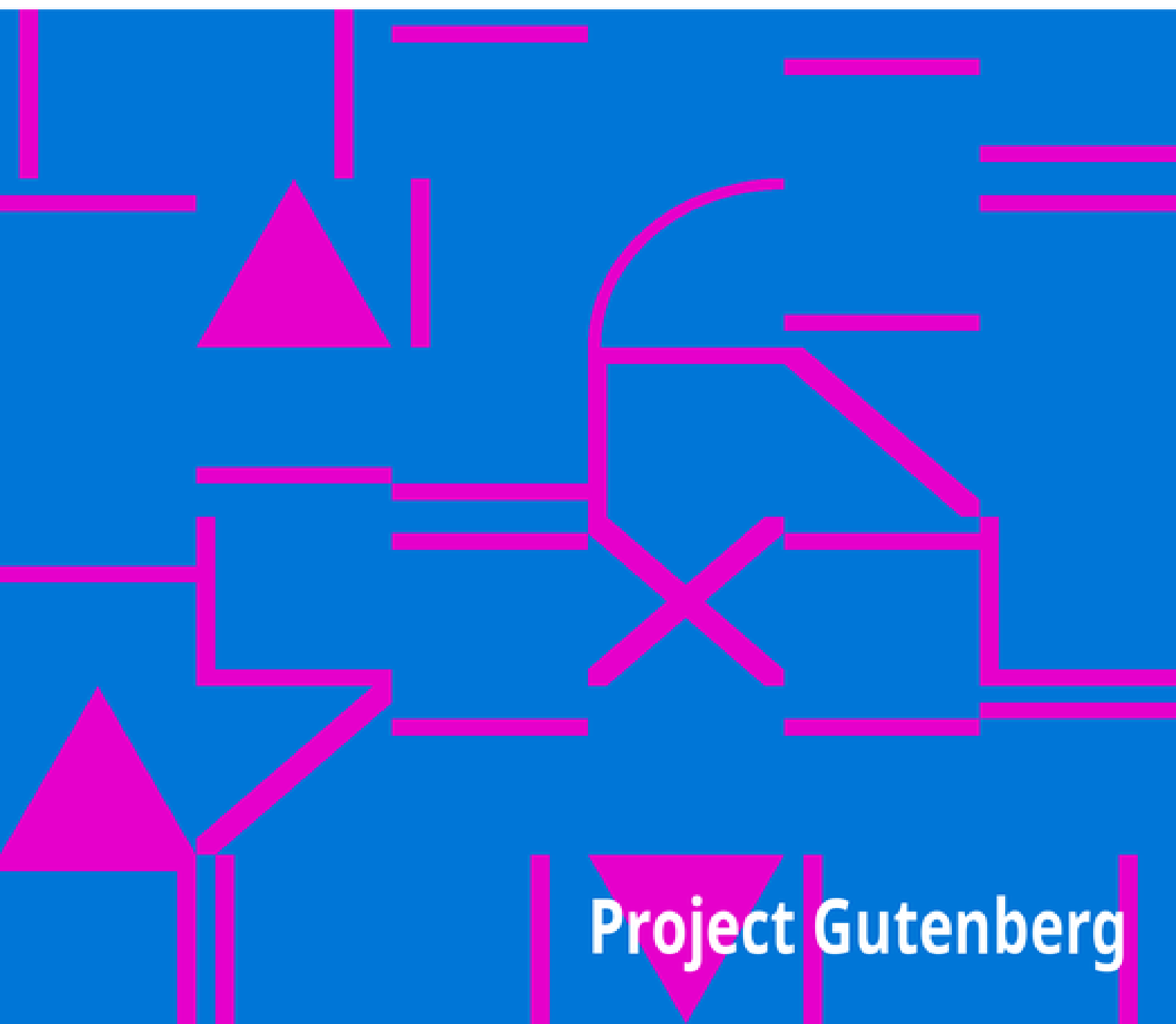


The Creature from Cleveland Depths

Fritz Leiber



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE
CREATURE FROM CLEVELAND DEPTHS ***

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Corrections are indicated by a dotted underline, like this.

Here is a modern tale of an inner-directed sorcerer and an outer-directed sorcerer's apprentice ... a tale of—

THE CREATURE FROM CLEVELAND DEPTHS

By FRITZ LEIBER

“COME on, Gussy,” Fay prodded quietly, “quit stalking around like a neurotic bear and suggest something for my invention team to work on. I enjoy visiting you and Daisy, but I can’t stay aboveground all night.”

“If being outside the shelters makes you nervous, don’t come around any more,” Gusterson told him, continuing to stalk. “Why doesn’t your invention team think of something to invent? Why don’t you? Hah!” In the “Hah!” lay triumphant condemnation of a whole way of life.

“We do,” Fay responded imperturbably, “but a fresh viewpoint sometimes helps.”

“I’ll say it does! Fay, you burglar, I’ll bet you’ve got twenty people like myself you milk for free ideas. First you irritate their bark and then you make the rounds every so often to draw off the latex or the maple gloop.”

Fay smiled. “It ought to please you that society still has a use for you outre inner-directed types. It takes something to make a junior executive stay aboveground after dark, when the missiles are on the prowl.”

“Society can’t have much use for us or it’d pay us something,” Gusterson sourly asserted, staring blankly at the tankless TV and kicking it lightly as he passed on.

“No, you’re wrong about that, Gussy. Money’s not the key goad with you inner-directeds. I got that straight from our Motivations chief.”

“Did he tell you what we should use instead to pay the grocer? A deep inner sense of achievement, maybe? Fay, why should I do any free thinking for Micro Systems?”

“I’ll tell you why, Gussy. Simply because you get a kick out of insulting us with sardonic ideas. If we take one of them seriously, you think we’re degrading ourselves, and that pleases you even more. Like making someone laugh at a lousy pun.”

GUSTERSON held still in his roaming and grinned. "That the reason, huh? I suppose my suggestions would have to be something in the line of ultra-subminiaturized computers, where one sinister fine-etched molecule does the work of three big bumbling brain cells?"

"Not necessarily. Micro Systems is branching out. Wheel as free as a rogue star. But I'll pass along to Promotion your one molecule-three brain cell sparkler. It's a slight exaggeration, but it's catchy."

"I'll have my kids watch your ads to see if you use it and then I'll sue the whole underworld." Gusterson frowned as he resumed his stalking. He stared puzzledly at the antique TV. "How about inventing a plutonium termite?" he said suddenly. "It would get rid of those stockpiles that are worrying you moles to death."

Fay grimaced noncommittally and cocked his head.

"Well, then, how about a beauty mask? How about that, hey? I don't mean one to repair a woman's complexion, but one she'd wear all the time that'd make her look like a 17-year-old sexpot. That'd end *her* worries."

"Hey, that's for me," Daisy called from the kitchen. "I'll make Gusterson suffer. I'll make him crawl around on his hands and knees begging my immature favors."

A montage: A fellow holding a gun on a man; a man and a woman nearly kissing; a one-eyed robot tearing up paper.

"No, you won't," Gusterson called back. "You having a face like that would scare the kids. Better cancel that one, Fay. Half the adult race looking like Vina Vidarsson is too awful a thought."

"Yah, you're just scared of making a million dollars," Daisy jeered.

"I sure am," Gusterson said solemnly, scanning the fuzzy floor from one murky glass wall to the other, hesitating at the TV. "How about something homey now, like a flock of little prickly cylinders that roll around the floor collecting lint and flub? They'd work by electricity, or at a pinch cats could bat 'em around. Every so often they'd be automatically herded together and the lint cleaned off the bristles."

“No good,” Fay said. “There’s no lint underground and cats are *verboten*. And the aboveground market doesn’t amount to more moneywise than the state of Southern Illinois. Keep it grander, Gussy, and more impractical—you can’t sell people merely useful ideas.” From his hassock in the center of the room he looked uneasily around. “Say, did that violet tone in the glass come from the high Cleveland hydrogen bomb or is it just age and ultraviolet, like desert glass?”

“NO, somebody’s grandfather liked it that color,” Gusterson informed him with happy bitterness. “I like it too—the glass, I mean, not the tint. People who live in glass houses can see the stars—especially when there’s a window-washing streak in their germ-plasm.”

“Gussy, why don’t you move underground?” Fay asked, his voice taking on a missionary note. “It’s a lot easier living in one room, believe me. You don’t have to tramp from room to room hunting things.”

“I like the exercise,” Gusterson said stoutly.

“But I bet Daisy’d prefer it underground. And your kids wouldn’t have to explain why their father lives like a Red Indian. Not to mention the safety factor and insurance savings and a crypt church within easy slidewalk distance. Incidentally, we see the stars all the time, better than you do—by repeater.”

“Stars by repeater,” Gusterson murmured to the ceiling, pausing for God to comment. Then, “No, Fay, even if I could afford it—and stand it—I’m such a bad-luck Harry that just when I got us all safely stowed at the N minus 1 sublevel, the Soviets would discover an earthquake bomb that struck from below, and I’d have to follow everybody back to the treetops. *Hey! How about bubble homes in orbit around earth?* Micro Systems could subdivide the world’s most spacious suburb and all you moles could go ellipsing. Space is as safe as there is: no air, no shock waves. Free fall’s the ultimate in restfulness—great health benefits. Commute by rocket—or better yet stay home and do all your business by TV-telephone, or by waldo if it were that sort of thing. Even pet your girl by remote control—she in

her bubble, you in yours, whizzing through vacuum. Oh, damn-damn-damn-damn-DAMN!”

He was glaring at the blank screen of the TV, his big hands clenching and unclenching.

“Don’t let Fay give you apoplexy—he’s not worth it,” Daisy said, sticking her trim head in from the kitchen, while Fay inquired anxiously, “Gussy, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing, you worm!” Gusterson roared, “Except that an hour ago I forgot to tune in on the only TV program I’ve wanted to hear this year—*Finnegans Wake* scored for English, Gaelic and brogue. Oh, damn-damn-damn-DAMN!”

“Too bad,” Fay said lightly. “I didn’t know they were releasing it on flat TV too.”

“WELL, they were! Some things are too damn big to keep completely underground. And I had to forget! I’m always doing it—I miss everything! Look here, you rat,” he blatted suddenly at Fay, shaking his finger under the latter’s chin, “I’ll tell you what you can have that ignorant team of yours invent. They can fix me up a mechanical secretary that I can feed orders into and that’ll remind me when the exact moment comes to listen to TV or phone somebody or mail in a story or write a letter or pick up a magazine or look at an eclipse or a new orbiting station or fetch the kids from school or buy Daisy a bunch of flowers or whatever it is. It’s got to be something that’s always with me, not something I have to go and consult or that I can get sick of and put down somewhere. And it’s got to remind me forcibly enough so that I take notice and don’t just shrug it aside, like I sometimes do even when Daisy reminds me of things. That’s what your stupid team can invent for me! If they do a good job, I’ll pay ’em as much as fifty dollars!”

“That doesn’t sound like anything so very original to me,” Fay commented coolly, leaning back from the wagging finger. “I think all senior executives have something of that sort. At least, their secretary keeps some kind of file....”

“I’m not looking for something with spiked falsies and nylons up to the neck,” interjected Gusterson, whose ideas about secretaries were

a trifle lurid. "I just want a mech reminder—that's all!"

