



WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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A Scene from "Assassin" by Mel Hunter

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The dilemma of "The Man in the White Suit" was but a minor irritation compared to Charles and his "all-weather" suit!

THE STANDARDIZED MAN

BY STEPHEN BARTHOLOMEW

THE TURBOCAR swiped an embankment at ninety miles an hour; the result was, of course, inevitable. It was a magnificent crash, and the driver was thrown clear at the end of it for a distance of 50 feet.

Charles looked at the body and got his bright idea.

The trouble had started a couple of weeks before, when Edwin, Charles' laboratory co-ordinator, had called him into his office just before Charles was due to leave for home. It was a distinct breach of etiquette to cause a worker to arrive home at any time besides his

accustomed hour, so Charles knew whatever Edwin wanted must be important. He sat down opposite the Co-ordinator and assumed a politely questioning look.

"Charles, you know I wouldn't call you here at this hour if it wasn't important," Edwin said, pursing his lips.

"Of course not, sir," Charles replied, waiting.

"The fact of the matter is, we are in dire straits." Edwin stared at the other ominously. "As you well know, the Textile Industry, like every other business firm in the world, has functioned entirely without economic troubles of any

sort for the past fifty years."

"Well, of course, sir . . ."

"And you are also well aware of what would be the results of any financial deviation in any of these firms, particularly in a major industry such as our own."

"Certainly, sir. Ours is a delicately balanced economic system. Any slight change in the economic status of one firm would . . ."

"Exactly!" Edwin leaned across the desk and glared at him. "I have just come from a Board of Directors meeting. And it was made known to us that during the past three weeks our margin of profit has fallen off by three tenths of a per cent!"

Charles' face turned pasty white. He swallowed and took a deep breath.

"Will that information be made public, sir?"

"Naturally not! But we aren't sure just how long we can keep it a secret! The fact of the matter is, the IBM says that our profit margin will continue to spiral downward at a gradually increasing rate unless some drastic change occurs in our production set-up!"

Edwin leaned back and clasped his hands, composing himself. "The precise reasons for the existence of the situation are quite obscure. However, the IBM has informed us that the problem can be remedied if we make a particular change in our production system, and it has informed us as to the nature of that change."

He stood up and placed a finger on a capacitance switch. A panel in the Wall slid back to reveal six

sales charts. There were two each marked *Winter*, *Summer* and *Spring-Fall*. Three were designated *marlons*, and three *marilyns*. Each of them showed a red line rising steeply on the left, levelling out to a perfectly straight bar all the way across, then dipping sharply again.

"Look here," Edwin said. "These are the sales charts for our six suits. As you know, we make three different types for marlons, and three for marilyns. Hot-weather, cold-weather, and medium-weather. Each suit is designed to last a carefully calculated length of time, and each consumer need only buy three suits a year. They are exactly alike except for slight size differences, and because of elastic fabrics these differences are held to a minimum. With this system the Textile Industry attained the ultimate in Standardization, the ultimate in efficiency."

Charles rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Has the IBM suggested any alternative to our system, any possible change?"

Edwin sat down again, folded his arms on the desk, and scowled. "That's where you come in! The IBM informs us that there is only one possible way to stabilize our economy, to raise our profit margin to its former level—and that is by further standardization!"

Charles raised his eyebrows. "You mean a sexless wardrobe, sir? That's been tried . . ."

"No, that's *not* what I mean!" Edwin snapped. "What I mean is an *all-weather suit*!"

Charles swallowed audibly at that and said nothing.

"You can see the advantages, of course," Edwin explained. "We'd need only to manufacture two types of suit, marlon and marilyn. Since we'd never have to adjust our factories, we could drop a lot of unnecessary technicians, and with the further standardization, manufacturing would be faster and cheaper—a *lot* cheaper. The consumer would only purchase one suit a year, but we could make up for that by raising the prices somewhat."

Charles finally got a word in. "But, *sir!* An all-weather suit? How can we design a suit that will be equally comfortable in the middle of a Florida heat-wave or a New England snowstorm?"

"How? How?" Edwin's voice raised and his finger pointed. "You're the research chemist, Charles! You're supposed to tell me how!"

