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COVER BY ORBAN

Illustrations by Orban, Schecterson, Harrison

JOHN RAYMOND • Publisher

BILL BRADLEY • Circulation Mgr.

DAVID GELLER • Advertising Mgr.

LESTER DEL REY • Editor

BEN PETERS • Assoc. Editor

MILTON BERWIN • Art Director

West Coast Office • H. L. MITCHELL

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THE ULTROOM ERROR

by JERRY SOHL

Smith admitted he had made an error involving a few murders—and a few thousand years. He was entitled to a sense of humor, though, even in the Ultroom!

*HB73782. Ultroom error. Tenda-
dal 13. Arvid 6. Kanad trans-
fer out of 1609 complete,
intact, but too near limit of
1,000 days. Next Kanad trans-
fer ready. 1951. Reginald, son
of Mr. and Mrs. Martin
Laughton, 3495 Orland Drive,
Marionville, Illinois, U. S. A.
Arrive his 378th day. TB-
73782.*

NANCY LAUGHTON sat on the blanket she had spread on the lawn in her front yard, knitting a pair of booties for the PTA bazaar. Occasionally she glanced at her son in the play pen, who was getting his daily dose of sunshine. He was gurgling happily, examining a ball, a cheese grater and a linen baby book, all with perfunctory interest.

When she looked up again she noticed a man walking by—except he turned up the walk and crossed the lawn to her.

He was a little taller than her husband, had piercing blue eyes and a rather amused set to his lips.

"Hello, Nancy," he said.

"Hello, Joe," she answered. It was her brother who lived in Kankakee.

"I'm going to take the baby for a while," he said.

"All right, Joe."

He reached into the pen, picked up the baby. As he did so the baby's knees hit the side of the play pen and young Laughton let out a scream—half from hurt and half from sudden lack of confidence in his new handler. But this did not deter Joe. He started off with the child.

Around the corner and after the man came a snarl-

ing mongrel dog, eyes bright, teeth glinting in the sunlight. The man did not turn as the dog threw himself at him, burying his teeth in his leg. Surprised, the man dropped the screaming child on the lawn and turned to the dog. Joe seemed off balance and he backed up confusedly in the face of the snapping jaws. Then he suddenly turned and walked away, the dog at his heels.

"I tell you, the man said he was my brother and he made me think he was," Nancy told her husband for the tenth time. "I don't even have a brother."

Martin Laughton sighed. "I can't understand why you believed him. It's just—just plain nuts, Nancy!"

"Don't you think I know it?" Nancy said tearfully. "I feel like I'm going crazy. I can't say I dreamt it because there was Reggie with his bleeding knees, squalling for all he was worth on the grass—Oh, I don't even want to think about it."

"We haven't lost Reggie, Nancy, remember that. Now why don't you try to get some rest?"

"You—you don't believe me at all, do you, Martin?"

When her husband did not answer, her head sank to her

arms on the table and she sobbed.

"Nancy, for heaven's sake, of course I believe you. I'm trying to think it out, that's all. We should have called the police."

Nancy shook her head in her arms. "They'd—never—believe me either," she moaned.

"I'd better go and make sure Reggie's all right." Martin got up out of his chair and went to the stairs.

"I'm going with you," Nancy said, hurriedly rising and coming over to him.

"We'll go up and look at him together."

They found Reggie peacefully asleep in his crib in his room upstairs. They checked the windows and tucked in the blankets. They paused in the room for a moment and then Martin stole his arm around his wife and led her to the door.

"As I've said, sergeant, this fellow hypnotized my wife. He made her think he was her brother. She doesn't even have a brother. Then he tried to get away with the baby." Martin leaned down and patted the dog. "It was Tiger here who scared him off."

The police sergeant looked at the father, at Nancy and

then at the dog. He scribbled notes in his book.

"Are you a rich man, Mr. Laughton?" he asked.

"Not at all. The bank still owns most of the house. I have a few hundred dollars, that's all."

"What do you do?"

"Office work, mostly. I'm a junior executive in an insurance company."

"Any enemies?"

"No . . . Oh, I suppose I have a few people I don't get along with, like anybody else. Nobody who'd do anything like this, though."

The sergeant flipped his notebook closed. "You'd better keep your dog inside and around the kid as much as possible. Keep your doors and windows locked. I'll see that the prowler car keeps an eye on the house. Call us if anything seems unusual or out of the way."