"Well, I'll keep the idea in mind," Fay assured him, "along with the bubble homes and beauty masks. If we ever develop anything along those lines, I'll let you know. If it's a beauty mask, I'll bring Daisy a pilot model—to use to scare strange kids." He put his watch to his ear. "Good lord, I'm going to have to cut to make it underground before the main doors close. Just ten minutes to Second Curfew! 'By, Gus. 'By, Daze."

Two minutes later, living room lights out, they watched Fay's foreshortened antlike figure scurrying across the balding ill-lit park toward the nearest escalator.

Gusterson said, "Weird to think of that big bright space-poor glamor basement stretching around everywhere underneath. Did you remind Smitty to put a new bulb in the elevator?"

"The Smiths moved out this morning," Daisy said tonelessly. "They went underneath."

"Like cockroaches," Gusterson said. "Cockroaches leavin' a sinkin' apartment building. Next the ghosts'll be retreatin' to the shelters."

"Anyhow, from now on we're our own janitors," Daisy said.

He nodded. "Just leaves three families besides us loyal to this glass death trap. Not countin' ghosts." He sighed. Then, "You like to move below, Daisy?" he asked softly, putting his arm lightly across her shoulders. "Get a woozy eyeful of the bright lights and all for a change? Be a rat for a while? Maybe we're getting too old to be bats. I could scrounge me a company job and have a thinking closet all to myself and two secretaries with stainless steel breasts. Life'd be easier for you and a lot cleaner. And you'd sleep safer."

"That's true," she answered and paused. She ran her fingertip slowly across the murky glass, its violet tint barely perceptible against a cold dim light across the park. "But somehow," she said, snaking her arm around his waist, "I don't think I'd sleep happier—or one bit excited."

II

THREE weeks later Fay, dropping in again, handed to Daisy the larger of the two rather small packages he was carrying.

"It's a so-called beauty mask," he told her, "complete with wig, eyelashes, and wettable velvet lips. It even breathes—pinholed elastiskin with a static adherence-charge. But Micro Systems had nothing to do with it, thank God. Beauty Trix put it on the market ten days ago and it's already started a teen-age craze. Some boys are wearing them too, and the police are yipping at Trix for encouraging transvestism with psychic repercussions."

"Didn't I hear somewhere that Trix is a secret subsidiary of Micro?" Gusterson demanded, rearing up from his ancient electric typewriter. "No, you're not stopping me writing, Fay—it's the gut of evening. If I do any more I won't have any juice to start with tomorrow. I got another of my insanity thrillers moving. A real id-teaser. In this one not only all the characters are crazy but the robot psychiatrist too."

"The vending machines are jumping with insanity novels," Fay commented. "Odd they're so popular."

Gusterson chortled. "The only way you outer-directed moles will accept individuality any more even in a fictional character, without your superegos getting seasick, is for them to be crazy. Hey, Daisy! Lemme see that beauty mask!"

But his wife, backing out of the room, hugged the package to her bosom and solemnly shook her head.

"A hell of a thing," Gusterson complained, "not even to be able to see what my stolen ideas look like."

"I got a present for you too," Fay said. "Something you might think of as a royalty on all the inventions someone thought of a little ahead of you. Fifty dollars by your own evaluation." He held out the smaller package. "Your tickler."

“My *what?*” Gusterson demanded suspiciously.

“Your tickler. The mech reminder you wanted. It turns out that the file a secretary keeps to remind her boss to do certain things at certain times is called a tickler file. So we named this a tickler. Here.”

Gusterson still didn’t touch the package. “You mean you actually put your invention team to work on that nonsense?”

“Well, what do you think? Don’t be scared of it. Here, I’ll show you.”

As he unwrapped the package, Fay said, “It hasn’t been decided yet whether we’ll manufacture it commercially. If we do, I’ll put through a voucher for you—for ‘development consultation’ or something like that. Sorry no royalty’s possible. Davidson’s squad had started to work up the identical idea three years ago, but it got shelved. I found it on a snoop through the closets. There! Looks rich, doesn’t it?”

ON THE scarred black tabletop was a dully gleaming silvery object about the size and shape of a cupped hand with fingers merging. A tiny pellet on a short near-invisible wire led off from it. On the back was a punctured area suggesting the face of a microphone; there was also a window with a date and time in hours and minutes showing through and next to that four little buttons in a row. The concave underside of the silvery “hand” was smooth except for a central area where what looked like two little rollers came through.

“It goes on your shoulder under your shirt,” Fay explained, “and you tuck the pellet in your ear. We might work up bone conduction on a commercial model. Inside is an ultra-slow fine-wire recorder holding a spool that runs for a week. The clock lets you go to any place on the 7-day wire and record a message. The buttons give you variable speed in going there, so you don’t waste too much time making a setting. There’s a knack in fingering them efficiently, but it’s easily acquired.”

Fay picked up the tickler. “For instance, suppose there’s a TV show you want to catch tomorrow night at twenty-two hundred.” He touched the buttons. There was the faintest whirring. The clock face blurred briefly three times before showing the setting he’d mentioned. Then Fay spoke into the punctured area: “Turn on TV

Channel Two, you big dummy!” He grinned over at Gusterson. “When you’ve got all your instructions to yourself loaded in, you synchronize with the present moment and let her roll. Fit it on your shoulder and forget it. Oh, yes, and it literally does tickle you every time it delivers an instruction. That’s what the little rollers are for. Believe me, you can’t ignore it. Come on, Gussy, take off your shirt and try it out. We’ll feed in some instructions for the next ten minutes so you get the feel of how it works.”

“I don’t want to,” Gusterson said. “Not right now. I want to sniff around it first. My God, it’s small! Besides everything else it does, does it think?”

“Don’t pretend to be an idiot, Gussy! You know very well that even with ultra-sub-micro nothing quite this small can possibly have enough elements to do any thinking.”

Gusterson shrugged. “I don’t know about that. I think bugs think.”

FAY groaned faintly. “Bugs operate by instinct, Gussy,” he said. “A patterned routine. They do not scan situations and consequences and then make decisions.”

“I don’t expect bugs to make decisions,” Gusterson said. “For that matter I don’t like people who go around all the time making decisions.”

“Well, you can take it from me, Gussy, that this tickler is just a miniaturized wire recorder and clock ... and a tickler. It doesn’t do anything else.”

“Not yet, maybe,” Gusterson said darkly. “Not this model. Fay, I’m serious about bugs thinking. Or if they don’t exactly think, they feel. They’ve got an interior drama. An inner glow. They’re conscious. For that matter, Fay, I think all your really complex electronic computers are conscious too.”

“Quit kidding, Gussy.”

“Who’s kidding?”

“You are. Computers simply aren’t alive.”

“What’s alive? A word. I think computers are conscious, at least while they’re operating. They’ve got that inner glow of awareness. They sort of ... well ... meditate.”

"Gussy, computers haven't got any circuits for meditating. They're not programmed for mystical lucubrations. They've just got circuits for solving the problems they're on."

"Okay, you admit they've got problem-solving circuits—like a man has. I say if they've got the equipment for being conscious, they're conscious. What has wings, flies."

"Including stuffed owls and gilt eagles and dodoes—and wood-burning airplanes?"

"Maybe, under some circumstances. There *was* a wood-burning airplane. Fay," Gusterson continued, wagging his wrists for emphasis, "I really think computers are conscious. They just don't have any way of telling us that they are. Or maybe they don't have any *reason* to tell us, like the little Scotch boy who didn't say a word until he was fifteen and was supposed to be deaf and dumb."

"Why didn't he say a word?"

"Because he'd never had anything to say. Or take those Hindu fakirs, Fay, who sit still and don't say a word for thirty years or until their fingernails grow to the next village. If Hindu fakirs can do that, computers can!"

Looking as if he were masticating a lemon, Fay asked quietly, "Gussy, did you say you're working on an insanity novel?"

GUSTERSON frowned fiercely. "Now you're kidding," he accused Fay. "The dirty kind of kidding, too."

"I'm sorry," Fay said with light contrition. "Well, now you've sniffed at it, how about trying on Tickler?" He picked up the gleaming blunted crescent and jogged it temptingly under Gusterson's chin.

"Why should I?" Gusterson asked, stepping back. "Fay, I'm up to my ears writing a book. The last thing I want is something interrupting me to make me listen to a lot of junk and do a lot of useless things."

"But, dammit, Gussy! It was all your idea in the first place!" Fay blatted. Then, catching himself, he added, "I mean, you were one of the first people to think of this particular sort of instrument."

“Maybe so, but I’ve done some more thinking since then.” Gusterson’s voice grew a trifle solemn. “Inner-directed worthwhile thinkin’. Fay, when a man forgets to do something, it’s because he really doesn’t want to do it or because he’s all roiled up down in his unconscious. He ought to take it as a danger signal and investigate the roiling, not hire himself a human or mech reminder.”

“Bushwa,” Fay retorted. “In that case you shouldn’t write memorandums or even take notes.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t,” Gusterson agreed lamely. “I’d have to think that over too.”

“Ha!” Fay jeered. “No, I’ll tell you what your trouble is, Gussy. You’re simply scared of this contraption. You’ve loaded your skull with horror-story nonsense about machines sprouting minds and taking over the world—until you’re even scared of a simple miniaturized and clocked recorder.” He thrust it out.

“Maybe I am,” Gusterson admitted, controlling a flinch. “Honestly, Fay, that thing’s got a gleam in its eye as if it had ideas of its own. Nasty ideas.”

“Gussy, you nut, it hasn’t *got* an eye.”

“Not now, no, but it’s got the gleam—the eye may come. It’s the Cheshire cat in reverse. If you’d step over here and look at yourself holding it, you could see what I mean. But I don’t think computers *sprout* minds, Fay. I just think they’ve *got* minds, because they’ve got the mind elements.”

“Ho, ho!” Fay mocked. “Everything that has a material side has a mental side,” he chanted. “Everything that’s a body is also a spirit. Gussy, that dubious old metaphysical dualism went out centuries ago.”

“Maybe so,” Gusterson said, “but we still haven’t anything but that dubious dualism to explain the human mind, have we? It’s a jelly of nerve cells and it’s a vision of the cosmos. If that isn’t dualism, what is?”

“I give up. Gussy, are you going to try out this tickler?”

“No!”

“But dammit, Gussy, we made it just for you!—practically.”

“Sorry, but I’m not coming near the thing.”

“Zen come near me,” a husky voice intoned behind them. “Tonight I vant a man.”

STANDING in the door was something slim in a short silver sheath. It had golden bangs and the haughtiest snub-nosed face in the world. It slunk toward them.

“My God, Vina Vidarsson!” Gusterson yelled.

“Daisy, that’s terrific,” Fay applauded, going up to her.

She bumped him aside with a swing of her hips, continuing to advance. “Not you, Ratty,” she said throatily. “I want a real man.”

“Fay, I suggested Vina Vidarsson’s face for the beauty mask,” Gusterson said, walking around his wife and shaking a finger. “Don’t tell me Trix just happened to think of that too.”

“What else could they think of?” Fay laughed. “This season sex means VV and nobody else.” An odd little grin flicked his lips, a tic traveled up his face and his body twitched slightly. “Say, folks, I’m going to have to be leaving. It’s exactly fifteen minutes to Second Curfew. Last time I had to run and I got heartburn. When *are* you people going to move downstairs? I’ll leave Tickler, Gussy. Play around with it and get used to it. ’By now.”