"Sir? I . . ."

"Listen!" Edwin poked the other in the chest. "I assume you know what will happen to Society if the Textile Industry becomes economically unstable?"

"Well, yes sir, but . . ."

"Then I assume you realize that the Board of Directors will stop at nothing to preserve the status quo! And since you happen to be our chief industrial chemist, the entire problem lands in your lap! Now, we want to know how to make an all-weather suit, and we want to know *fast*. Therefore, Charles, you're going to tell us how to do it! Understand?"

Charles nodded unhappily. "Yes sir, I understand."

CHARLES went to work the next day after informing his wife that she could expect him to begin keeping rather irregular hours at the laboratory. The idea of any kind of irregularity was enough to worry any wife, and Ingrid was the naturally suspicious type. She was always nagging and had, upon occasion, even gone so far as to insinuate that Charles had individualist tendencies.

So he knew that she would, embarrassingly, call Edwin to check up on him, but he didn't really care.

The real problem was the all-weather suit.

Charles put his small corps of assistants on the project, investigating several lines of thought at once. Every day, someone would drop around for a while to check on his progress, and he had no delusions about what would happen if he failed. The entire economic stability of his society depended on his coming up with an all-weather suit, and he began to have trouble sleeping nights.

Eventually, he found what looked like a workable solution.

He called Edwin to tell him about it, and Edwin came down to the lab to see for himself.

"Is this it?" he asked, picking up what looked like a burlap handkerchief.

Charles cleared his throat. "Well, that's the first sample, sir. Of course, it's possible to obtain a finer weave once we find out a few things about it, and when it's bleached . . ."

Edwin nodded impatiently. "Yes,

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yes. Well, what's so special about it?"

"Well, it's made of a radically new type of fiber, sir . . ."

"How's it new?"

"I can show you more technical data on it, sir, but basically the difference between this and conventional types of fiber is that this is thermostatic."

"How do you mean, thermostatic?"

"Well, sir, basically, the diameter of the fiber is inversely proportional with the temperature. When the temperature rises, the fiber contracts, and when the temperature drops, it expands. So in cold weather, you have a fine, tight weave with good insulation, and in warm weather you have a loose weave with ventilation . . ."

Edwin nodded and dropped the fabric on a lab bench. "Sounds good."

"Well sir, we have to make a few more tests on it, and it'll have to be field tested before we can decide if it's safe to use in garments . . ."

Edwin tapped him on the shoulder. "Test it, Charlie."

"Sir?"

Edwin frowned. "We don't have as much time as you think. We need that suit of yours *fast*. We can't afford to waste any more time puttering around the laboratory. You have the fellows downstairs make up some of this stuff into a Standard suit, and I want you to put it on yourself. What I mean is, *today*!"

Charles' jaw dropped. "Today! But . . ."

"No buts! Wear it a couple of days, and if you say it checks out, we go into production immediately."

So Charles went home that night in a new suit and a worried frown.

THINGS WERE smooth for about two days. Charles continued to wear the suit and Edwin insisted on his making the preliminary preparations for the mass-production of thermostatic fabric. Charles was kept busy working out specifications.

Then there were two factors that brought about a drastic change in his life.

One was that he was worried. Charles wasn't exactly sure what he was worried about, but at the back of his mind there was something in the complicated molecular structure of the new fiber that bothered him.

The other factor was that Ingrid was still nagging him. Perhaps if Charles had been able to tell her what he was working on she would have understood why he was worried. But he didn't tell her, and she didn't understand.

One day after Charles had come home and eaten, she started an argument with him about something or other, and in the most heated part of the battle she had hurled at him the supreme insult.

"Charles," she said, "I think you look different!"

Coupled with the strain that Charles was under, that had been enough to make him stare at In-

grid for a moment, wheel and stalk out of the apartment.

After all, to say that one's face was even subtly different—even if it really was—was an unforgivable insult.

Charles went out for a long, solitary evening walk and ended up at one of those places that features six varieties of beer, a continuous floor show and a loud band. Charles was not quite aware of entering, but once inside, watching the bump-and-grinders who wore nothing but their name tags, he found it difficult to leave.

