an effort to communicate with it. And the Ghost just stood there, day after day, patient-like as if it had nothing better to do than let Weeks examine it.

I asked Weeks if I could do anything to help him and he said he didn't know exactly

what to do himself and he couldn't very well tell me what to do. So I just sat around and watched Weeks and the Ghost.

It was approximately five feet tall and three feet wide. It kept changing its shape and size so Weeks gave up trying to measure its exact size. At times it was transparent, almost invisible, and other times opaque. And it changed color like a chameleon. If you held a shoe before it, it changed color until its whole body was the same shade of brown. If you held a red object before it, it matched the color perfectly. And, as Weeks proved, it could match any wave length in the visible spectrum between 3,000 and 8,000 angstroms.

But I couldn't imagine how the Ghost did it and I asked Weeks, "How can something without physical substance change color?"

He hesitated before he explained and I could almost see the wheels working inside his head as he decided to give it to me in layman's terms.

"It's simple," he said. He held a piece of green cloth before the Ghost, and the Ghost changed to the same shade of

green. "This cloth is green. Right? It's green because its physical substance has a quality that reflects light of a green wave length. The wave length...the angstrom units pass through space and reach the retina of your eye and register as green when the message is relayed to your brain. But the color itself, as it passes through space, has no physical substance. As it passes through space, it's a wave length, angstrom units, energy. And the Ghost can duplicate forms of energy. It duplicates the *energy* of green rather than the substance of the cloth. Its body *is* energy and it does it the same way one of us would flex a muscle."

I said, "Uh huh."

But it didn't end there. We discovered later that the Ghost could duplicate sounds. I didn't ask Weeks how the Ghost did that, but he told me anyway. I don't remember his exact words but he said something about sound being a form of energy also and something about sound consisting of wave lengths of vibrations as they passed through space.

AT this point, Weeks was wild with joy and kept saying things like, "My name is Weeks." And then he would hold up his hand and say, "Hand." And then hold up a book and say, "Book." And the Ghost caught on. After a few times, when he held up the book again, the Ghost said, "Book." And when he held up his hand and wiggled his fingers, the Ghost said, "Hand."

Weeks was fascinated, but, more than anything else, I was amused. It's a weird sight to see a man talking to something that resembles a ghost and it standing there, repeating everything like a parrot.

Weeks pointed at the Ghost and said, "Ghost."

The Ghost said, "Ghost."

Weeks pointed at himself and said, "Man."

The Ghost said, "Man."

I said, "Polly wants a cracker. *Aaarrk!*"

The Ghost said, "Polly wants a cracker. *Aaarrk!*"

I laughed so hard tears ran down my cheeks. The thing sounded just like a parrot!

I said, "Avast there, ye blarsted landlubber!"

"Avast there, ye blarsted

landlubber! Polly wants a cracker. *Aaarrk!* Ghost. Book. Hand. Man."

I laughed so hard my sides began to hurt. I laughed until Weeks slapped my face.

"You stupid fool! Making fun of a creature ten times more intelligent than we are. Making fun of a—"

I stopped him right there. I grabbed him by the collar and shook him so hard his glasses fell to the floor. I didn't say anything. I didn't have to say anything. Weeks is a pale little guy with enough strength to fight his way out of a paper bag but he'd be exhausted when he got out. It was the first time he'd ever done anything like that and he knew from my expression what I'd do if he ever did anything like it again.

We didn't apologize to each other, but we both felt sorry about the incident and it took us awhile to forget it. In the meanwhile, the Ghost became even more interesting. The Ghosts, as I said before, couldn't be harmed. Any object passed through them as if passing through a fog. But, we discovered, a Ghost could

polarize a section of its energy if it wanted to *touch* something.

Weeks held the book in front of the Ghost so long and kept saying "Book" so often that the Ghost became interested and one day it *took* the book and started turning pages with tentacle-like extensions of its body. When we touched the extensions, they felt cold but *solid* and Weeks found out by experiment that any polarization by a Ghost had a reflexive protection system.