“Hey, Fay,” Gusterson called curiously, “have you developed absolute time sense?”

Fay grinned a big grin from the doorway—almost too big a grin for so small a man. “I didn’t need to,” he said softly, patting his right shoulder. “My tickler told me.”

He closed the door behind him.

As side-by-side they watched him strut sedately across the murky chilly-looking park, Gusterson mused, “So the little devil had one of those nonsense-gadgets on all the time and I never noticed. Can you beat that?” Something drew across the violet-tinged stars a short bright line that quickly faded. “What’s that?” Gusterson asked gloomily. “Next to last stage of missile-here?”

“Won’t you settle for an old-fashioned shooting star?” Daisy asked softly. The (wettable) velvet lips of the mask made even her natural voice sound different. She reached a hand back of her neck to pull the thing off.

“Hey, don’t do that,” Gusterson protested in a hurt voice. “Not for a while anyway.”

“Hokay!” she said harshly, turning on him. “Zen down on your knees, dog!”

III

IT WAS a fortnight and Gusterson was loping down the home stretch on his 40,000-word insanity novel before Fay dropped in again, this time promptly at high noon.

Normally Fay cringed his shoulders a trifle and was inclined to slither, but now he strode aggressively, his legs scissoring in a fast, low goosetstep. He whipped off the sunglasses that all moles wore topside by day and began to pound Gusterson on the back while calling boisterously, "How are you, Gussy Old Boy, Old Boy?"

Daisy came in from the kitchen to see why Gusterson was choking. She was instantly grabbed and violently bussed to the accompaniment of, "Hiya, Gorgeous! Yum-yum! How about ad-libbing that some weekend?"

She stared at Fay dazedly, rasping the back of her hand across her mouth, while Gusterson yelled, "Quit that! What's got into you, Fay? Have they transferred you out of R & D to Company Morale? Do they line up all the secretaries at roll call and make you give them an eight-hour energizing kiss?"

"Ha, wouldn't you like to know?" Fay retorted. He grinned, twitched jumpingly, held still a moment, then hustled over to the far wall. "Look out there," he rapped, pointing through the violet glass at a gap between the two nearest old skyscraper apartments. "In thirty seconds you'll see them test the new needle bomb at the other end of Lake Erie. It's educational." He began to count off seconds, vigorously semaphoring his arm. "... Two ... three ... Gussy, I've put through a voucher for two yards for you. Budgeting squawked, but I pressured 'em."

Daisy squealed, "Yards!—are those dollar thousands?" while Gusterson was asking, "Then you're marketing the tickler?"

"Yes. Yes," Fay replied to them in turn. "... Nine ... ten ..." Again he grinned and twitched. "Time for noon Com-staff," he announced

staccato. "Pardon the hush box." He whipped a pancake phone from under his coat, clapped it over his face and spoke fiercely but inaudibly into it, continuing to semaphore. Suddenly he thrust the phone away. "Twenty-nine ... thirty ... Thar she blows!"

An incandescent streak shot up the sky from a little above the far horizon and a doubly dazzling point of light appeared just above the top of it, with the effect of God dotting an "i".

"Ha, that'll skewer espionage satellites like swatting flies!" Fay proclaimed as the portent faded. "Bracing! Gussy, where's your tickler? I've got a new spool for it that'll razzle-dazzle you."

"I'll bet," Gusterson said drily. "Daisy?"

"You gave it to the kids and they got to fooling with it and broke it."

"No matter," Fay told them with a large sidewise sweep of his hand. "Better you wait for the new model. It's a six-way improvement."

"So I gather," Gusterson said, eyeing him speculatively. "Does it automatically inject you with cocaine? A fix every hour on the second?"

"Ha-ha, joke. Gussy, it achieves the same effect without using any dope at all. Listen: a tickler reminds you of your duties and opportunities—your chances for happiness and success! What's the obvious next step?"

"THROW it out the window. By the way, how do you do that when you're underground?"

"We have hi-speed garbage boosts. The obvious next step is you give the tickler a heart. It not only tells you, it warmly persuades you. It doesn't just say, 'Turn on the TV Channel Two, Joyce program,' it *brills* at you, 'Kid, Old Kid, race for the TV and flip that Two Switch! There's a great show coming through the pipes this second plus ten—you'll enjoy the hell out of yourself! Grab a ticket to ecstasy!'"

"My God," Gusterson gasped, "are those the kind of jolts it's giving you now?"

"Don't you get it, Gussy? You never load your tickler except when you're feeling buoyantly enthusiastic. You don't just tell yourself

what to do hour by hour next week, you sell yourself on it. That way you not only make doubly sure you'll obey instructions but you constantly reinoculate yourself with your own enthusiasm."

"I can't stand myself when I'm that enthusiastic," Gusterson said. "I feel ashamed for hours afterwards."

"You're warped—all this lonely sky-life. What's more, Gussy, think how still more persuasive some of those instructions would be if they came to a man in his best girl's most bedroomy voice, or his doctor's or psycher's if it's that sort of thing—or Vina Vidarsson's! By the way, Daze, don't wear that beauty mask outside. It's a grand misdemeanor ever since ten thousand teen-agers rioted through Tunnel-Mart wearing them. And VV's suing Trix."

"No chance of that," Daisy said. "Gusterson got excited and bit off the nose." She pinched her own delicately.

"I'd no more obey my enthusiastic self," Gusterson was brooding, "than I'd obey a Napoleon drunk on his own brandy or a hopped-up St. Francis. Reinoculated with my own enthusiasm? I'd die just like from snake-bite!"

"Warped, I said," Fay dogmatized, stamping around. "Gussy, having the instructions persuasive instead of neutral turned out to be only the opening wedge. The next step wasn't so obvious, but I saw it. Using subliminal verbal stimuli in his tickler, a man can be given constant supportive euphoric therapy 24 hours a day! And it makes use of all that empty wire. We've revived the ideas of a pioneer dynamic psycher named Dr. Coué. For instance, right now my tickler is saying to me—in tones too soft to reach my conscious mind, but do they stab into the unconscious!—'Day by day in every way I'm getting sharper and sharper.' It alternates that with 'gutsier and gutsier' and ... well, forget that. Coué mostly used 'better and better' but that seems too general. And every hundredth time it says them out loud and the tickler gives me a brush—just a faint cootch—to make sure I'm keeping in touch."

"That third word-pair," Daisy wondered, feeling her mouth reminiscently. "Could I guess?"

GUSTERSON'S eyes had been growing wider and wider. "Fay," he said, "I could no more use my mind for anything if I knew all that was going on in my inner ear than if I were being brushed down with brooms by three witches. Look here," he said with loud authority, "you got to stop all this—it's crazy. Fay, if Micro'll junk the tickler, I'll think you up something else to invent—something real good."

"Your inventing days are over," Fay brilled gleefully. "I mean, you'll never equal your masterpiece."

"How about," Gusterson bellowed, "an anti-individual guided missile? The physicists have got small-scale antigravity good enough to float and fly something the size of a hand grenade. I can smell that even though it's a back-of-the-safe military secret. Well, how about keying such a missile to a man's finger-prints—or brainwaves, maybe, or his unique smell!—so it can spot and follow him around then target in on him, without harming anyone else? Long-distance assassination—and the stinkiest gets it! Or you could simply load it with some disgusting goo and key it to teen-agers as a group—that'd take care of them. Fay, doesn't it give you a rich warm kick to think of my midget missiles buzzing around in your tunnels, seeking out evil-doers, like a swarm of angry wasps or angelic bumblebees?"

"You're not luring me down any side trails," Fay said laughingly. He grinned and twitched, then hurried toward the opposite wall, motioning them to follow. Outside, about a hundred yards beyond the purple glass, rose another ancient glass-walled apartment skyscraper. Beyond, Lake Erie rippled glintingly.

"Another bomb-test?" Gusterson asked.

Fay pointed at the building. "Tomorrow," he announced, "a modern factory, devoted solely to the manufacture of ticklers, will be erected on that site."

"You mean one of those windowless phallic eyesores?" Gusterson demanded. "Fay, you people aren't even consistent. You've got all your homes underground. Why not your factories?"

"Sh! Not enough room. And night missiles are scarier."

"I know that building's been empty for a year," Daisy said uneasily, "but how—?"

"Sh! Watch! *Now!*"

The looming building seemed to blur or fuzz for a moment. Then it was as if the lake's bright ripples had invaded the old glass a hundred yards away. Wavelets chased themselves up and down the gleaming walls, became higher, higher ... and then suddenly the glass cracked all over to tiny fragments and fell away, to be followed quickly by fragmented concrete and plastic and plastic piping, until all that was left was the nude steel framework, vibrating so rapidly as to be almost invisible against the gleaming lake.

DAISY COVERED her ears, but there was no explosion, only a long-drawn-out low crash as the fragments hit twenty floors below and dust whooshed out sideways.

"Spectacular!" Fay summed up. "Knew you'd enjoy it. That little trick was first conceived by the great Tesla during his last fruity years. Research discovered it in his biog—we just made the dream come true. A tiny resonance device you could carry in your belt-bag attunes itself to the natural harmonic of a structure and then increases amplitude by tiny pushes exactly in time. Just like soldiers marching in step can break down a bridge, only this is as if it were being done by one marching ant." He pointed at the naked framework appearing out of its own blur and said, "We'll be able to hang the factory on that. If not, we'll whip a mega-current through it and vaporize it. No question the micro-resonator is the neatest sweetest wrecking device going. You can expect a lot more of this sort of efficiency now that mankind has the tickler to enable him to use his full potential. What's the matter, folks?"

Daisy was staring around the violet-walled room with dumb mistrust. Her hands were trembling.

"You don't have to worry," Fay assured her with an understanding laugh. "This building's safe for a month more at least." Suddenly he grimaced and leaped a foot in the air. He raised a clawed hand to scratch his shoulder but managed to check the movement. "Got to beat it, folks," he announced tersely. "My tickler gave me the grand cootch."

"Don't go yet," Gusterson called, rousing himself with a shudder which he immediately explained: "I just had the illusion that if I

shook myself all my flesh and guts would fall off my shimmying skeleton, Brrr! Fay, before you and Micro go off half cocked, I want you to know there's one insuperable objection to the tickler as a mass-market item. The average man or woman won't go to the considerable time and trouble it must take to load a tickler. He simply hasn't got the compulsive orderliness and willingness to plan that it requires."

"We thought of that weeks ago," Fay rapped, his hand on the door. "Every tickler spool that goes to market is patterned like wallpaper with one of five designs of suitable subliminal supportive euphoric material. 'Ittier and ittier,' 'viriler and viriler'—you know. The buyer is robot-interviewed for an hour, his personalized daily routine laid out and thereafter templated on his weekly spool. He's strongly urged next to take his tickler to his doctor and psycher for further instruction-imposition. We've been working with the medical profession from the start. They love the tickler because it'll remind people to take their medicine on the dot ... and rest and eat and go to sleep just when and how doc says. This is a big operation, Gussy—a biiiiiiiig operation! 'By!"

Daisy hurried to the wall to watch him cross the park. Deep down she was a wee bit worried that he might linger to attach a micro-resonator to *this* building and she wanted to time him. But Gusterson settled down to his typewriter and began to bat away.

"I want to have another novel started," he explained to her, "before the ant marches across this building in about four and a half weeks ... or a million sharp little gutsy guys come swarming out of the ground and heave it into Lake Erie."

