



The Inhabited

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Published: 1953

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

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Two slitted green eyes loomed up directly in front of him. He plunged into them immediately.

He had just made the voyage, naked through the dimension stratum, and he scurried into the first available refuge, to hover there, gasping.

The word "he" does not strictly apply to the creature, for it had no sex, nor are the words "naked," "scurried," "hover" and "gasping" accurate at all. But there are no English words to describe properly what it was and how it moved, except in very general terms. There are no Asiatic, African or European words, though perhaps there are mathematical symbols. But, because this is not a technical paper, the symbols have no place in it.

He was a sort of spy, a sort of fifth-columnist. He had some of the characteristics of a kamikaze pilot, too, because there was no telling if he'd get back from his mission.

Hovering in his refuge and gasping for breath, so to speak, he tried to compose his thoughts after the terrifying journey and adjust himself to his new environment, so he could get to work. His job, as first traveler to this new world, the Earth, was to learn if it were suitable for habitation by his fellow beings back home. Their world was about ended and they had to move or die.

He was being discomfited, however, in his initial adjustment. His first stop in the new world—unfortunately, not only for his dignity, but for his equilibrium—had been in the mind of a cat.

It was his own fault, really. He and the others had decided that his first in a series of temporary habitations should be in one of the lower order of animals. It was a matter of precaution—the mind would be easy to control, if it came to a contest. Also, there would be less chance of running into a mind-screen and being trapped or destroyed.

The cat had no mind-screen, of course; some might even have argued that she didn't have a mind, especially the human couple she lived with. But whatever she did have was actively at work, feeling the solid tree-branch under her claws and the leaves against which her tail switched and seeing the half-grown chickens below.

The chickens were scratching in the forbidden vegetable garden. The cat, the runt of her litter and thus named Midge, often had been chased out of the garden herself, but it was no sense of justice which now set her little gray behind to wriggling in preparation for her leap. It was mischief, pure and simple, which motivated her.

Midge leaped, and the visitor, who had made the journey between dimensions without losing consciousness, blacked out.

When he revived, he was being rocketed along in an up-and-down and at the same time side-ward series of motions which got him all giddy. With an effort he oriented himself so that the cat's vision became his, and he watched in distaste as the chickens scurried, scrawny wings lifted and beaks achirp, this way and that to escape the monstrous cat.

The cat never touched the chickens; she was content to chase them. When she had divided the flock in half, six in the pea patch and six under the porch, she lay down in the shade of the front steps and reflectively licked a paw.

The spy got the impression of reflection, but he was baffledly unable to figure out what the cat was reflecting on. Midge in turn licked a paw, rolled in the dust, arched her back against the warm stone of the steps and snapped cautiously at a low-flying wasp. She was a contented cat. The impression of contentment came through very well.

The dimension traveler got only one other impression at the moment—one of languor.

The cat, after a prodigious pink yawn, went to sleep. The traveler, although he had never known the experience of voluntary unconsciousness, was tempted to do the same. But he fought against the influence of his host and, robbed of vision with the closing of the cat's eyes, he meditated.

He had been on Earth less than ten minutes, but his meditation consisted of saying to himself in his own way that if he was ever going to get anything done, he'd better escape from this cat's mind.

He accomplished that a few minutes later, when there was a crunching of gravel in the driveway and a battered Plymouth stopped and a man stepped out. Midge opened her eyes, crept up behind a row of stones bordering the path to the driveway and jumped delicately out at the man, who tried unsuccessfully to gather her into his arms.

Through the cat's eyes from behind the porch steps, where Midge had fled, the traveler took stock of the human being it was about to inhabit:

Five-feet-elevenish, thirtyish, blond-brown-haired, blue-summer-suited.

And no mind-screen.

The traveler traveled and in an instant he was looking down from his new height at the gray undersized cat. Then the screen door of the porch opened and a female human being appeared.

With the male human impressions now his, the traveler experienced some interesting sensations. There was a body-to-body

togetherness apparently called "gimmea hug" and a face-to-face-touching ceremony, "kiss."

"Hmm," thought the traveler, in his own way. "Hmm."

The greeting ceremony was followed by one that had this catechism:

"Suppareddi?"

"Onnatable."

Then came the "eating."

This eating, something he had never done, was all right, he decided. He wondered if cats ate, too. Yes, Midge was under the gas stove, chewing delicately at a different kind of preparation.

There was a great deal of eating. The traveler knew from the inspection of the mind he was inhabiting that the man was enormously hungry and tired almost to exhaustion.

"The damn job had to go out today," was what had happened. "We worked till almost eight o'clock. I think I'll take a nap after supper while you do the dishes."

The traveler understood perfectly, for he was a very sympathetic type. That was one reason they had chosen him for the transdimensional exploration. They had figured the best applicant for the job would be one with an intellect highly attuned to the vibrations of these others, known dimly through the warp-view, one extremely sensitive and with a great capacity for appreciation. Shrewd, too, of course.

The traveler tried to exercise control. Just a trace of it at first. He attempted to dissuade the man from having his nap. But his effort was ignored.

The man went to sleep as soon as he lay down on the couch in the living room. Once again, as the eyes closed, the traveler was imprisoned. He hadn't realized it until now, but he evidently couldn't transfer from one mind to another except through the eyes, once he was inside. He had planned to explore the woman's mind, but now he was trapped, at least temporarily.

Oh, well. He composed himself as best he could to await the awakening. This sleeping business was a waste of time.

There were footsteps and a whistling noise outside. The inhabited man heard the sounds and woke up, irritated. He opened his eyes a slit as his wife told the neighbor that Charlie was taking a nap, worn out from a hard day at the office, and the visitor, darting free, transferred again.