The system is basically simple but can only be explained by illustration. If, for instance, a man burns his finger, his nervous system works automatically, reflexively, and relays messages to the proper muscles in his arm to withdraw the finger from the source of pain. And the Ghosts' protection system was identical in function.

If a Ghost, for instance, was on Ceres' surface and polarized a section of its energy and a meteor struck the solidified area, it wouldn't be harmed. Instead, the reflexive system would depolarize the area at the *microsecond* of contact and

the meteor would pass through it.

It was almost unbelievable. The Ghosts were invulnerable. They could touch anything, but nothing could touch them unless they wanted it to touch them.

SHORTLY after that, we received a message over the radio that war had been declared against the Antarians. And as a Reserve Officer, I received notice that my unit had been activated. I left for Earth on the next supply ship and soon found myself aboard another ship headed for Antares.

I had always thought that an interstellar war would be fought with spaceships and atomic bombs. I discovered differently. There's a lot more men in a civilization than spaceships and atomic bombs and I spent three years fighting from city to city on Antares while the Antarians and our men threw spaceships and atomic bombs at each other in outer space.

During that time, I heard only two things about Weeks and the Ghosts. Both of those I saw in old newspapers while

resting in foxholes. One was an item about Weeks' wife. He was 4F and had continued his research on Ceres. His wife, a gorgeous blue-eyed blonde, evidently had too many lonely nights back on Earth. She divorced him and remarried.

And later I read that Weeks had failed to communicate with the Ghosts. I felt sorry for Weeks when I read that. He had tried hard; had worked on the project like a fanatic. But I wasn't surprised that he failed. Nothing had changed my opinion that the Ghosts were stupid. A parrot can also repeat, "Avast there, ye blarsted landlubber," but he doesn't know what it means.

THE war ended and I was shipped back to Earth and discharged. I was happily adjusting to civilian life again and had forgotten all about Weeks when I answered the door one day and there he was, grinning from ear to ear.

He said, "Hello, Ed."

I didn't recognize him at first. Instead of being the homely guy I remembered, his features had changed. His nose was smaller, his chin was larg-

er, and a dozen other things about his face had changed. . . all small changes so he had the same general appearance but all *right* changes so he was now handsome. Some surgeon had done a marvelous plastic surgery job.

Our conversation rambled while we reminisced about the experiences we'd had together and brought each other up to date on what we had done and were doing.

Then I brought the conversation around to the Ghosts. "I was sorry to hear you didn't communicate with the Ghosts," I said. "You certainly tried hard enough."

"That's why I came to see you," he said. "To tell you the truth and make an offer. The truth is—I *did* communicate with the Ghosts."

I didn't say anything but my astonishment must have shown on my face.

"I did," he repeated.

"I don't believe it."

He lit a cigarette and explained, "Remember how the Ghosts could duplicate sound and light and any form of energy? When I analyzed them more closely, I learned they

could duplicate *thought*. Thoughts are a form of energy—electrical impulses traveling through the networks of our minds. I'm not telepathic but they learned to project thoughts and receive my thoughts. They can—"

"You mean," I asked dazedly, "that the Ghosts are intelligent?"

He nodded his head. "Very much so."

I mixed some drinks—strong ones—and handed him one. I wasn't sure if he was pulling my leg or not, but I decided to go along with him for awhile. "If the Ghosts are intelligent," I asked, "why don't they *do* something?"

He sipped his drink. "That's hard for us to understand, but it makes sense in their case. They are, more or less, like a man who stands on the bank of a river and watches the river go by. The man wouldn't jump in the river and try to stop it or change its course. And it would be just as foolish for the Ghosts to interfere with events that take place around them. They would have no reason; nothing to gain. They spend their lives in ac-

tivities so completely alien that it appears to us as if they do nothing."

He waited for me to make a comment, but I couldn't think of any. I had seen the Ghosts and their parrot-like ability to copy colors and sounds. I had always thought of them as brainless creatures and now Weeks claimed they were intelligent. So what? If a race is so alien that you haven't anything in common with it, who cares if it's intelligent?

"Have you ever had any queer dreams?" Weeks inquired.