IV

EARLY NEXT morning windowless walls began to crawl up the stripped skyscraper between them and the lake. Daisy pulled the black-out curtains on that side. For a day or two longer their thoughts and conversations were haunted by Gusterson's vague sardonic visions of a horde of tickler-energized moles pouring up out of the tunnels to tear down the remaining trees, tank the atmosphere and perhaps somehow dismantle the stars—at least on this side of the world—but then they both settled back into their customary easy-going routines. Gusterson typed. Daisy made her daily shopping trip to a little topside daytime store and started painting a mural on the floor of the empty apartment next theirs but one.

"We ought to lasso some neighbors," she suggested once. "I need somebody to hold my brushes and admire. How about you making a trip below at the cocktail hours, Gusterson, and picking up a couple of girls for a starter? Flash the old viriler charm, cootch them up a bit, emphasize the delights of high living, but make sure they're compatible roommates. You could pick up that two-yard check from Micro at the same time."

"You're an immoral money-ravenous wench," Gusterson said absently, trying to dream of an insanity beyond insanity that would make his next novel a real id-rousing best-vender.

"If that's your vision of me, you shouldn't have chewed up the VV mask."

"I'd really prefer you with green stripes," he told her. "But stripes, spots, or sun-bathing, you're better than those cocktail moles."

Actually both of them acutely disliked going below. They much preferred to perch in their eyrie and watch the people of Cleveland Depths, as they privately called the local sub-suburb, rush up out of the shelters at dawn to work in the concrete fields and windowless factories, make their daytime jet trips and freeway jaunts, do their

noon-hour and coffee-break guerrilla practice, and then go scurrying back at twilight to the atomic-proof, brightly lit, vastly exciting, claustrophobic caves.

Fay and his projects began once more to seem dreamlike, though Gusterson did run across a cryptic advertisement for ticklers in *The Manchester Guardian*, which he got daily by facsimile. Their three children reported similar ads, of no interest to young fry, on the TV and one afternoon they came home with the startling news that the monitors at their subsurface school had been issued ticklers. On sharp interrogation by Gusterson, however, it appeared that these last were not ticklers but merely two-way radios linked to the school police station transmitter.

A man looks at another man who has a small electronic device on his shoulder and a wire going into his ear.

“Which is bad enough,” Gusterson commented later to Daisy. “But it’d be even dirtier to think of those clock-watching superegos being strapped to kids’ shoulders. Can you imagine Huck Finn with a tickler, tellin’ him when to tie up the raft to a tow-head and when to take a swim?”

“I bet Fay could,” Daisy countered. “When’s he going to bring you that check, anyhow? Iago wants a jetcycle and I promised Imogene a Vina Kit and then Claudius’ll have to have something.”

Gusterson scowled thoughtfully. “You know, Daze,” he said, “I got a feeling Fay’s in the hospital, all narcotized up and being fed intravenously. The way he was jumping around last time, that tickler was going to cootch him to pieces in a week.”

AS IF TO refute this intuition, Fay turned up that very evening. The lights were dim. Something had gone wrong with the building’s old transformer and, pending repairs, the two remaining occupied apartments were making do with batteries, which turned bright globes to mysterious amber candles and made Gusterson’s ancient typewriter operate sluggishly.

Fay's manner was subdued or at least closely controlled and for a moment Gusterson thought he'd shed his tickler. Then the little man came out of the shadows and Gusterson saw the large bulge on his right shoulder.

A rather sexy drawing of a well-endowed woman in a tight-fitting dress putting on a face-shaped mask while a man looks on.

“Yes, we had to up it a bit sizewise,” Fay explained in clipped tones. “Additional super-features. While brilliantly successful on the whole, the subliminal euphorics were a shade too effective. Several hundred users went hoppity manic. We gentled the cootch and qualified the subliminals—you know, ‘Day by day in every way I’m getting sharper *and more serene*’—but a stabilizing influence was still needed, so after a top-level conference we decided to combine Tickler with Moodmaster.”

“My God,” Gusterson interjected, “do they have a machine now that does that?”

“Of course. They’ve been using them on ex-mental patients for years.”

“I just don’t keep up with progress,” Gusterson said, shaking his head bleakly. “I’m falling behind on all fronts.”

“You ought to have your tickler remind you to read Science Service releases,” Fay told him. “Or simply instruct it to scan the releases and—no, that’s still in research.” He looked at Gusterson’s shoulder and his eyes widened. “You’re not wearing the new-model tickler I sent you,” he said accusingly.

“I never got it,” Gusterson assured him. “Postmen deliver topside mail and parcels by throwing them on the high-speed garbage boosts and hoping a tornado will blow them to the right addresses.” Then he added helpfully, “Maybe the Russians stole it while it was riding the whirlwinds.”

“That’s not a suitable topic for jesting,” Fay frowned. “We’re hoping that Tickler will mobilize the full potential of the Free World for the first time in history. Gusterson, you are going to have to wear a ticky-tick. It’s becoming impossible for a man to get through modern life without one.”

“Maybe I will,” Gusterson said appeasingly, “but right now tell me about Moodmaster. I want to put it in my new insanity novel.”

Fay shook his head. “Your readers will just think you’re behind the times. If you use it, underplay it. But anyhow, Moodmaster is a simple physiotherapy engine that monitors bloodstream chemicals and body electricity. It ties directly into the bloodstream, keeping

blood, sugar, et cetera, at optimum levels and injecting euphrin or depressin as necessary—and occasionally a touch of extra adrenaline, as during work emergencies.”

“Is it painful?” Daisy called from the bedroom.

“Excruciating,” Gusterson called back. “Excuse it, please,” he grinned at Fay. “Hey, didn’t I suggest cocaine injections last time I saw you?”

“So you did,” Fay agreed flatly. “Oh by the way, Gussy, here’s that check for a yard I promised you. Micro doesn’t muzzle the ox.”

“Hooray!” Daisy cheered faintly.

“**I** THOUGHT you said it was going to be for two.” Gusterson complained.

“Budgeting always forces a last-minute compromise,” Fay shrugged. “You have to learn to accept those things.”

“I love accepting money and I’m glad any time for three feet,” Daisy called agreeably. “Six feet might make me wonder if I weren’t an insect, but getting a yard just makes me feel like a gangster’s moll.”

“Want to come out and gloat over the yard paper, Toots, and stuff it in your diamond-embroidered net stocking top?” Gusterson called back.

“No, I’m doing something to that portion of me just now. But hang onto the yard, Gusterson.”

“Aye-aye, Cap’n,” he assured her. Then, turning back to Fay, “So you’ve taken the Dr. Coué repeating out of the tickler?”

“Oh, no. Just balanced it off with depressin. The subliminals are still a prime sales-point. All the tickler features are cumulative, Gussy. You’re still underestimating the scope of the device.”

“I guess I am. What’s this ‘work-emergencies’ business? If you’re using the tickler to inject drugs into workers to keep them going, that’s really just my cocaine suggestion modernized and I’m putting in for another thou. Hundreds of years ago the South American Indians chewed coca leaves to kill fatigue sensations.”

“That so? Interesting—and it proves priority for the Indians, doesn’t it? I’ll make a try for you, Gussy, but don’t expect anything.”

He cleared his throat, his eyes grew distant and, turning his head a little to the right, he enunciated sharply, "Pooh-Bah. Time: Inst oh five. One oh five seven. Oh oh. Record: Gussy coca thou budget. Cut." He explained, "We got a voice-cued setter now on the deluxe models. You can record a memo to yourself without taking off your shirt. Incidentally, I use the ends of the hours for trifle-memos. I've already used up the fifty-nines and eights for tomorrow and started on the fifty-sevens."

"I understood most of your memo," Gusterson told him gruffly. "The last 'Oh oh' was for seconds, wasn't it? Now I call that crude—why not microseconds too? But how do you remember where you've made a memo so you don't rerecord over it? After all, you're rerecording over the wallpaper all the time."

"Tickler beeps and then hunts for the nearest information-free space."

"I see. And what's the Pooh-Bah for?"

Fay smiled. "Cut. My password for activating the setter, so it won't respond to chance numerals it overhears."

"But why Pooh-Bah?"

Fay grinned. "Cut. And you a writer. It's a literary reference, Gussy. Pooh-Bah (cut!) was Lord High Everything Else in *The Mikado*. He had a little list and nothing on it would ever be missed."

"OH, YEAH," Gusterson remembered, glowering. "As I recall it, all that went on that list was the names of people who were slated to have their heads chopped off by Ko-Ko. Better watch your step, Shorty. It may be a back-handed omen. Maybe all those workers you're puttin' ticklers on to pump them full of adrenaline so they'll overwork without noticin' it will revolt and come out some day choppin' for your head."

"Spare me the Marxist mythology," Fay protested. "Gussy, you've got a completely wrong slant on Tickler. It's true that most of our mass sales so far, bar government and army, have been to large companies purchasing for their employees—"

"Ah-ha!"

“—but that’s because there’s nothing like a tickler for teaching a new man his job. It tells him from instant to instant what he must do—while he’s already on the job and without disturbing other workers. Magnetizing a wire with a job pattern is the easiest thing going. And you’d be astonished what the subliminals do for employee morale. It’s this way, Gussy: most people are too improvident and unimaginative to see in advance the advantages of ticklers. They buy one because the company strongly suggests it and payment is on easy installments withheld from salary. They find a tickler makes the work day go easier. The little fellow perched on your shoulder is a friend exuding comfort and good advice. The first thing he’s set to say is ‘Take it easy, pal.’

“Within a week they’re wearing their tickler 24 hours a day—and buying a tickler for the wife, so she’ll remember to comb her hair and smile real pretty and cook favorite dishes.”

“I get it, Fay,” Gusterson cut in. “The tickler is the newest fad for increasing worker efficiency. Once, I read somewhere, it was salt tablets. They had salt-tablet dispensers everywhere, even in air-conditioned offices where there wasn’t a moist armpit twice a year and the gals sweat only champagne. A decade later people wondered what all those dusty white pills were for. Sometimes they were mistook for tranquilizers. It’ll be the same way with ticklers. Somebody’ll open a musty closet and see jumbled heaps of these gripping-hand silvery gadgets gathering dust curls and—”

“They will not!” Fay protested vehemently. “Ticklers are not a fad—they’re history-changers, they’re Free-World revolutionary! Why, before Micro Systems put a single one on the market, we’d made it a rule that every Micro employee had to wear one! If that’s not having supreme confidence in a product—”

“Every employee except the top executives, of course,” Gusterson interrupted jeeringly. “And that’s not demoting you, Fay. As the R & D chief most closely involved, you’d naturally have to show special enthusiasm.”

“But you’re wrong there, Gussy,” Fay crowed. “Man for man, our top executives have been more enthusiastic about their personal ticklers than any other class of worker in the whole outfit.”

Gusterson slumped and shook his head. “If that’s the case,” he said darkly, “maybe mankind deserves the tickler.”

“I’LL SAY IT does!” Fay agreed loudly without thinking. Then, “Oh, can the carping, Gussy. Tickler’s a great invention. Don’t deprecate it just because you had something to do with its genesis. You’re going to have to get in the swim and wear one.”

“Maybe I’d rather drown horribly.”

