

*Practice makes perfect in
some cases – but not
in this eerie instance!*

K I D S T U F F

By WINSTON MARKS

WHY ME? Why, out of 300 billion people on earth, why did they have to pick on *me*?

And if it had to happen, why couldn't it have happened before I met Betty and fell in love with her? You see, Betty and I were to be married tomorrow. We *were* to have been married. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, indeed! What a ghastly thought that is! How can I explain to Betty - to anyone! I can't face her, and what could I say on the telephone? "Sorry, Betty, I can't marry you. I'm no longer - quite human."

Quit joking, Kelley! This is for real. You're sober and awake and it did happen. Marrying Betty is out of the question even if she'd have you the way you are. You're not *that* two-faced!

Quit standing in front of the mirror, naked and shaking, looking for scars, counting your fingers and toes. You've taken a hundred inventories, and it always comes out wrong. And it always will, unless ... unless *they* come back. But that's hopeless. They'd never find me again. Not out of all the people on earth. Besides, they didn't seem to give a damn. No more than a kid gives a damn what happens to a lump of modelling clay when he gets bored squeezing it into this shape and that.

Where did they come from? Or, judging from their "talk," *when* did they come from? And would it do me any good if I knew?

I WAS SITTING there in my bachelor apartment, drinking a can of beer and trying to work a crossword puzzle to get sleepy. I wasn't especially jittery like the groom is always supposed to be on the eve of his wedding. Just wide awake at midnight, wanting to get sleepy so I could get some real rest when I went to bed.

Just sitting there trying to think of a two-letter word for "sun-god." And that made me think of the gold in Betty's hair when the sun was on it at the beach. And pretty soon I was just staring into space, aching for Betty, wishing the next twelve hours of my life would vanish and we could be together, heading for our little cottage at the lake.

Staring into space.... Then it wasn't just space. There were these two big ball bearings in front of me, about three feet in diameter, if you could say they had a diameter. They looked like ball bearings because their surfaces were shiny, mirrorlike steel. But they had unevenly spaced, smooth bumps. Something like the random knobs on a potato, so they weren't really round at all.

The light from my lamp reflected crazily, and my own image gaped back at me from their distorted, reflecting curves. Like the fun-mirrors at the crazy-house, only crazier, and not funny at all. Fear is

never funny. And I was afraid. I'll swear I could *taste* the terror. It was salty on my tongue. When I tried to cry out, the roof of my mouth felt like old concrete.

Then one of them spoke. "It's alive! Intelligent! It senses our presence!"

I was receiving pure thought, not words. But man thinks only in words. And their thoughts fished suitable words from my subconscious to frame them for my assimilation.

Telepathy? Impossible! What common points of reference could I have with these two unthinkably alien life-forms?

The answer whipped back at me on an intuitive, sub-vocal level: Thought is a universal energy manifestation. *Language is only the clumsy vehicle for thought.*

Between me and the aliens lay no such barrier.

"Obviously intelligent," the other agreed. "Feel those gamma radiations? Too bad they're so weak. It would be interesting if he could communicate with us."

I stammered aloud, "But - but I *can* communicate with you. I understand every - "

They were paying no attention to my raspy words. "Yes, that's typical of these ancient, organic life-forms. As I recall, they use some form of physical vibration of their gaseous medium for communicating among themselves - "

"Speaking of which," the other interrupted, "this particular gaseous medium seems to contain oxygen. We'd best not remain overlong or we'll corrode and catch hell when we return."

"Exude a little nickel if it irritates you. We'll catch hell anyway when mother - "

Yes, that's the word that came to me!

" - discovers *when* we've been. I'm curious about these flesh and blood creatures. I wonder who invented this clumsy monstrosity."

HE MEANT ME. He rolled a foot nearer, and the other followed with an uncertain wobble. "I turned out better in the third grade."

"Liar! You nearly flunked meta-plastics."

"Well, you did flunk it, so who are you to - ?"

"Just don't be over-critical. I think this one looks fairly practical. Well-balanced - "

"That's just what I mean. Observe the unimaginative bisymmetry. Two arms, two legs, two eyes, five fingers on each hand, five toes on each foot. Surely, the inventor was a mechanic and no artist. In this light gravity there was no need for - "

"And how would you improve the design, your high-and-mightiness?"

"First let's remove the covering."

My clothes left my body-gently, but with the sound of violent tearing. In two seconds I sat naked, my garments laid back like split bandages.

I shouted, “See here, for God’s sakes!”

The aliens had made no visible move, yet they had wielded powerful forces to strip everything I wore from my body, shirt, slacks, underwear and even my shoes, without so much as pinching my flesh.

I leaped to my feet naked as a straw. They were between me and the door, but they seemed so clumsy.

“Watch it! He’s alarmed. Don’t let him escape!”