The room was just ventilated enough to prevent suffocation, but it was purposely kept hot and stuffy in the hope that this would induce thirst on the part of the customers.

When he thought about it later he decided it was undoubtedly the humidity that had caused the catastrophe, but when it happened he hadn't the foggiest notion what was going on.

All he knew was that he had signalled a waitress for a third beer, she had come threading her way between the postage-stamp tables, he had looked up to give his order, she had looked down impersonally, and then there was a scream.

It took a moment to realize that the waitress was screaming at him, and by that time there were shouts from the surrounding tables as well, and men and women alike were stumbling all over themselves to get away from Charles.

In no time at all, there was a first-rate riot in progress, then the

lights went out, and Charles had brains enough to fight his way to an exit and slip into the dark alley outside.

And then Charles inspected himself and realized the horrible truth.

The key concept to Charles' society was expressed in the word *Standardization*. Standardization had had its beginning in the early Industrial Revolution, when men first discovered that it was far more efficient to make a thousand pieces of furniture if you made them all exactly alike.

And since efficiency means economic predictability, and since predictability means stability, Standardization quickly became the watchword in the world's new industrial economy.

So, in time, virtually every product manufactured was standardized. From the smallest bolts and screws in a wristwatch, through automobile license plates, to clothing styles; everything manufactured was strictly standard equipment.

Of course, the only unpredictable factor in this structure was the human element, therefore the logical answer was a standardized consumer.

The trend had started, undoubtedly, in Hollywood. The Art of Cinematography had not existed long before becoming the Motion Picture Industry. And, naturally, an industry must be efficient.

The Hollywood tycoons had decided that the best way to reduce the margin of risk on any new movie star was to create an arbitrary criterion, and to require the

potential star to measure up to that standard.

Charles was absently aware that the female standard of beauty had been exemplified by a woman named Marilyn, and that the masculine standard had been represented in someone named Marlon.

So, gradually, all of the new female stars that were selected by Hollywood resembled Marilyn as much as possible, and male leads were selected to look like Marlon. If anyone had a nose that wasn't quite right, or large ears, a little plastic surgery quickly remedied the problem, and if a female starlet happened to have brown hair, peroxide was always handy.

And in time, it became increasingly difficult to tell one movie star from another.

Then the standard, idealized faces and their standards, idealized personal mannerisms became socially fashionable, and with modern cosmetics and readily available plastic surgery, the fashionable men and women in society began to imitate the ideal.

It became not only fashionable to wear the Standard face, but indecent *not* to do so. Social conformity was encouraged as much as possible, and the end result was the closest thing to a Standardized, predictable consumer as there ever could be.

This might have produced difficult problems, because with all women and all men wearing identical clothing and identical faces, it might have become impossible to tell one person from another, which was not desirable even in a Standardized world.

Along with the Standard face had come name tags by which a person might individualize himself to the minimum necessary degree.

These name tags were worn about the neck on a colorful plastic band, with the tag itself, a white plastic card, on the right side of the neck. On the tag, in gold lettering, was the person's name, address, and Social Security number.

And—they were worn *all* the time.

The name tag was the only means by which a person might be identified. Without it, anyone might impersonate anyone else he pleased. So, of course, it became obscene to appear in public without one.

And Charles, standing in the alley, looked down at himself and realized the horrible truth.

He found himself running through back streets, sidling around corners, and darting into doorways.

After an hour or two, he realized that he was no longer within the City Limits.

Charles took a good look around him and discovered he was standing on a minor highway just outside of town. There were no cars or people in sight, and he dropped off the road into some bushes to get his wind and think.

He had *known* there was something wrong with the molecular structure of the suit he was wearing, but Edwin wouldn't listen.

It had undoubtedly been the humidity. The chemical process

had no doubt been going on since he'd first donned the suit, but it had been the heat in that beer joint that had accelerated the action enough to finish the job. Human perspiration acting on the new fiber in the collar of his suit produced some obscure chemical reaction which had a corrosive effect on the plastic band and plastic card of his name tag.