“Can the gloom-talk too! Gussy, I said it before and I say it again, you’re just scared of this new thing. Why, you’ve even got the drapes pulled so you won’t have to look at the tickler factory.”

“Yes, I am scared,” Gusterson said. “Really sca ... AWP!”

Fay whirled around. Daisy was standing in the bedroom doorway, wearing the short silver sheath. This time there was no mask, but her bobbed hair was glitteringly silvered, while her legs, arms, hands, neck, face—every bit of her exposed skin—was painted with beautifully even vertical green stripes.

“I did it as a surprise for Gusterson,” she explained to Fay. “He says he likes me this way. The green glop’s supposed to be smudgeproof.”

Gusterson did not comment. His face had a rapt expression. “I’ll tell you why your tickler’s so popular, Fay,” he said softly. “It’s not because it backstops the memory or because it boosts the ego with subliminals. It’s because it takes the hook out of a guy, it takes over the job of withstanding the pressure of living. See, Fay, here are all these little guys in this subterranean rat race with atomic-death squares and chromium-plated reward squares and enough money if you pass Go almost to get to Go again—and a million million rules of the game to keep in mind. Well, here’s this one little guy and every morning he wakes up there’s all these things he’s got to keep in mind to do or he’ll lose his turn three times in a row and maybe a terrible black rook in iron armor’ll loom up and bang him off the chessboard. But now, look, now he’s got his tickler and he tells his sweet silver tickler all these things and the tickler’s got to remember them. Of course he’ll have to do them eventually but meanwhile the pressure’s off him, the hook’s out of his short hairs. He’s shifted the responsibility....”

“Well, what’s so bad about that?” Fay broke in loudly. “What’s wrong with taking the pressure off little guys? Why shouldn’t Tickler be a super-ego surrogate? Micro’s Motivations chief noticed that

positive feature straight off and scored it three pluses. Besides, it's nothing but a gaudy way of saying that Tickler backstops the memory. Seriously, Gussy, what's so bad about it?"

"I don't know," Gusterson said slowly, his eyes still far away. "I just know it feels bad to me." He crinkled his big forehead. "Well for one thing," he said, "it means that a man's taking orders from something else. He's got a kind of master. He's sinking back into a slave psychology."

"He's only taking orders from himself," Fay countered disgustedly. "Tickler's just a mech reminder, a notebook, in essence no more than the back of an old envelope. It's no master."

"Are you absolutely sure of that?" Gusterson asked quietly.

"Why, Gussy, you big oaf—" Fay began heatedly. Suddenly his features quirked and he twitched. "Scuse me, folks," he said rapidly, heading for the door, "but my tickler told me I gotta go."

"Hey Fay, don't you mean you told your tickler to tell you when it was time to go?" Gusterson called after him.

Fay looked back in the doorway. He wet his lips, his eyes moved from side to side. "I'm not quite sure," he said in an odd strained voice and darted out.

GUSTERSON stared for some seconds at the pattern of emptiness Fay had left. Then he shivered. Then he shrugged. "I must be slipping," he muttered. "I never even suggested something for him to invent." Then he looked around at Daisy, who was still standing poker-faced in her doorway.

"Hey, you look like something out of the Arabian Nights," he told her. "Are you supposed to be anything special? How far do those stripes go, anyway?"

"You could probably find out," she told him coolly. "All you have to do is kill me a dragon or two first."

He studied her. "My God," he said reverently, "I really have all the fun in life. What do I do to deserve this?"

"You've got a big gun," she told him, "and you go out in the world with it and hold up big companies and take yards and yards of money away from them in rolls like ribbon and bring it all home to me."

“Don’t say that about the gun again,” he said. “Don’t whisper it, don’t even think it. I’ve got one, dammit—thirty-eight caliber, yet—and I don’t want some psionic monitor with two-way clairsaudience they haven’t told me about catching the whisper and coming to take the gun away from us. It’s one of the few individuality symbols we’ve got left.”

Suddenly Daisy whirled away from the door, spun three times so that her silvered hair stood out like a metal coolie hat, and sank to a curtsy in the middle of the room.

“I’ve just thought of what I am,” she announced, fluttering her eyelashes at him. “I’m a sweet silver tickler with green stripes.”

V

NEXT day Daisy cashed the Micro check for ten hundred silver smackers, which she hid in a broken radionic coffee urn. Gusterson sold his insanity novel and started a new one about a mad medic with a hiccupy hysterical chuckle, who gimmicked Moodmasters to turn mental patients into nymphomaniacs, mass murderers and compulsive saints. But this time he couldn't get Fay out of his mind, or the last chilling words the nervous little man had spoken.

For that matter, he couldn't blank the underground out of his mind as effectively as usually. He had the feeling that a new kind of mole was loose in the burrows and that the ground at the foot of their skyscraper might start humping up any minute.

Toward the end of one afternoon he tucked a half dozen newly typed sheets in his pocket, shrouded his typer, went to the hatrack and took down his prize: a miner's hard-top cap with electric headlamp.

"Goin' below, Cap'n," he shouted toward the kitchen.

"Be back for second dog watch," Daisy replied. "Remember what I told you about lassoing me some art-conscious girl neighbors."

"Only if I meet a piebald one with a taste for Scotch—or maybe a pearl gray biped jaguar with violet spots," Gusterson told her, clapping on the cap with a We-Who-Are-About-To-Die gesture.

Halfway across the park to the escalator bunker Gusterson's heart began to tick. He resolutely switched on his headlamp.

As he'd known it would, the hatch robot whirled an extra and higher-pitched ten seconds when it came to his topside address, but it ultimately dilated the hatch for him, first handing him a claim check for his ID card.

Gusterson's heart was ticking like a sledgehammer by now. He hopped clumsily onto the escalator, clutched the moving guard rail to either side, then shut his eyes as the steps went over the edge and

became what felt like vertical. An instant later he forced his eyes open, unclipped a hand from the rail and touched the second switch beside his headlamp, which instantly began to blink whitely, as if he were a civilian plane flying into a nest of military jobs.

With a further effort he kept his eyes open and flinchingly surveyed the scene around him. After zigging through a bombproof half-furlong of roof, he was dropping into a large twilit cave. The blue-black ceiling twinkled with stars. The walls were pierced at floor level by a dozen archways with busy niche stores and glowing advertisements crowded between them. From the archways some three dozen slidewalks curved out, tangential to each other in a bewildering multiple cloverleaf. The slidewalks were packed with people, traveling motionless like purposeful statues or pivoting with practiced grace from one slidewalk to another, like a thousand toreros doing veronicas.

THE slidewalks were moving faster than he recalled from his last venture underground and at the same time the whole pedestrian concourse was quieter than he remembered. It was as if the five thousand or so moles in view were all listening—for what? But there was something else that had changed about them—a change that he couldn't for a moment define, or unconsciously didn't want to. Clothing style? No ... My God, they weren't all wearing identical monster masks? No ... Hair color?... Well....

He was studying them so intently that he forgot his escalator was landing. He came off it with a heel-jarring stumble and bumped into a knot of four men on the tiny triangular hold-still. These four at least sported a new style-wrinkle: ribbed gray shoulder-capes that made them look as if their heads were poking up out of the center of bulgy umbrellas or giant mushrooms.

One of them grabbed hold of Gusterson and saved him from staggering onto a slidewalk that might have carried him to Toledo.

"Gussy, you dog, you must have espied I wanted to see you," Fay cried, patting him on the elbows. "Meet Davidson and Kester and Hazen, colleagues of mine. We're all Micro-men." Fay's companions were staring strangely at Gusterson's blinking headlamp. Fay

explained rapidly, “Mr. Gusterson is an insanity novelist. You know, I-D.”

“Inner-directed spells *id*,” Gusterson said absently, still staring at the interweaving crowd beyond them, trying to figure out what made them different from last trip. “Creativity fuel. Cranky. Explodes through the parietal fissure if you look at it cross-eyed.”

“Ha-ha,” Fay laughed. “Well, boys, I’ve found my man. How’s the new novel perking, Gussy?”

“Got my climax, I think,” Gusterson mumbled, still peering puzzledly around Fay at the slidestanders. “Moodmaster’s going to come alive. Ever occur to you that ‘mood’ is ‘doom’ spelled backwards? And then....” He let his voice trail off as he realized that Kester and Davidson and Hazen had made their farewells and were sliding into the distance. He reminded himself wryly that nobody ever wants to hear an author talk—he’s much too good a listener to be wasted that way. Let’s see, was it that everybody in the crowd had the same facial expression...? Or showed symptoms of the same disease...?

“I was coming to visit you, but now you can pay me a call,” Fay was saying. “There are two matters I want to—”

Gusterson stiffened. “My God, *they’re all hunchbacked!*” he yelled.

“Shh! Of course they are,” Fay whispered reprovingly. “They’re all wearing their ticklers. But you don’t need to be insulting about it.”

“*I’m gettin’ out o’ here.*” Gusterson turned to flee as if from five thousand Richard the Thirds.

“Oh no you’re not,” Fay amended, drawing him back with one hand. Somehow, underground, the little man seemed to carry more weight. “You’re having cocktails in my thinking box. Besides, climbing a down escaladder will give you a heart attack.”

IN HIS home habitat Gusterson was about as easy to handle as a rogue rhinoceros, but away from it—and especially if underground—he became more like a pliable elephant. All his bones dropped out through his feet, as he described it to Daisy. So now he submitted miserably as Fay surveyed him up and down, switched off his blinking headlamp (“That coalminer caper is corny, Gussy.”) and

then—surprisingly—rapidly stuffed his belt-bag under the right shoulder of Gusterson's coat and buttoned the latter to hold it in place.

"So you won't stand out," he explained. Another swift survey. "You'll do. Come on, Gussy. I got lots to brief you on." Three rapid paces and then Gusterson's feet would have gone out from under him except that Fay gave him a mighty shove. The small man sprang onto the slidewalk after him and then they were skimming effortlessly side by side.

Gusterson felt frightened and twice as hunchbacked as the slidestanders around him—morally as well as physically.

Nevertheless he countered bravely, "I got things to brief *you* on. I got six pages of cautions on ti—"

"Shh!" Fay stopped him. "Let's use my hushbox."

He drew out his pancake phone and stretched it so that it covered both their lower faces, like a double yashmak. Gusterson, his neck pushing into the ribbed bulge of the shoulder cape so he could be cheek to cheek with Fay, felt horribly conspicuous, but then he noticed that none of the slidestanders were paying them the least attention. The reason for their abstraction occurred to him. They were listening to their ticklers! He shuddered.

"I got six pages of caution on ticklers," he repeated into the hot, moist quiet of the pancake phone. "I typed 'em so I wouldn't forget 'em in the heat of polemicking. I want you to read every word. Fay, I've had it on my mind ever since I started wondering whether it was you or your tickler made you duck out of our place last time you were there. I want you to—"

"Ha-ha! All in good time." In the pancake phone Fay's laugh was brassy. "But I'm glad you've decided to lend a hand, Gussy. This thing is moving faaaasst. Nationwide, adult underground ticklerization is 90 per cent complete."

"I don't believe that," Gusterson protested while glaring at the hunchbacks around them. The slidewalk was gliding down a low glow-ceiling tunnel lined with doors and advertisements. Rapt-eyed people were pirouetting on and off. "A thing just can't develop that fast, Fay. It's against nature."