“Try and stop me!” I screamed, tensing my muscles for a leap over the pair of intruders. Suddenly the air about my sweating body seemed to thicken to the viscosity of molasses. I could breathe it all right, but quick motion was denied me. My grand leap died before my right foot left the floor. I retreated to my chair in slow-motion panic, sinking slowly through the clabbered atmosphere, to a sitting position on my torn clothing,

“Yes, a very clumsy, unesthetic life-form. In fact the bisymmetry fairly nauseates me. Granted that the two arms are practical, doubtless one or the other does 90% of all work. So why have them of equal importance? See here, I’ll demonstrate...”

“Wait!” the other cautioned. “This is a sentient creature. You can’t operate without - “

“Of course not!”

Something buzzed in my spine, and I blanked out. For the space of one breath, it seemed.

“There, that’s better.”

“I guess I must agree with you.”

A faint tingle in my left arm caused me to stare at it. Unbelievably! Its length was the same, but its diameter was reduced to two-thirds, and there were two fingers missing on the hand. The opposable thumb remained, but it now had more the appearance of a claw than a human hand. I tried to scream, but the sound was a glutinous bubble of air that never reached my lips.

“How about the pedal appendages-?”

“Well - ” there was some hesitation. “Considering the method of locomotion, bisymmetry seems more justified there. However, why bilateral? Why not quadrilateral?”

“Because the organs of sight face only one way.”

“I can fix that, too.”

My spine buzzed, and when I looked down again a flood of peculiar changes had taken place. My ankles terminated in the middle of my feet, and my heels had disappeared. In their place were toes.

“You see, with the double-hinged knee-joint, he can travel forward or backward now without pivoting.

Then I became aware that I could *look* forward and backward at the same time.

“That thing in the middle is certainly superfluous.”

“Yes.”

Buzz!

It was gone.

“A tentacle fastened, say, to the right hip-bone could be very useful.”

Buzz!

My right hip tingled. From it protruded a whip-like appendage some eight feet long, brown and leathery, tapering to the diameter of a pencil and terminating in a pink flesh-pad richly supplied with sensory buds. I could feel every hair in the nap of the carpet on which it rested - feel, taste, smell and hear! Four sense organs in one!

“Now we are making progress!” came the exclamation.

Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!

The instant-seeming anesthetic moments came upon me in quick succession, and each left me bereft of some standard, human equipment or in the possession of some extra-normal addition to my anatomy - with no more sensation than the slight tingle I have mentioned.

From their mental remarks I conclude that I lost my vermiform appendix, tonsils and a mole on my left shoulder blade. Most of the other items which I acquired were too grotesque to describe further.

“The two additional cardiac structures and the adrenal adjustments should assure some likelihood of immortality,” one of the intruders was explaining.

“Which would probably bring about over-population in ten generations,” the other reminded him.

“Ah, yes. I should compensate for that.”

Buzz, and he did!

“I’m corroding.”

“Exude some chrome as I told you.”

“I think I hear mother calling, anyway. Let’s go before she - “

THEY WERE too late. A third bumpy ball-bearing materialized behind the two aliens, and instantly a barrage of maternal scolding dominated the ether. “I’ve been searching the whole continuum for you two! What are you doing back here?”

“We were just about to return, Mother.”

“That’s the truth, Mother. We just broke through here so we could practice our advanced - “

“Practice!” Mother exclaimed. “Practice on this poor, primitive, organic creature?”

I felt poor and primitive indeed. Paralyzed with fear, my only wonder now was that apparently I had retained my sanity throughout this waking nightmare.

“We didn’t hurt him.”

“You put him back the way you found him, do you understand? Do it right this instant!”

“Yes, Mother. Let’s see, how *did* we find him?”

“Simple bilateral symmetry, stupid!”

“Oh, yes, two of everything except - “

“Hold it! Remember the anaesthesia.”

Buzz!

WHEN I AWAKENED this time they were gone. My electric clock hummed softly on the mantle, revealing the nonsensical information that less than an hour had passed since my visitors first arrived.

I staggered to my feet, bracing myself against the thick air, but the air was just ordinary, thin, substanceless air again. My hand dropped to my right hip.

The tentacle was gone.

“Thank God!” I breathed, and for an instant my common sense tried to insist that I had merely fallen asleep for a few minutes and dreamed the whole fantastic sequence.

But no! Why would I be stark naked? And why were my clothes lying ruined in my chair like bandages split with a huge razor?

I clenched my left fist and gained comfort from the reassuring pressure of four fingers and a thumb in my palm. But then I stepped into my bedroom and stood before my full-length mirror - where I have stood rooted ever since.

And the question revolves in my brain, punctuated only by my profanity and sobs of despair. How can I marry Betty now? How can I face her, let alone marry her?

What woman on earth could bring herself to marry a man with no navel and two heads?