

CLASSICS TO GO

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ALAN EDWARD NOURSE

Amazing Stories

Volume 64

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The Brain Sinner

***An invisible network of human minds
lay across the country, delicately tuned,
waiting breathlessly for the first spark
of contact from the unknown ... from
the unpredictable telepathic Alien***

The ship skimmed down like a shadow from the outer atmosphere and settled gently and silently in the tangled underbrush of the hill that overlooked the bend in the broad river. There was a hiss of scorched leaves, and the piping of a small, trapped animal. Then there was silence.

Higher up, the sunlight was bright over the horizon; here the shadows had lengthened and it was quite dark. Far across the hills a dog howled mournfully; night birds made small rustling sounds through the scrub and underbrush. The alien waited, tensely, listening, waiting with his mind open for any flicker of surprise or wonder, waiting for a whisper of fear or recognition to slip into his mind from the dark hills around the ship. He waited and waited.

Then he gave a satisfied grunt. Foolish of him to worry. All possible care had been taken to avoid any kind of alarm. He had landed unseen from Io.

The alien stretched back against the couch, allowing his long, tight muscles to relax, as he sent inquiring feelers of thought out from the ship, probing gently and tentatively, for signs of the psi-presence. The landing, after all, had been assumed. Already the natives had convinced themselves that ships such as his were a delusion. Such

simple creatures, to disregard the evidence of their own senses! There should be no problem here when the invasion began, with the preliminary studies already completed, the disguising techniques almost perfected. A primitive world, indeed, but a world with psi-presence already developing—a possible flaw in the forthcoming silent conquest.

For psi-presence could detect other psi-presence, always, anywhere, despite any disguise. The alien knew that. It was the one universal denominator in all the centuries of conquest and enslavement in his people's history. Before they could come, they must know the strength of the psi-presence on this world.

The alien moved, finally, beginning his preparations. In the center of the cabin an image flickered, swarming flecks of light and shadow that filled out a three-dimensional form, complete and detailed. The alien sat back and studied it through hooded yellow eyes—carefully, oh so carefully, for there must be no mistake, not here, not now. The scouts had come and gone, bringing back the data and specimens of the man-things necessary for a satisfactory disguise. Now the alien stared at the image, regarding the bone structure and muscle contour critically. Then, slowly, he began work with the plastiflesh, modelling the sharp angles of his members into neat curves, skillfully laying folds of skin, molding muscle bulges and jointed fingers, always studying the strange, clumsy image that flickered before him.

It was the image of a man. That was what they called themselves. There were many of them, and somewhere among them there was psi-presence, feeble and underdeveloped, but there somewhere. He eyed the image again, and pressed a stud on the control panel, and another image met his eyes, an electronic reflection of himself. He studied it, and carefully superimposed the two, adding

contour here and there, yellow eyes seeking out imperfections as he worked.

There must be no mistake. Failure would mean disgrace and death, horrible, writhing death by dissociation and burning, neuron by neuron. He knew. He had officiated at executions before; delightful experiences, but not to be trifled with. He stared at the image again and then at himself.

The skin tone was wrong. The yellow came through too clearly in places, and in this strange culture that color was reported to carry unpleasant connotations. He worked pale, sickly-pink stuff into his soft, wrinkle-free skin, then molded out the cheeks and forehead. Hair would be a problem, of course, but then there would be many small imperfections. He smiled grimly to himself. There were other ways of masking imperfections.

At last he was satisfied. There was no way to bring the normal reddish color into the pale green lips; there was no way to satisfactorily prepare the myriad wrinkles and creases that crossed the skin of the man-things, but with a little skillful application of projection techniques it did not matter.

The alien struggled into the tight, restricting clothes that lay in a bundle, carefully folded and pressed, at his feet. The hard, board-like shoes cut at his ankles, and the hairy stuff of the red-and-white checked shirt made him writhe in discomfort, but once outside the ship he was glad for the warmth. He stepped out onto the ground, and listened again carefully. Then he made certain arrangements with wires, and threw a switch on a small black case near the air lock, and began marching down the hill away from the ship.