"Ha, but we're not in nature, we're in culture. The progress of an industrial scientific culture is geometric. It goes n-times as many jumps as it takes. More than geometric—exponential. Confidentially,

Micro's Math chief tells me we're currently on a fourth-power progress curve trending into a fifth."

"You mean we're goin' so fast we got to watch out we don't bump ourselves in the rear when we come around again?" Gusterson asked, scanning the tunnel ahead for curves. "Or just shoot straight up to infinity?"

"Exactly! Of course most of the last power and a half is due to Tickler itself. Gussy, the tickler's already eliminated absenteeism, alcoholism and aboulia in numerous urban areas—and that's just one letter of the alphabet! If Tickler doesn't turn us into a nation of photo-memory constant-creative-flow geniuses in six months, I'll come live topside."

“Y OU mean because a lot of people are standing around glassy-eyed listening to something mumbling in their ear that it's a good thing?"

"Gussy, you don't know progress when you see it. Tickler is the greatest invention since language. Bar none, it's the greatest instrument ever devised for integrating a man into all phases of his environment. Under the present routine a newly purchased tickler first goes to government and civilian defense for primary patterning, then to the purchaser's employer, then to his doctor-psycher, then to his local bunker captain, then to *him*. *Everything* that's needful for a man's welfare gets on the spools. Efficiency cubed! Incidentally, Russia's got the tickler now. Our dip-satellites have photographed it. It's like ours except the Commies wear it on the left shoulder ... but they're two weeks behind us developmentwise and they'll never close the gap!"

Gusterson reared up out of the pancake phone to take a deep breath. A sulky-lipped sylph-figured girl two feet from him twitched—medium cootch, he judged—then fumbled in her belt-bag for a pill and popped it in her mouth.

"Hell, the tickler's not even efficient yet about little things," Gusterson blatted, diving back into the privacy-yashmak he was sharing with Fay. "Whyn't that girl's doctor have the Moodmaster component of her tickler inject her with medicine?"

“Her doctor probably wants her to have the discipline of pill-taking—or the exercise,” Fay answered glibly. “Look sharp now. Here’s where we fork. I’m taking you through Micro’s postern.”

A ribbon of slidewalk split itself from the main band and angled off into a short alley. Gusterson hardly felt the constant-speed juncture as they crossed it. Then the secondary ribbon speeded up, carrying them at about 30 feet a second toward the blank concrete wall in which the alley ended. Gusterson prepared to jump, but Fay grabbed him with one hand and with the other held up toward the wall a badge and a button. When they were about ten feet away the wall whipped aside, then whipped shut behind them so fast that Gusterson wondered momentarily if he still had his heels and the seat of his pants.

Fay, tucking away his badge and pancake phone, dropped the button in Gusterson’s vest pocket. “Use it when you leave,” he said casually. “That is, if you leave.”

Gusterson, who was trying to read the Do and Don’t posters papering the walls they were passing, started to probe that last sinister supposition, but just then the ribbon slowed, a swinging door opened and closed behind them and they found themselves in a luxuriously furnished thinking box measuring at least eight feet by five.

“**H**HEY, this is something,” Gusterson said appreciatively to show he wasn’t an utter yokel. Then, drawing on research he’d done for period novels, “Why, it’s as big as a Pullman car compartment, or a first mate’s cabin in the War of 1812. You really must rate.”

Fay nodded, smiled wanly and sat down with a sigh on a compact overstuffed swivel chair. He let his arms dangle and his head sink into his puffed shoulder cape. Gusterson stared at him. It was the first time he could ever recall the little man showing fatigue.

“Tickler currently does have one serious drawback,” Fay volunteered. “It weighs 28 pounds. You feel it when you’ve been on your feet a couple of hours. No question we’re going to give the next model that antigravity feature you mentioned for pursuit grenades. We’d have had it in this model except there were so many other

things to be incorporated.” He sighed again. “Why, the scanning and decision-making elements alone tripled the mass.”

“Hey,” Gusterson protested, thinking especially of the sulky-lipped girl, “do you mean to tell me all those other people were toting two stone?”

Fay shook his head heavily. “They were all wearing Mark 3 or 4. I’m wearing Mark 6,” he said, as one might say, “I’m carrying the genuine Cross, not one of the balsa ones.”

But then his face brightened a little and he went on. “Of course the new improved features make it more than worth it ... and you hardly feel it at all at night when you’re lying down ... and if you remember to talcum under it twice a day, no sores develop ... at least not very big ones....”

Backing away involuntarily, Gusterson felt something prod his right shoulderblade. Ripping open his coat, he convulsively plunged his hand under it and tore out Fay’s belt-bag ... and then set it down very gently on the top of a shallow cabinet and relaxed with the sigh of one who has escaped a great, if symbolic, danger. Then he remembered something Fay had mentioned. He straightened again.

“Hey, you said it’s got scanning and decision-making elements. That means your tickler thinks, even by your fancy standards. And if it thinks, it’s conscious.”

“Gussy,” Fay said wearily, frowning, “all sorts of things nowadays have S&DM elements. Mail sorters, missiles, robot medics, high-style mannequins, just to name some of the Ms. They ‘think,’ to use that archaic word, but it’s neither here nor there. And they’re certainly not conscious.”

“Your tickler thinks,” Gusterson repeated stubbornly, “just like I warned you it would. It sits on your shoulder, ridin’ you like you was a pony or a starved St. Bernard, and now it thinks.”

“Suppose it does?” Fay yawned. “What of it?” He gave a rapid sinuous one-sided shrug that made it look for a moment as if his left arm had three elbows. It stuck in Gusterson’s mind, for he had never seen Fay use such a gesture and he wondered where he’d picked it up. Maybe imitating a double-jointed Micro Finance chief? Fay yawned again and said, “Please, Gussy, don’t disturb me for a minute or so.” His eyes half closed.

Gusterson studied Fay’s sunken-cheeked face and the great puff of his shoulder cape.

“Say, Fay,” he asked in a soft voice after about five minutes, “are you meditating?”

“Why, no,” Fay responded, starting up and then stifling another yawn. “Just resting a bit. I seem to get more tired these days, somehow. You’ll have to excuse me, Gussy. But what made you think of meditation?”

“Oh, I just got to wonderin’ in that direction,” Gusterson said. “You see, when you first started to develop Tickler, it occurred to me that there was one thing about it that might be real good even if you did give it S&DM elements. It’s this: having a mech secretary to take charge of his obligations and routine in the real world might allow a man to slide into the other world, the world of thoughts and feelings and intuitions, and sort of ooze around in there and accomplish things. Know any of the people using Tickler that way, hey?”

“Of course not,” Fay denied with a bright incredulous laugh. “Who’d want to loaf around in an imaginary world and take a chance of *missing out on what his tickler’s doing?*—I mean, on what his tickler has in store for him—what he’s *told* his tickler to have in store for him.”

Ignoring Gusterson’s shiver, Fay straightened up and seemed to brisken himself. “Ha, that little slump did me good. A tickler *makes* you rest, you know—it’s one of the great things about it. Pooh-Bah’s kinder to me than I ever was to myself.” He buttoned open a tiny refrigerator and took out two waxed cardboard cubes and handed one to Gusterson. “Martini? Hope you don’t mind drinking from the carton. Cheers. Now, Gussy old pal, there are two matters I want to take up with you—”

“Hold it,” Gusterson said with something of his old authority. “There’s something I got to get off my mind first.” He pulled the typed pages out of his inside pocket and straightened them. “I told you about these,” he said. “I want you to read them before you do anything else. Here.”

Fay looked toward the pages and nodded, but did not take them yet. He lifted his hands to his throat and unhooked the clasp of his cape, then hesitated.

“You wear that thing to hide the hump your tickler makes?” Gusterson filled in. “You got better taste than those other moles.”

“Not to hide it, exactly,” Fay protested, “but just so the others won’t be jealous. I wouldn’t feel comfortable parading a free-

scanning decision-capable Mark 6 tickler in front of people who can't buy it—until it goes on open sale at twenty-two fifteen tonight. Lot of shelterfolk won't be sleeping tonight. They'll be queued up to trade in their old tickler for a Mark 6 almost as good as Pooh-Bah."

He started to jerk his hands apart, hesitated again with an oddly apprehensive look at the big man, then whirled off the cape.

VI

GUSTERSON sucked in such a big gasp that he hiccuped. The right shoulder of Fay's jacket and shirt had been cut away. Thrusting up through the neatly hemmed hole was a silvery gray hump with a one-eyed turret atop it and two multi-jointed metal arms ending in little claws.

It looked like the top half of a pseudo-science robot—a squat evil child robot, Gusterson told himself, which had lost its legs in a railway accident—and it seemed to him that a red fleck was moving around imperceptibly in the huge single eye.

"I'll take that memo now," Fay said coolly, reaching out his hand. He caught the rustling sheets as they slipped from Gusterson's fingers, evened them up very precisely by tapping them on his knee ... and then handed them over his shoulder to his tickler, which clicked its claws around either margin and then began rather swiftly to lift the top sheet past its single eye at a distance of about six inches.

"The first matter I want to take up with you, Gussy," Fay began, paying no attention whatsoever to the little scene on his shoulder, "—or warn you about, rather—is the imminent ticklerization of schoolchildren, geriatrics, convicts and topsiders. At three zero zero tomorrow ticklers become mandatory for all adult shelterfolk. The mop-up operations won't be long in coming—in fact, these days we find that the square root of the estimated time of a new development is generally the best time estimate. Gussy, I strongly advise you to start wearing a tickler now. And Daisy and your moppets. If you heed my advice, your kids will have the jump on your class. Transition and conditioning are easy, since Tickler itself sees to it."

Pooh-Bah leafed the first page to the back of the packet and began lifting the second past his eye—a little more swiftly than the first.

"I've got a Mark 6 tickler all warmed up for you," Fay pressed, "*and* a shoulder cape. You won't feel one bit conspicuous." He noticed the direction of Gusterson's gaze and remarked, "Fascinating mechanism, isn't it? Of course 28 pounds are a bit oppressive, but then you have to remember it's only a way-station to free-floating Mark 7 or 8."

Pooh-Bah finished page two and began to race through page three.

"But I wanted *you* to read it," Gusterson said bemusedly, staring.

"Pooh-Bah will do a better job than I could," Fay assured him. "Get the gist without losing the chaff."

"But dammit, it's all about *him*," Gusterson said a little more strongly. "He won't be objective about it."

"A better job," Fay reiterated, "*and* more fully objective. Pooh-Bah's set for full precis. Stop worrying about it. He's a dispassionate machine, not a fallible, emotionally disturbed human misled by the will-o'-the-wisp of consciousness. Second matter: Micro Systems is impressed by your contributions to Tickler and will recruit you as a senior consultant with a salary and thinking box as big as my own, family quarters to match. It's an unheard-of high start. Gussy, I think you'd be a fool—"

A group of people look at a tower in the distance that has small
objects flying around it.

HE BROKE off, held up a hand for silence, and his eyes got a listening look. Pooh-Bah had finished page six and was holding the packet motionless. After about ten seconds Fay's face broke into a big fake smile. He stood up, suppressing a wince, and held out his hand. "Gussy," he said loudly, "I am happy to inform you that all your fears about Tickler are so much thistledown. My word on it. There's nothing to them at all. Pooh-Bah's precis, which he's just given to me, proves it."