Nancy had taken a sedative and was asleep by the time Martin finished cleaning the .30-.30 rifle he used for deer hunting. He put it by the stairs, ready for use, fully loaded, leaning it against the wall next to the telephone stand.

THE front door bell rang. He answered it. It was Dr. Stuart and another man.

"I came as soon as I could, Martin," the young doctor said, stepping inside with the other man. "This is my new assistant, Dr. Tompkins."

Martin and Tompkins shook hands.

"The baby—?" Dr. Stuart asked.

"Upstairs," Martin said.

"You'd better get him, Dr. Tompkins, if we're to take him to the hospital. I'll stay here with Mr. Laughton. How've you been, Martin?"

"Fine."

"How's everything at the office?"

"Fine."

"And your wife?"

"She's fine, too."

"Glad to hear it, Martin. Mighty glad. Say, by the way, there's that bill you owe me. I think it's \$32, isn't that right?"

"Yes, I'd almost forgotten about it."

"Why don't you be a good fellow and write a check for it? It's been over a year, you know."

"That's right. I'll get right at it." Martin went over to his desk, opened it and started looking for his checkbook. Dr. Stuart stood by him, making idle comment until Dr. Tompkins came down the stairs with the sleeping baby cuddled against his shoulder.

"Never mind the check, now, Martin. I see we're ready to go." He went over to his assistant and took the baby. Together they walked out the front door.

"Good-bye," Martin said, going to the door.

Then he was nearly bowled over by the discharge of the .30-.30. Dr. Stuart crumpled to the ground, the baby falling to the lawn. Dr. Tompkins whirled and there was a second shot. Dr. Tompkins pitched forward on his face.

The figure of a woman ran from the house, retrieved the now squalling infant and ran back into the house. Once inside, Nancy slammed the door, gave the baby to the stunned Martin and headed for the telephone.

"One of them was the same man!" she cried.

Martin gasped, sinking into a chair with the baby. "I believed them," he said slowly and uncomprehendingly. "They made me believe them!"

"Those bodies," the sergeant said. "Would you mind pointing them out to me, please?"

"Aren't they—aren't they on the walk?" Mrs. Laughton asked.

"There is nothing on the walk, Mrs. Laughton."

"But there *must* be! I tell you I shot these men who posed as doctors. One of them was the same man who tried to take the baby this afternoon. They hypnotized my husband—"

"Yes, I know, Mrs. Laughton. We've been through that." The sergeant went to the door and opened it. "Say, Homer, take another look around the walk and the bushes. There's supposed to be two of them. Shot with a 30-.30."

He turned and picked up the gun and examined it again. "Ever shoot a gun before, Mrs. Laughton?"

"Many times. Martin and I used to go hunting together before we had Reggie."

The sergeant nodded. "You were taking an awful chance, shooting at a guy carrying your baby, don't you think?"

"I shot him in the legs. The other—the other turned and I shot him in the chest. I could even see his eyes when he turned around. If I hadn't pulled the trigger then . . . I don't want to remember it."

The patrolman pushed the door open. "There's no bodies out here but there's some blood. Quite a lot of blood. A little to one side of the walk."

The policemen went out.

"Thank God you woke up,

Nancy," Martin said. "I'd have let them have the baby." * He reached over and smoothed the sleeping Reggie's hair.

Nancy, who was rocking the boy, narrowed her eyes.

"I wonder why they want our baby? He's just like any other baby. We don't have any money. We couldn't pay a ransom."

"Reggie's pretty cute, though," Martin said. "You will have to admit that."

Nancy smiled. Then she suddenly stopped rocking.

"Martin!"

He sat up quickly.

"Where's Tiger?"

Together they rose and walked around the room. They found him in a corner, eyes open, tongue protruding. He was dead.

"IF we keep Reggie in the house much longer he'll turn out to be a hermit," Martin said at breakfast a month later. "He needs fresh air and sunshine."

"I'm not going to sit on the lawn alone with him, Martin. I just can't, that's all. I'd be able to think of nothing but that day."

"Still thinking about it? I think we'd have heard from them again if they were coming back. They probably got somebody else's baby by this

time." Martin finished his coffee and rose to kiss her goodbye. "But for safety's sake I guess you'd better keep that gun handy."