He had to get home, somehow, and tell Edwin to hold up production on the new thermostatic suit. Perhaps the flaw in it could be eliminated in a short time. If it couldn't . . .

He considered. The world Dollar Standard had been absolutely stable for more years than he knew about. What would happen if it suddenly became unstable? A fluctuation of even a fraction of a cent would cause widespread panic; it would jolt the Public's faith in its infallible economic system. And the panic would cause further deviation in the Dollar's purchasing power, and—more panic.

He wiped his brow. If the situation in the Textile Industry was as critical as Edwin said it was, then Edwin and his superiors weren't going to be at all happy when Charles told them about the suit—and Charles was going to be the fall guy.

But of course he had to get back and tell them. Because Edwin was all set to start production on the all-weather suit immediately, and if he actually went through with that and got a few million of them onto consumer's backs, the result would be not panic, but disaster.

And Charles' present problem was how to get home without being arrested.

IT WAS then that one individual got an extremely tough break, and Charles got his first lucky one.

A turbocar came barreling down the highway and, without warning struck an embankment. The driver was thrown fifty feet from the wreckage.

Under different circumstances, he would never have considered doing what he did then. The penalty for wearing another person's name tag was severe. But Charles was under an extreme emotional strain; and without even thinking, he bent over the limp grey form of the other marlon and removed his tag.

He straightened, then, clutching the plastic band and looking around at the smoking wreck. Already, he could hear a siren somewhere in the night.

He slipped the name tag over his head and struck out through the bushes toward the city.

His plan was simple; he had another name tag in his apartment for emergency purposes, and if Ingrid was in bed he'd have no trouble getting it, destroying the one he was wearing now, and putting on his other suit.

Briefly, he wondered what the police would think of finding a body near a smashed car with no name tag. They'd probably decide it was the same person that had caused the disturbance at the night club earlier in the evening.

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Charles realized that the lettering on the car had indicated it was a public, coin-operated vehicle, so the authorities would have no means of identifying the body.

After awhile it occurred to him that if he should go into hiding someplace, the body might easily be identified as his own, and he wouldn't have to worry about what Edwin and the other bosses would do to him. It probably wouldn't be noticed that the torn and blood-spattered clothes on the corpse were not thermostatic. But he shook his head resolutely. Even if he were crazy enough to try it, the body would be reported missing by somebody or other, so that would never do.

Eventually, Charles reached a main thoroughfare in the city and hailed a cab. He climbed in the back, told the driver briefly to take him home, and then slumped down in the seat and brooded.

He stared out the window, watching the buildings go by, and the emotional reaction of the evening began to set in. Morbidly, Charles wondered what they'd do to him if he kept his mouth shut and let the Industry put the suit into production, and waited for the millions of ID tags to begin to drop off.

The prospect was so frightening that his apprehension over what would happen if it was discovered he was wearing somebody else's tag almost disappeared.

Finally, the cab rolled to a stop. Charles got out and dropped some coins into the hand protruding from the front seat, and, head low, he turned and entered the

apartment house.

He trudged dismally up the stairs, thinking about his wife. He wondered what would happen if she were awake and waiting for him. If she saw that he had on somebody else's name tag.

The door was unlocked.

And the light was on.

He wondered if he could duck into the bedroom without being seen, and then someone leaped at him and he knew it was too late.

"Oh, James dear!" she cried, throwing her arms around Charles' neck. "When you walked out of here, I thought you'd never come back to me!"

Charles looked at the marilyn's name tag with slow horror and realized that in his preoccupation, out of sheer force of habit, he had simply said to the cab driver, "Take me home," and the driver had looked at the address on his tag and complied. The apartment building so much resembled Charles' own that he hadn't known the difference, and he hadn't bothered to look at the number on the door.

When Charles walked in, this Marilyn, Stasia her name was, had looked at his name tag and thought he was her James. She didn't have the slightest idea of who he really was.

Then Charles closed his eyes, swallowed, and knew something else.

It really didn't make the least bit of difference *who* he was. And of course, the solution to all his troubles was obvious.

With a sigh, Charles leaned over Stasia and kissed her.

E N D