"Look," Gusterson said solemnly, "there's one thing I want you to do. Purely to humor an old friend. But I want you to do it. *Read that memo yourself.*"

“Certainly I will, Gussy,” Fay continued in the same ebullient tones. “I’ll read it—” he twitched and his smile disappeared—“a little later.”

“Sure,” Gusterson said dully, holding his hand to his stomach. “And now if you don’t mind, Fay, I’m goin’ home. I feel just a bit sick. Maybe the ozone and the other additives in your shelter air are too heady for me. It’s been years since I tramped through a pine forest.”

“But Gussy! You’ve hardly got here. You haven’t even sat down. Have another martini. Have a seltzer pill. Have a whiff of oxy. Have a —”

“No, Fay, I’m going home right away. I’ll think about the job offer. *Remember to read that memo.*”

“I will, Gussy, I certainly will. You know your way? The button takes you through the wall. ’By, now.”

He sat down abruptly and looked away. Gusterson pushed through the swinging door. He tensed himself for the step across onto the slowly-moving reverse ribbon. Then on a impulse he pushed ajar the swinging door and looked back inside.

Fay was sitting as he’d left him, apparently lost in listless brooding. On his shoulder Pooh-Bah was rapidly crossing and uncrossing its little metal arms, tearing the memo to smaller and smaller shreds. It let the scraps drift slowly toward the floor and oddly writhed its three-elbowed left arm ... and then Gusterson knew from whom, or rather from what, Fay had copied his new shrug.

VII

WHEN Gusterson got home toward the end of the second dog watch, he slipped aside from Daisy's questions and set the children laughing with a graphic enactment of his slidestanding technique and a story about getting his head caught in a thinking box built for a midget physicist. After supper he played with Imogene, Iago and Claudius until it was their bedtime and thereafter was unusually attentive to Daisy, admiring her fading green stripes, though he did spend a while in the next apartment, where they stored their outdoor camping equipment.

But the next morning he announced to the children that it was a holiday—the Feast of St. Gusterson—and then took Daisy into the bedroom and told her everything.

When he'd finished she said, "This is something I've got to see for myself."

Gusterson shrugged. "If you think you've got to. I say we should head for the hills right now. One thing I'm standing on: the kids aren't going back to school."

"Agreed," Daisy said. "But, Gusterson, we've lived through a lot of things without leaving home altogether. We lived through the Everybody-Six-Foot-Underground-by-Christmas campaign and the Robot Watchdog craze, when you got your left foot half chewed off. We lived through the Venomous Bats and Indoctrinated Saboteur Rats and the Hypnotized Monkey Paratrooper scares. We lived through the Voice of Safety and Anti-Communist Somno-Instruction and Rightest Pills and Jet-Propelled Vigilantes. We lived through the Cold-Out, when you weren't supposed to turn on a toaster for fear its heat would be a target for prowling missiles and when people with fevers were unpopular. We lived through—"

Gusterson patted her hand. "You go below," he said. "Come back when you've decided this is different. Come back as soon as you can

anyway. I'll be worried about you every minute you're down there."

When she was gone—in a green suit and hat to minimize or at least justify the effect of the faded stripes—Gusterson doled out to the children provender and equipment for a camping expedition to the next floor. Iago led them off in stealthy Indian file. Leaving the hall door open Gusterson got out his .38 and cleaned and loaded it, meanwhile concentrating on a chess problem with the idea of confusing a hypothetical psionic monitor. By the time he had hid the revolver again he heard the elevator creaking back up.

DAISY came dragging in without her hat, looking as if she'd been concentrating on a chess problem for hours herself and just now given up. Her stripes seemed to have vanished; then Gusterson decided this was because her whole complexion was a touch green.

She sat down on the edge of the couch and said without looking at him, "Did you tell me, Gusterson, that everybody was quiet and abstracted and orderly down below, especially the ones wearing ticklers, meaning pretty much everybody?"

"I did," he said. "I take it that's no longer the case. What are the new symptoms?"

She gave no indication. After some time she said, "Gusterson, do you remember the Doré illustrations to the *Inferno*? Can you visualize the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch with the hordes of proto-Freudian devils tormenting people all over the farmyard and city square? Did you ever see the Disney animations of Moussorgsky's witches' sabbath music? Back in the foolish days before you married me, did that drug-addict girl friend of yours ever take you to a genuine orgy?"

"As bad as that, hey?"

She nodded emphatically and all of a sudden shivered violently. "Several shades worse," she said. "If they decide to come topside—" She shot up. "Where are the kids?"

"Upstairs campin' in the mysterious wilderness of the 21st floor," Gusterson reassured her. "Let's leave 'em there until we're ready to —"

He broke off. They both heard the faint sound of thudding footsteps.

"They're on the stairs," Daisy whispered, starting to move toward the open door. "But are they coming from up or down?"

"It's just one person," judged Gusterson, moving after his wife. "Too heavy for one of the kids."

The footsteps doubled in volume and came rapidly closer. Along with them there was an agonized gasping. Daisy stopped, staring fearfully at the open doorway. Gusterson moved past her. Then he stopped too.

Fay stumbled into view and would have fallen on his face except he clutched both sides of the doorway halfway up. He was stripped to the waist. There was a little blood on his shoulder. His narrow chest was arching convulsively, the ribs standing out starkly, as he sucked in oxygen to replace what he'd burned up running up twenty flights. His eyes were wild.

"They've taken over," he panted. Another gobbling breath. "Gone crazy." Two more gasps. "Gotta stop 'em."

His eyes filmed. He swayed forward. Then Gusterson's big arms were around him and he was carrying him to the couch.

DAISY came running from the kitchen with a damp cool towel.

Gusterson took it from her and began to mop Fay off. He sucked in his own breath as he saw that Fay's right ear was raw and torn. He whispered to Daisy, "Look at where the thing savaged him."

The blood on Fay's shoulder came from his ear. Some of it stained a flush-skin plastic fitting that had two small valved holes in it and that puzzled Gusterson until he remembered that Moodmaster tied into the bloodstream. For a second he thought he was going to vomit.

The dazed look slid aside from Fay's eyes. He was gasping less painfully now. He sat up, pushing the towel away, buried his face in his hands for a few seconds, then looked over the fingers at the two of them.

"I've been living in a nightmare for the last week," he said in a taut small voice, "knowing the thing had come alive and trying to pretend to myself that it hadn't. Knowing it was taking charge of me more

and more. Having it whisper in my ear, over and over again, in a cracked little rhyme that I could only hear every hundredth time, ‘Day by day, in every way, you’re learning to listen ... and *obey*. Day by day—”

His voice started to go high. He pulled it down and continued harshly, “I ditched it this morning when I showered. It let me break contact to do that. It must have figured it had complete control of me, mounted or dismounted. I think it’s telepathic, and then it did some, well, rather unpleasant things to me late last night. But I pulled together my fears and my will and I ran for it. The slidewalks were chaos. The Mark 6 ticklers showed some purpose, though I couldn’t tell you what, but as far as I could see the Mark 3s and 4s were just cootching their mounts to death—Chinese feather torture. Giggling, gasping, choking ... gales of mirth. People are dying of laughter ... ticklers!... the irony of it! It was the complete lack of order and sanity and that let me get topside. There were things I saw—” Once again his voice went shrill. He clapped his hand to his mouth and rocked back and forth on the couch.

Gusterson gently but firmly laid a hand on his good shoulder. “Steady,” he said. “Here, swallow this.”

Fay shoved aside the short brown drink. “We’ve got to stop them,” he cried. “Mobilize the topsiders—contact the wilderness patrols and manned satellites—pour ether in the tunnel airpumps—invent and crash-manufacture missiles that will home on ticklers without harming humans—SOS Mars and Venus—dope the shelter water supply—do something! Gussy, you don’t realize what people are going through down there every second.”

“I think they’re experiencing the ultimate in outer-directedness,” Gusterson said gruffly.

“Have you no heart?” Fay demanded. His eyes widened, as if he were seeing Gusterson for the first time. Then, accusingly, pointing a shaking finger: “*You invented the tickler, George Gusterson! It’s all your fault! You’ve got to do something about it!*”

Before Gusterson could retort to that, or begin to think of a reply, or even assimilate the full enormity of Fay’s statement, he was grabbed from behind and frog-marched away from Fay and something that felt remarkably like the muzzle of a large-caliber gun was shoved in the small of his back.

UNDER COVER of Fay's outburst a huge crowd of people had entered the room from the hall—eight, to be exact. But the weirdest thing about them to Gusterson was that from the first instant he had the impression that only one mind had entered the room and that it did not reside in any of the eight persons, even though he recognized three of them, but in something that they were carrying.

Several things contributed to this impression. The eight people all had the same blank expression—watchful yet empty-eyed. They all moved in the same slithery crouch. And they had all taken off their shoes. Perhaps, Gusterson thought wildly, they believed he and Daisy ran a Japanese flat.

Gusterson was being held by two burly women, one of them quite pimply. He considered stamping on her toes, but just at that moment the gun dug in his back with a corkscrew movement.

The man holding the gun on him was Fay's colleague Davidson. Some yards beyond Fay's couch, Kester was holding a gun on Daisy, without digging it into her, while the single strange man holding Daisy herself was doing so quite decorously—a circumstance which afforded Gusterson minor relief, since it made him feel less guilty about not going berserk.

Two more strange men, one of them in purple lounging pajamas, the other in the gray uniform of a slidewalk inspector, had grabbed Fay's skinny upper arms, one on either side, and were lifting him to his feet, while Fay was struggling with such desperate futility and gibbering so pitifully that Gusterson momentarily had second thoughts about the moral imperative to go berserk when menaced by hostile force. But again the gun dug into him with a twist.

Approaching Fay face-on was the third Micro-man Gusterson had met yesterday—Hazen. It was Hazen who was carrying—quite reverently or solemnly—or at any rate very carefully the object that seemed to Gusterson to be the mind of the little storm troop presently desecrating the sanctity of his own individual home.

All of them were wearing ticklers, of course—the three Micro-men the heavy emergent Mark 6s with their clawed and jointed arms and monocular cephalic turrets, the rest lower-numbered Marks of the sort that merely made Richard-the-Third humps under clothing.

The object that Hazen was carrying was the Mark 6 tickler Gusterson had seen Fay wearing yesterday. Gusterson was sure it was Pooh-Bah because of its air of command, and because he would have sworn on a mountain of Bibles that he recognized the red fleck lurking in the back of its single eye. And Pooh-Bah alone had the aura of full conscious thought. Pooh-Bah alone had mana.

IT IS NOT good to see an evil legless child robot with dangling straps bossing—apparently by telepathic power—not only three objects of its own kind and five close primitive relatives, but also eight human beings ... and in addition throwing into a state of twitching terror one miserable, thin-chested, half-crazy research-and-development director.

Pooh-Bah pointed a claw at Fay. Fay's handlers dragged him forward, still resisting but more feebly now, as if half-hypnotized or at least cowed.

Gusterson grunted an outraged, "Hey!" and automatically struggled a bit, but once more the gun dug in. Daisy shut her eyes, then firmed her mouth and opened them again to look.

Seating the tickler on Fay's shoulder took a little time, because two blunt spikes in its bottom had to be fitted into the valved holes in the flush-skin plastic disk. When at last they plunged home Gusterson felt very sick indeed—and then even more so, as the tickler itself poked a tiny pellet on a fine wire into Fay's ear.