The morning turned into a brilliant, sunshiny day. Puffs of clouds moved slowly across the summer sky and a warm breeze rustled the trees. It would be a crime to keep Reggie inside on a day like this, Nancy thought.

So she called Mrs. MacDougal, the next door neighbor. Mrs. MacDougal was familiar with what had happened to the Laughtons and she agreed to keep an eye on Nancy and Reggie and to call the police at the first sign of trouble.

With a fearful but determined heart Nancy moved the play pen and set it up in the front yard. She spread a blanket for herself and put Reggie in the pen. Her heart pounded all the while and she watched the street for any strangers, ready to flee inside if need be. Reggie just gurgled with delight at the change in environment.

THIS peaceful scene was disturbed by a speeding car in which two men were riding. The car roared up the street, swerved toward the parkway, tires screaming,

bounced over the curb and sidewalk, straight toward the child and mother. Reggie, attracted by the sudden noise, looked up to see the approaching vehicle. His mother stood up, set her palms against her cheeks and shrieked.

The car came on, crunched over the play pen, killing the child. The mother was hit and instantly killed, force of the blow snapping her spine and tossing her against the house. The car plunged on into a tree, hitting it a terrible blow, crumbling the car's forward end so it looked like an accordion. The men were thrown from the machine.

"We'll never be able to prosecute in this case," the states attorney said. "At least not on a drunken driving basis."

"I can't get over it," the chief of police said. "I've got at least six men who will swear the man was drunk. He staggered, reeled and gave the usual drunk talk. He reeked of whiskey."

The prosecutor handed the report over the desk. "Here's the analysis. Not a trace of alcohol. He couldn't have even had a smell of near beer. Here's another report. This is his physical exam made not long afterwards. The man was in perfect health. Only

variations are he had a scar on his leg where something, probably a dog, bit him once. And then a scar on his chest. It looked like an old gunshot wound, they said. Must have happened years ago."

"That's odd. The man who accosted Mrs. Laughton in the afternoon was bitten by their dog. Later that night she said she shot the same man in the chest. Since the scars are healed it obviously couldn't be the same man. But there's a real coincidence for you. And speaking of the dogbite, the Laughton dog died that night. His menu evidently didn't agree with him. Never did figure what killed him, actually."

"Any record of treatment on the man she shot?"

"The *men*. You'll remember, there were two. No, we never found a trace of either. No doctor ever made a report of a gunshot wound that night. No hospital had a case either—at least not within several hundred miles—that night or several nights afterwards. Ever been shot with .30-.30?"

The state attorney shook his head. "I wouldn't be here if I had."

"I'll say you wouldn't. The pair must have crawled away to die God knows where."

"Getting back to the man who ran over the child and killed Mrs. Laughton. Why did he pretend to be drunk?"

It was the chief's turn to shake his head. "Your guess is as good as mine. There are a lot of angles to this case none of us understand. It looks deliberate, but where's the motive?"

"What does the man have to say?"

"I was afraid you'd get to him," the chief said, his neck reddening. "It's all been rather embarrassing to the department." He coughed self-consciously. "He's proved a strange one, all right. He says his name is John Smith and he's got cards to prove it, too—for example, a social security card. It looks authentic, yet there's no such number on file in Washington, so we've discovered. We've had him in jail for a week and we've all taken turns questioning him. He laughs and admits his guilt—in fact, he seems amused by most everything. Sometimes all alone in his cell he'll start laughing for no apparent reason. It gives you the creeps."

THE state attorney leaned back in his chair. "Maybe it's a case for an alienist."

"One jump ahead of you."

Dr. Stone thinks he's normal, but won't put down any I.Q. Actually, he can't figure him out himself. Smith seems to take delight in answering questions—sort of anticipates them and has the answer ready before you're half through asking."

"Well, if Dr. Stone says he's normal, that's enough for me." The prosecutor was silent for a moment. Then, "How about the husband?"

"Laughton? We're afraid to let him see him. All broken up. No telling what kind of a rumpus he'd start—especially if Smith started his funny business."

"Guess you're right. Well, Mr. Smith won't think it's so funny when we hang criminal negligence or manslaughter on him. By the way, you've checked possible family connections?"