I nodded my head but before I could ask what dreams had to do with the Ghosts on Ceres, he went on, "Especially when you're a kid. When you're a kid you might dream you're Santa Claus and you keep all the toys for yourself, or you might dream you're Superman, or you might dream you're flying through the air. I had a queer dream when I was a kid. I dreamed that I was a painted ghost."

"Huh?"

"Painted ghost," he repeated. "I didn't know what it meant at the time, but I had

the same dream on Ceres after the Ghosts started to duplicate colors and I analyzed it the next day."

He leaned forward in his chair and glanced around the room as if to make sure we were alone. "Dreaming you're a painted ghost is the same as dreaming you're Superman," he said. "A ghost can't be hurt...nothing can hurt a ghost. They're not physical. But the trouble with being a ghost is that no one sees it...no one knows it's there. On the other hand, a *painted* ghost would be seen. A ghost painted the color of flesh could walk in a crowd and not be noticed as being anything different than a man. And yet nothing could ever hurt it."

He convinced me that he was either drunk or crazy. And it didn't seem likely he could have gotten drunk so soon.

He rose and walked about the room as if looking for something and I wondered if I should humor him or call the police or what.

He found what he was looking for: a knife on the desk... a sharp knife I'd been using as a letter-opener.

"Watch." He placed his left hand on the desk and stabbed it with the knife.

His hand vanished before the knife struck it...

...and reappeared when he withdrew the knife.

Then his face changed as I watched. His nose became smaller; his lips became fuller and reddened while his hair grew longer until it reached his shoulders. A dozen other changes took place until the grinning face was...*a woman's*.

Then he walked *through* the desk; *through* a wall and back again; walked to where I sat paralyzed in my chair and then—so close I could have reached out and touched him—he faded, vanished entirely and then reappeared.

"Seen enough?"

I nodded my head. If I had never seen the Ghosts on Ceres, the demonstration would have startled me out of my wits. But I *had* seen the Ghosts and everything he did could have been done by a Ghost. A Ghost could change its shape and color. A Ghost could pass through material objects; could—by polarization of its energy

—touch objects and—because of its reflexive protection system—a knife or *any* material object would never harm it. And, I realized numbly, one of the Ghosts on Ceres could have done anything with its peculiar life-form. The truth had been there before my eyes all the time and I had watched the Ghosts day after day without seeing the truth.

“You’re a— You’re a Ghost?”

The face changed until it was once again Weeks’. “I’m a Ghost,” he said. “A painted ghost.”

I don’t remember exactly what he said after that. I suppose I was too numb to understand everything. But I remember he explained how he communicated with the Ghosts and told them he wanted to be one of them. And *they*—I don’t think he told me how they did it—*they* made him like them.

It’s simple, Weeks said, once you get used to the idea. He said he doesn’t have a body but when he wants one, he only has to concentrate. Using the energy is like using new muscles and he learned how to polarize, shape, and color it.

Energy is a universal tool, he said, and anything can be done with energy.

And just before Weeks left, he invited me to join him. The Ghosts had changed him and at his request had agreed to change another human to their life-form. They wouldn’t change everyone who might want to be changed but as a favor to Weeks, they would change *one* more human so he’d have a—not a human, but an *ex*-human companion.

And Weeks... Weeks said I was his best friend, so I had first chance. If I wanted, I could become a Ghost.

He wrote down his address and said I could think it over and let him know.

An invitation to become a Ghost! Only one thing would be more fantastic: an invitation to become a ghost of the haunted house variety rather than one of the life-form that lives on Ceres.

But, as Weeks said, there would be a lot of advantages. Nothing can harm a Ghost. A Ghost can go anywhere, do anything.

I’m still thinking it over. There would be a lot of advan-

tages, but it's the little things that worry me. A million little things and I wonder how I'd feel with all those little things changed...I wonder if the advantages are equal to all the little things...

For instance, I brush my teeth every morning. How would I *feel* when I woke up

each morning and found I didn't have any teeth? How would I feel each morning when I woke up and found—as a matter of fact—I didn't have *a body*?

And— Well, anyway, there's a million little things like that.

THE END