He would no longer need the ship. Not now.

The underbrush grew thicker, and he fought his way through the scrub until he reached a roadway. It was not paved. A

flicker of sour amusement swept through the alien's mind. They had been afraid that these simple creatures might try to oppose them! Yet the scouts had said that far to the East were great stone and steel cities—the places-of-madness, the scout had said. Perhaps. But here there was no stone and steel, only dust, and the ruts of wagon wheels, and a howling dog somewhere over the hill.

The alien trudged on for almost an hour, trying to acclimate his legs to the fierce tug of gravity that pulled at him. And then he stopped short and listened.

He heard them, then, in the depths of his mind, somewhere on the other side of the hill. His eyes narrowed. No psi-presence there, but two of the man-things, beyond doubt. Other whispers, too dull, stupid, vagrant whispers flickering through his mind. Lower life forms, no doubt. Possibly a farm with work animals. The scouts had said there were such. He turned off the road and almost cried out when the sharp barbs of a fence cut through his tender skin.

A trickle of green dripped down his arm, until he rubbed a poultice across it, and it became smooth and sickly-pink again. With a vicious jerk he pulled the fence out, post and all, and left it on the ground, moving through the woods toward the sounds he had heard.

Soon the woods ended and he saw the dwelling across a broad clearing. Black dirt lay open in the moonlight. He started across. There was light inside the dwelling, and the dull, babbling flow of uncontrolled man-thought struck his mind like a vapor. There were other buildings, too, dark buildings, and one tall one that had a spoked wheel on top, and creaked and rustled in the darkness.

He had almost reached the dwelling when a small, four-legged creature jumped up in the darkness, crying out at him in a horrible discordant barrage. The creature came

running swiftly, and the alien's mind caught the sharp whine of fear and hate emanating from the thing. It stopped before him, baring its fangs and snarling.