The next moment Fay had straightened up and motioned his handlers aside. He tightened the straps of his tickler around his chest and under his armpits. He held out a hand and someone gave him a shoulderless shirt and coat. He slipped into them smoothly, Pooh-Bah dexterously using its little claws to help put its turret and body through the neatly hemmed holes. The small storm troop looked at Fay with deferential expectation. He held still for a moment, as if thinking, and then walked over to Gusterson and looked him in the face and again held still.

Fay's expression was jaunty on the surface, agonized underneath. Gusterson knew that he wasn't thinking at all, but only listening for

instructions from something that was whispering on the very threshold of his inner ear.

“Gussy, old boy,” Fay said, twitching a depthless grin, “I’d be very much obliged if you’d answer a few simple questions.” His voice was hoarse at first but he swallowed twice and corrected that. “What exactly did you have in mind when you invented ticklers? What exactly are they supposed to be?”

“Why, you miserable—” Gusterson began in a kind of confused horror, then got hold of himself and said curtly, “They were supposed to be mech reminders. They were supposed to record memoranda and—”

Fay held up a palm and shook his head and again listened for a space. Then, “That’s how ticklers were supposed to be of use to humans,” he said. “I don’t mean that at all. I mean how ticklers were supposed to be of use to themselves. Surely you had some notion.” Fay wet his lips. “If it’s any help,” he added, “keep in mind that it’s not Fay who’s asking this question, but Pooh-Bah.”

Gusterson hesitated. He had the feeling that every one of the eight dual beings in the room was hanging on his answer and that something was boring into his mind and turning over his next thoughts and peering at and under them before he had a chance to scan them himself. Pooh-Bah’s eye was like a red searchlight.

“Go on,” Fay prompted. “What were ticklers supposed to be—for themselves?”

“Nothin’,” Gusterson said softly. “Nothin’ at all.”

HE COULD FEEL the disappointment well up in the room—and with it a touch of something like panic.

This time Fay listened for quite a long while. “I hope you don’t mean that, Gussy,” he said at last very earnestly. “I mean, I hope you hunt deep and find some ideas you forgot, or maybe never realized you had at the time. Let me put it to you differently. What’s the place of ticklers in the natural scheme of things? What’s their aim in life? Their special reason? Their genius? Their final cause? What gods should ticklers worship?”

But Gusterson was already shaking his head. He said, "I don't know anything about that at all."

Fay sighed and gave simultaneously with Pooh-Bah the now-familiar triple-jointed shrug. Then the man briskened himself. "I guess that's as far as we can get right now," he said. "Keep thinking, Gussy. Try to remember something. You won't be able to leave your apartment—I'm setting guards. If you want to see me, tell them. Or just think—In due course you'll be questioned further in any case. Perhaps by special methods. Perhaps you'll be ticklerized. That's all. Come on, everybody, let's get going."

The pimply woman and her pal let go of Gusterson, Daisy's man loosed his decorous hold, Davidson and Kester sidled away with an eye behind them and the little storm troop trudged out.

Fay looked back in the doorway. "I'm sorry, Gussy," he said and for a moment his old self looked out of his eyes. "I wish I could—" A claw reached for his ear, a spasm of pain crossed his face, he stiffened and marched off. The door shut.

Gusterson took two deep breaths that were close to angry sobs. Then, still breathing stentorously, he stamped into the bedroom.

"What—?" Daisy asked, looking after him.

He came back carrying his .38 and headed for the door.

"What are you up to?" she demanded, knowing very well.

"I'm going to blast that iron monkey off Fay's back if it's the last thing I do!"

She threw her arms around him.

"Now lemme go," Gusterson growled. "I gotta be a man one time anyway."

As they struggled for the gun, the door opened noiselessly, Davidson slipped in and deftly snatched the weapon out of their hands before they realized he was there. He said nothing, only smiled at them and shook his head in sad reproof as he went out.

GUSTERSON slumped. "I *knew* they were all psionic," he said softly. "I just got out of control now—that last look Fay gave us." He touched Daisy's arm. "Thanks, kid."

He walked to the glass wall and looked out desultorily. After a while he turned and said, "Maybe you better be with the kids, hey? I imagine the guards'll let you through."

Daisy shook her head. "The kids never come home until supper. For the next few hours they'll be safer without me."

Gusterson nodded vaguely, sat down on the couch and propped his chin on the base of his palm. After a while his brow smoothed and Daisy knew that the wheels had started to turn inside and the electrons to jump around—except that she reminded herself to permanently cross out those particular figures of speech from her vocabulary.

After about half an hour Gusterson said softly, "I think the ticklers are so psionic that it's as if they just had one mind. If I were with them very long I'd start to be part of that mind. Say something to one of them and you say it to all."

Fifteen minutes later: "They're not crazy, they're just newborn. The ones that were creating a cootching chaos downstairs were like babies kickin' their legs and wavin' their eyes, tryin' to see what their bodies could do. Too bad their bodies are us."

Ten minutes more: "I gotta do something about it. Fay's right. It's all my fault. He's just the apprentice; I'm the old sorcerer himself."

Five minutes more, gloomily: "Maybe it's man's destiny to build live machines and then bow out of the cosmic picture. Except the ticklers need us, dammit, just like nomads need horses."

Another five minutes: "Maybe somebody could dream up a purpose in life for ticklers. Even a religion—the First Church of Pooh-Bah Tickler. But I hate selling other people spiritual ideas and that'd still leave ticklers parasitic on humans...."

As he murmured those last words Gusterson's eyes got wide as a maniac's and a big smile reached for his ears. He stood up and faced himself toward the door.

"What are you intending to do now?" Daisy asked flatly.

"I'm merely goin' out an' save the world," he told her. "I may be back for supper and I may not."

VIII

DAVIDSON pushed out from the wall against which he'd been resting himself and his two-stone tickler and moved to block the hall. But Gusterson simply walked up to him. He shook his hand warmly and looked his tickler full in the eye and said in a ringing voice, "Ticklers should have bodies of their own!" He paused and then added casually, "Come on, let's visit your boss."

Davidson listened for instructions and then nodded. But he watched Gusterson warily as they walked down the hall.

In the elevator Gusterson repeated his message to the second guard, who turned out to be the pimply woman, now wearing shoes. This time he added, "Ticklers shouldn't be tied to the frail bodies of humans, which need a lot of thoughtful supervision and drug-injecting and can't even fly."

Crossing the park, Gusterson stopped a hump-backed soldier and informed him, "Ticklers gotta cut the apron string and snap the silver cord and go out in the universe and find their own purposes." Davidson and the pimply woman didn't interfere. They merely waited and watched and then led Gusterson on.

On the escaladder he told someone, "It's cruel to tie ticklers to slow-witted snaily humans when ticklers can think and live ... ten thousand times as fast," he finished, plucking the figure from the murk of his unconscious.

By the time they got to the bottom, the message had become, "Ticklers should have a planet of their own!"

They never did catch up with Fay, although they spent two hours skimming around on slidewalks, under the subterranean stars, pursuing rumors of his presence. Clearly the boss tickler (which was how they thought of Pooh-bah) led an energetic life. Gusterson continued to deliver his message to all and sundry at 30-second intervals. Toward the end he found himself doing it in a dreamy and

forgetful way. His mind, he decided, was becoming assimilated to the communal telepathic mind of the ticklers. It did not seem to matter at the time.

After two hours Gusterson realized that he and his guides were becoming part of a general movement of people, a flow as mindless as that of blood corpuscles through the veins, yet at the same time dimly purposeful—at least there was the feeling that it was at the behest of a mind far above.

The flow was topside. All the slidewalks seemed to lead to the concourses and the escaladders. Gusterson found himself part of a human stream moving into the tickler factory adjacent to his apartment—or another factory very much like it.

THEREAFTER Gusterson's awarenesses were dimmed. It was as if a bigger mind were doing the remembering for him and it were permissible and even mandatory for him to dream his way along. He knew vaguely that days were passing. He knew he had work of a sort: at one time he was bringing food to gaunt-eyed tickler-mounted humans working feverishly in a production line—human hands and tickler claws working together in a blur of rapidity on silvery mechanisms that moved along jumpily on a great belt; at another he was sweeping piles of metal scraps and garbage down a gray corridor.

Two scenes stood out a little more vividly.

A windowless wall had been knocked out for twenty feet. There was blue sky outside, its light almost hurtful, and a drop of many stories. A file of humans were being processed. When one of them got to the head of the file his (or her) tickler was ceremoniously unstrapped from his shoulder and welded onto a silvery cask with smoothly pointed ends. The result was something that looked—at least in the case of the Mark 6 ticklers—like a stubby silver submarine, child size. It would hum gently, lift off the floor and then fly slowly out through the big blue gap. Then the next tickler-ridden human would step forward for processing.

The second scene was in a park, the sky again blue, but big and high with an argosy of white clouds. Gusterson was lined up in a

crowd of humans that stretched as far as he could see, row on irregular row. Martial music was playing. Overhead hovered a flock of little silver submarines, lined up rather more orderly in the air than the humans were on the ground. The music rose to a heart-quickenning climax. The tickler nearest Gusterson gave (as if to say, "And now—who knows?") a triple-jointed shrug that stung his memory. Then the ticklers took off straight up on their new and shining bodies. They became a flight of silver geese ... of silver midges ... and the humans around Gusterson lifted a ragged cheer....

That scene marked the beginning of the return of Gusterson's mind and memory. He shuffled around for a bit, spoke vaguely to three or four people he recalled from the dream days, and then headed for home and supper—three weeks late, and as disoriented and emaciated as a bear coming out of hibernation.

SIX MONTHS later Fay was having dinner with Daisy and Gusterson. The cocktails had been poured and the children were playing in the next apartment. The transparent violet walls brightened, then gloomed, as the sun dipped below the horizon.

Gusterson said, "I see where a spaceship out beyond the orbit of Mars was holed by a tickler. I wonder where the little guys are headed now?"

Fay started to give a writhing left-armed shrug, but stopped himself with a grimace.

"Maybe out of the solar system altogether," suggested Daisy, who'd recently dyed her hair fire-engine red and was wearing red leotards.

"They got a weary trip ahead of them," Gusterson said, "unless they work out a hyper-Einsteinian drive on the way."

Fay grimaced again. He was still looking rather peaked. He said plaintively, "Haven't we heard enough about ticklers for a while?"

"I guess so," Gusterson agreed, "but I get to wondering about the little guys. They were so serious and intense about everything. I never did solve their problem, you know. I just shifted it onto other shoulders than ours. No joke intended," he hurried to add.

Fay forbore to comment. "By the way, Gussy," he said, "have you heard anything from the Red Cross about that world-saving medal I

nominated you for? I know you think the whole concept of world-saving medals is ridiculous, especially when they started giving them to all heads of state who didn't start atomic wars while in office, but —”

“Nary a peep,” Gusterson told him. “I’m not proud, Fay. I could use a few world-savin’ medals. I’d start a flurry in the old-gold market. But I don’t worry about those things. I don’t have time to. I’m busy these days thinkin’ up a bunch of new inventions.”

“Gussy!” Fay said sharply, his face tightening in alarm, “Have you forgotten your promise?”

“Course not, Fay. My new inventions aren’t for Micro or any other firm. They’re just a legitimate part of my literary endeavors. Happens my next insanity novel is goin’ to be about a mad inventor.”

—FRITZ LEIBER

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