"Nobody ever saw John Smith before. Even at the address on his driver's license. And there's no duplicate of that in Springfield, in case you're interested."

The man who had laughingly told police his name was John Smith lay on his cot in the county jail, his eyes closed, his arms folded across his chest. This gave him the appearance of being alert despite reclining. Even as he

lay, his mouth held a hint of a smile.

Arvid 6—for John Smith *was* Arvid 6—had lain in that position for more than four hours, when suddenly he snapped his eyes open and appeared to be listening. For a moment a look of concern crossed his face and he swung his legs to the floor and sat there expectantly. Arvid 6 knew Tendal 13 had materialized and was somewhere in the building.

Eventually there were some sounds from beyond the steel cell and doorway. There was a clang when the outer doorway was opened and Arvid 6 rose from his cot.

"Your lawyer's here to see you," the jailer said, indicating the man with the brief case. "Ring the buzzer when you're through." The jailer let the man in, locked the cell door and walked away.

The man threw the brief case on the jail cot and stood glaring.

"Your damned foolishness has gone far enough. I'm sick and tired of it," he declared. "If you carry on any more we'll never get back to the Ultroom!"

"I'm sorry, Tendal," the man on the cot said. "I didn't think—"

"You're absolutely right.

You didn't think. Crashing that car into that tree and killing that woman—that was the last straw. You don't even deserve to get back to our era. You ought to be made to rot here."

"I'm *really* sorry about that," Arvid 6 said.

"**Y**OU know the instructions. Just because you work in the Ultroom don't get to thinking human life doesn't have any value. We wouldn't be here if it hadn't. But to unnecessarily kill—" The older man shook his head. "You could have killed yourself as well and we'd never get the job done. As it is, you almost totally obliterated me." Tendal 13 paced the length of the cell and back again, gesturing as he talked.

"It was only with the greatest effort I pulled myself back together again. I doubt that you could have done it. And then all the while you've been sitting here, probably enjoying yourself with your special brand of humor I have grown to despise."

"You didn't have to come along at all, you know," Arvid 6 said.

"How well I know! How sorry I am that I ever did! It was only because I was sorry for you, because someone

older and more experienced than you was needed. I volunteered. Imagine that! I volunteered! Tendal 13 reaches the height of stupidity and volunteers to help Arvid 6 go back 6,000 years to bring Kanad back, to correct a mistake Arvid 6 made!" He snorted. "I still can't believe I was ever that stupid. I only prove it when I pinch myself and here I am.

"Oh, you've been a joy to be with! First it was that hunt in ancient Mycenae when you let the lion escape the hunters' quaint spears and we were partly eaten by the lion in the bargain, although you dazzled the hunters, deflecting their spears. And then your zest for drink when we were with Octavian in Alexandria that led to everybody's amusement but ours when we were ambushed by Anthony's men. And worst of all, that English barmaid you became engrossed with at our last stop in 1609, when her husband mistook me for you and you let him take me apart piece by piece—"

"All right, all right," Arvid 6 said. "I'll admit I've made some mistakes. You're just not adventurous, that's all."

"Shut up! For once you're going to listen to me. Our instructions specifically stated

we were to have as little as possible to do with these people. But at every turn you've got us more and more enmeshed with them. If that's adventure, you can have it." Tendal 13 sat down wearily and sank his head in his hands. "It was you who conceived the idea of taking Reggie right out of his play pen. 'Watch me take that child right out from under its mother's nose' were your exact words. And before I could stop you, you did. Only you forgot an important factor in the equation—the dog, Tiger. And you nursed a dogbite most of the afternoon before it healed. And then you took your spite out on the poor thing by suggesting suffocation to it that night.

"And speaking of that night, you remember we agreed I was to do the talking. But no, you pulled a switch and captured Martin Laughton's attention. 'I came as soon as I could, Martin,' you said. And suddenly I played a very minor role. 'This is my new assistant, Dr. Tompkins,' you said. And then what happened? I get shot in the legs and you get a hole in your back. We were both nearly obliterated that time and we didn't even come close to getting the child.

"Still you wanted to run the whole show. 'I'm younger than you,' you said. 'I'll take the wheel.' And the next thing I know I'm floating in space halfway to nowhere with two broken legs, a spinal injury, concussion and some of the finest bruises you ever saw."