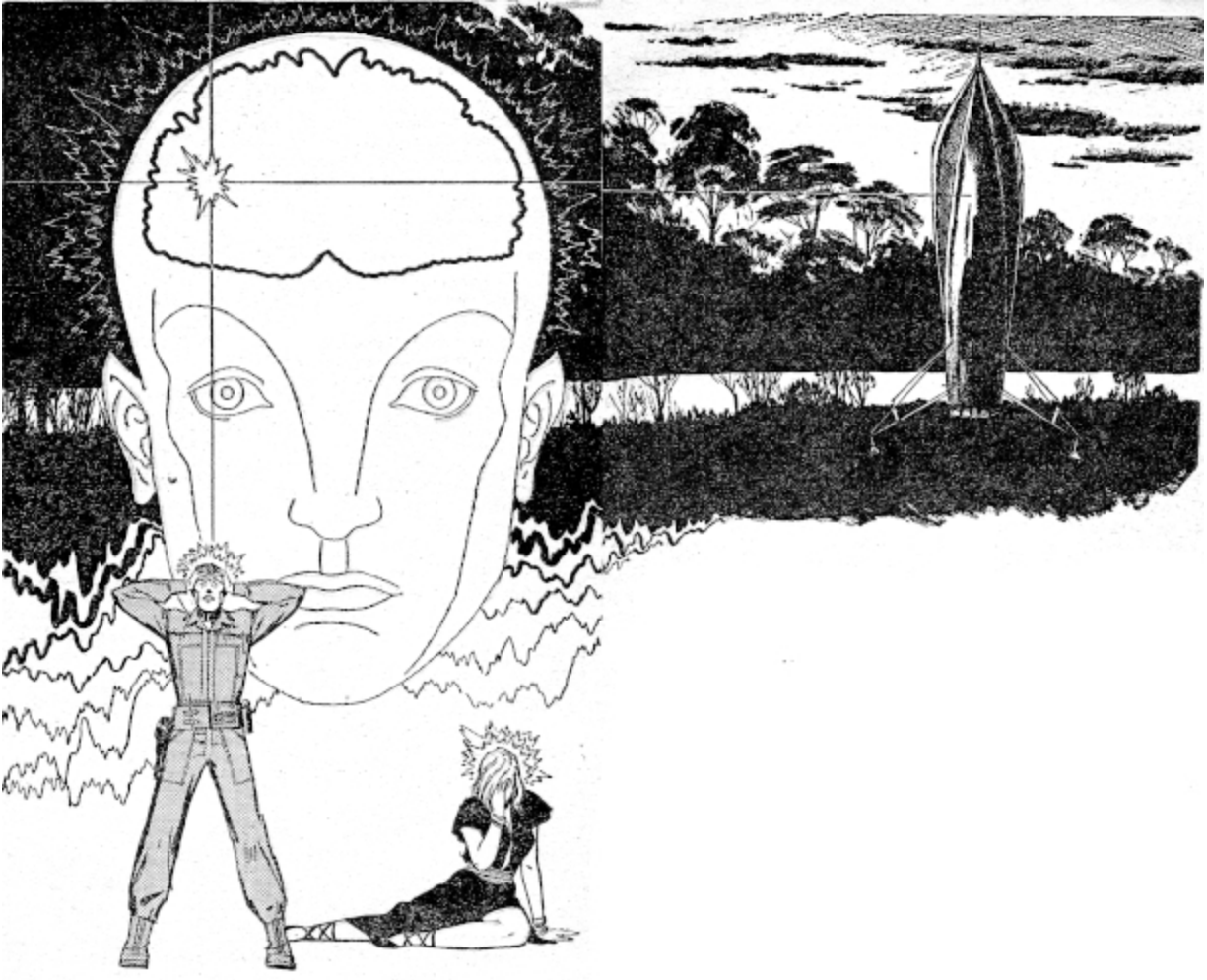
The alien lashed his foot out savagely; it crunched into flesh and bone, and the creature lay flopping helplessly, spurting dark wet stuff, its cry cut off in mid-yelp. The alien stepped onto the porch as the door opened suddenly, framing a tall, thin man-thing in a box of yellow light. "Brownie?" he called. "Come here, Brownie! What's the matter—" His words trailed off when he saw the alien. "Who are you?"

"A traveller," said the alien, his voice grating harshly in the darkness. "I need lodging and food—"

The farmer's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he peered from the doorway. "Come closer, let me get a look at you," he said.

The alien stepped closer, concentrating all his psi-faculties on the farmer's mind, blurring his perception of the minute imperfections of his disguise. It required all his power; he had none left to probe the farmer's mind, and he waited, trembling. That could come later.

The farmer blinked, and nodded, finally. "All right," he said. "We've got some food on the stove. Come on in."



II

Senatorial Councilman Benjamin Towne slammed his cane down on the floor with a snarl, and eased himself back down in his seat, staring angrily around the small Federal Security Commission ante-room. The American Council attaché standing near the door retrieved the cane, handing it to the Councilman with a polite murmur. Instantly he regretted his action when Towne began slapping the cane against his palm, short staccato slaps that rang out ominously in the small room.

The Councilman was not in the habit of waiting. He did not like it in the least, and made no effort to conceal his feelings. His little green cat eyes roved around the room in

sharp disapproval, resting momentarily on the neat autodesks, on the cool grey walls, on the vaguely disturbing water-color on the wall—one of those sickening Psi-High experimentals that the snob critics all claimed to be so wonderful. The Councilman growled and blinked at the morning sunlight streaming through the muted glass panels of the northeast wall. Far below, the second morning rush hour traffic buzzed through the city with frantic nervousness.

The Councilman tapped his cane on the floor, glancing up at his attaché. "That Sanders girl," he snapped. "Give me her file again."

The Council attaché opened a large briefcase, and produced a thick bundle of papers in a manilla folder. Towne took them and glanced through the papers, lighting one of his long, green-tipped cigarettes from a ruby-studded lighter. "How about Dr. Abrams? Was he questioned?"

The attaché nodded in embarrassment. "Nothing doing. He ran us in circles."

Towne's scowl deepened. "Did you give him the Treatment?"

"He just wasn't having any, sir. Said he'd answer to a Joint Council hearing, and nothing less."

"Stubborn old goat. He knows I've got nothing that will stand up in a Council hearing." Towne went back to the papers again, still tapping the floor with the cane. "*Damn* that Roberts!"

The attaché glanced down at Benjamin Towne with some curiosity. It was easy to see how the man drew such powerful support from his constituents. There was something overwhelming about his appearance—the heavy jaw and grim mouth line, the shock of sandy hair that fell over his forehead, the burning green eyes, the stout, well muscled body. The attaché's eyes drifted down to the

withered left leg and the grotesque twisted foot, and he looked away in embarrassment. What was so awe-inspiring about a crippled man who accumulated great power? Towne certainly had done that. Some said that Ben Towne was the most powerful man in North America. Some also said that he was the greatest man, but that was something quite different indeed. And some said that he was the most dangerous man alive. The attaché shivered. That was none of his business. If he went probing *that* line too far they'd be calling him Psi-High, and he liked his job too much to risk that.

The inner door opened and a tall man with prematurely gray hair strode in, followed by a girl in her early twenties. "Sorry to keep you, Councilman," the man said. "No, no, don't get up. We can talk right here."

Towne had made no effort to rise. He glared at the man, and then his eyes drifted to the girl and widened angrily. "I said a *private* conference, Roberts. I don't want one of these damned brain-picking snakes in the same room with me."

The man nodded coolly to the girl. "Sit down, Jean. Councilman, this is Jean Sanders. If you're here about the Alien investigation, I want her to sit in."

Ben Towne slowly set the papers down on the floor. "Record this, Roger," he said to the attaché. His eyes turned to Roberts. "I understand he slipped out of your hands again yesterday," he said with vicious smoothness. "A pity."

Roberts reddened. "That's right. He slipped out clean."

"No pictures, no identifications, no nothing, eh?"

"I'm afraid not."

Towne's voice was deadly. "Mr. Roberts, an unidentified Alien creature has been at large in this country for three solid

weeks, and your Federal Security teams haven't even gotten near him. I want to know why."

"I'd suggest that if you read our reports—"

"Damn you, man, I didn't come here for insolence!" Towne slammed the cane down with a clatter. "You're answerable to the Joint Senatorial Council of the North American States for every wretched thing you do, and I'm ready to bring charges of criminal negligence against you in this Alien investigation—"

"*Criminal negligence!*" Roberts jumped up, his eyes blazing. "My god, Councilman! We've thrown everything we have into this search. This creature has played us for fools every step of the way! We didn't even get a look at his ship. It blew up right in our faces! Do you realize what we're fighting here?"

"I realize quite well," said Towne, frostily. "You're fighting an Alien who has slipped into our population, somehow, and just vanished. There's no way to tell what he wants or what he's doing. The potential danger of his presence is staggering. And you've fumbled and groaned for three weeks without even turning up a hot trail. You haven't even a coherent description of him—"

"We're fighting a telepath," Roberts said softly. "An Alien with telepathic powers like nothing we've ever dreamed of. That's what we're fighting. And we're losing, too."

The girl across the room stirred uneasily. Ben Towne's green eyes shot over to her viciously. "And you're using freaks like her to help him hide, I suppose."

"Jean Sanders is not a freak." Roberts' voice grated in the still air of the room. "She's Psi-High, and she's the most valuable asset we've got in this search at the present moment. It's a real pity there aren't more Psi-Highs that have had her training."