"THESE twentieth century machines aren't what they ought to be," Arvid 6 said.

"You never run out of excuses, do you, Arvid? Remember what you said in the Ultroom when you pushed the lever clear over and transferred Kanad back 6,000 years? 'My hand slipped.' As simple as that. 'My hand slipped.' It was so simple everyone believed you. You were given no real punishment. In a way it was a reward—at least to you—getting to go back and rescue the life germ of Kanad out of each era he'd be born in."

Tendal 13 turned and looked steadily and directly at Arvid 6. "Do you know what I think? I think you deliberately pushed the lever over as far as it would go *just to see what would happen*. That's how simple I think it was."

Arvid 6 flushed, turned away and looked at the floor.

"What crazy things have you been doing since I've been gone?" Tendal 13 asked.

Arvid 6 sighed. "After what you just said I guess it wouldn't amuse you, although it has me. They got to me right after the accident before I had a chance to collect my wits, dematerialize or anything—you said we shouldn't dematerialize in front of anybody."

"That's right."

"Well, I didn't know what to do. I could see they thought I was drunk, so I was. But they had a blood sample before I could manufacture any alcohol in my blood, although I implanted a memory in them that I reeked of it." He laughed. "I fancy they're thoroughly confused."

"And you're thoroughly amused, no doubt. Have they questioned you?"

"At great length. They had a psychiatrist in to see me. He was a queer fellow with the most stupid set of questions and tests I ever saw."

"And you amused yourself with him."

"I suppose you'd think so."

"Who do you tell them you are?"

"John Smith. A rather prevalent name here, I understand. I manufactured a pasteboard called a social se-

curity card and a driver's license—"

"Never mind. It's easy to see you've been your own inimitable self. Believe me, if I ever get back to the Ultroom I hope I never see you again. And I hope I'll never leave there again though I'm rejuvenated through a million years."

"Was Kanad's life germ transferred all right this time?"

Tendal 13 shook his head. "I haven't heard. The transfers are getting more difficult all the time. In 1609, you'll remember, it was a case of pneumonia for the two-year-old. A simple procedure. It wouldn't work here. Medicine's too far along." He produced a notebook. "The last jump was 342 years, a little more than average. The next ought to be around 2250. Things will be more difficult than ever there, probably."

"Do you think Kanad will be angry about all this?"

"How would you like to have to go through all those birth processes, to have your life germ knocked from one era to the next?"

"Frankly, I didn't think he'd go back so far."

"If it had been anybody but Kanad nobody'd ever have thought of going back after

it. The life germ of the head of the whole galactic system who came to the Ultroom to be transplanted to a younger body—and then sending him back beyond his original birth date—"Tendal 13 got up and commenced his pacing again. "Oh, I suppose Kanad's partly to blame, wanting rejuvenating at only 300 years. Some have waited a thousand or more or until their bones are like paper."

"I just wonder how angry Kanad will be," Arvid muttered.

HB92167. Ultroom Error. Tendal 13. Arvid 6. Kanad transfer out of 1951 complete. Next Kanad transfer ready. 2267. Phullam 19, son of Orla 39 and Rhoda R, 22H Level M, Hemisphere B, Quadrant 3, Sector I. Arrive his 329th Day.

TB92167

ARVID 6 rose from the cot and the two men faced each other.

"Before we leave, Arvid," Tendal 13 started to say.

"I know, I know. You want me to let you handle everything."

"Exactly. Is that too much to ask after all you've done?"

"I guess I have made mistakes. From now on you be the boss. I'll do whatever you say."

"I hope I can count on that." Tendal 13 rang the jail buzzer.

The jailer unlocked the cell door.

"You remember the chief said it's all right to take him with me, Matthews," Tendal 13 told the jailer.

"Yes, I remember," the jailer said mechanically, letting them both out of the cell.

They walked together down the jail corridor. When they came to another barred door the jailer fumbled with the keys and clumsily tried several with no luck.

Arvid 6, an amused set to his mouth and devilment in his eyes, watched the jailer's expression as he walked through the bars of the door. He laughed as he saw the jailer's eyes bulge.

"Arvid!"

Tendal 13 walked briskly through the door, snatched Arvid 6 by the shoulders and shook him.

The jailer watched stupefied as the two men vanished in the middle of a violent argument.