But he miscalculated and there he was in the mind of the neighbor. Irritated with himself, the traveler was about to jump to the mind of the

woman when he was caught up in the excitement that was consuming his new host.

"Sorry," said the neighbor. "The new batch of records I ordered came today and I thought Charlie'd like to hear them. Tell him to come over tomorrow night, if he wants to hear the solidest combo since Muggsy's Roseland days."

The wife said all right, George, she'd tell him. But the traveler was experiencing the excited memories of a dixieland jazz band in his new host's mind, and he knew he'd be hearing these fantastically wonderful new sounds at first hand as soon as George got back to his turntable.

They could hardly wait, George and his inhabitant both.

His inhabitant had come from a dimension-world of vast, contemplative silences. There was no talk, no speech vibrations, no noise which could not be shut out by the turning of a mental switch. Communication was from mind to mind, not from mouth to ear. It was a world of peaceful silence, where everything had been done, where the struggle for physical existence had ended, and where there remained only the sweet fruits of past labor to be enjoyed.

That had been the state of affairs, at any rate, up until the time of the Change, which was something the beings of the world could not stop. It was not a new threat from the lower orders, which they had met and overcome before, innumerable times. It was not a threat from outside—no invasion such as they had turned back in the past. Nor was it a cooling of their world or the danger of imminent collision with another.

The Change came from within. It was decadence. There was nothing left for the beings to do. They had solved all their problems and could find no new ones. They had exhausted the intricate workings of reflection, academic hypothetica and mind-play; there hadn't been a new game, for instance, in the lifetime of the oldest inhabitant.

And so they were dying of boredom. This very realization had for a time halted the creeping menace, because, as they came to accept it and discuss ways of meeting it, the peril itself subsided. But the moment they relaxed, the Change started again.

Something had to be done. Mere theorizing about their situation was not enough. It was then that they sent their spy abroad.

Because they had at one time or another visited each of the planets in their solar system and had exhausted their possibilities or found them barren, and because they were not equipped, even at the peak of their

physical development, for intergalactic flight, there remained only one way to travel—in time.

Not forward or backward, for both had been tried. Travel ahead had been discouraging—in fact, it had convinced them that their normal passage through the years had to be stopped. The reason had been made dramatically clear—they, the master race, did not exist in the future. They had vanished and the lower forms of life had begun to take over.

Travel into the past would be even more boring than continued existence in the present, they realized, because they would be reliving the experiences they had had and still vividly remembered, and would be incapable of changing them. It would be both tiresome and frustrating.

That left only one way to go—sideways in time, across the dimension line—to a world like their own, but which had developed so differently through the eons that to visit it and conquer the minds of its inhabitants would be worth while.

In that way they picked Earth for their victim and sent out their spy. Just one spy. If he didn't return, they'd send another. There was enough time. And they had to be sure.

George put a record on the phonograph and fixed himself a drink while the machine warmed up.

The interdimensional invader reacted pleasurably to the taste and instant warming effect of the liquor on George's mind.

"Ahh!" said George aloud, and his temporary inhabitant agreed with him.

George lifted the phonograph needle into the groove and went to sit on the edge of a chair. Jazz poured out of the speaker and the man beat out the time with his heels and toes.

The visitor in his mind experimented with control. He went at it subtly, at first, so as not to alarm his host. He tried to quiet the beating of time with the feet. He suggested that George cross his legs instead. The beating of time continued. The visitor urged that George do this little thing he asked; he bent all his powers to the suggestion, concentrating on the tapping feet. There wasn't even a glimmer of reaction.

Instead, there was a reverse effect. The pounding of music was insistent. The visitor relaxed. He rationalized and told himself he would try another time. Now he would observe this phenomenon. But he became more than just an observer.

The visitor reeled with sensation. The vibrations gripped him, twisted him and wrung him out. He was limp, palpitating and thoroughly

happy when the record ended and George got up immediately to put on another.

Hours later, drunk with the jazz and the liquor, the visitor went blissfully to sleep inside George's mind when his host went to bed.

He awoke, with George, to the experience of a nagging throb. But in a few minutes, after a shower, shave and breakfast with steaming coffee, it was gone, and the visitor looked forward to the coming day.

It was George's day off and he was going fishing. Humming to himself, he got out his reel and flies and other paraphernalia and contentedly arranged them in the back of his car. Visions of the fine, quiet time he was going to have went through George's mind, and his inhabitant decided he had better leave. He had to get on with his exploration; he mustn't allow himself to be trapped into just having fun.

But he stayed with George as the fisherman drove his car out of the garage and along a highway. The day was sunny and warm. There was a slight wind and the green trees sighed delicately in it. The birds were pleasantly vocal and the colors were superb.

The visitor found it oddly familiar. Then he realized what it was.

His world was like this, too. It had the trees, the birds, the wind and the colors. All were there. But its people had long since ceased to appreciate them. Their existence had turned inward and the external things no longer were of interest. Yet the visitor, through George's eyes, found this world delightful. He reveled in its beauty, its breathtaking panorama and its balance. And he wondered if he was able to appreciate it for the first time now because he was being active, although in a vicarious way, and participating in life, instead of merely reflecting on it. This would be a clue to have analyzed by the greater minds to which he would report.

Then, with a wrench, the visitor chided himself. He was allowing himself to identify too closely with this mortal, with his appreciation of such diverse pursuits as jazz and fishing. He had to get on. There was work to be done.

George waved to a boy playing in a field and the boy waved back. With the contact of their eyes, the visitor was inside the boy's mind.

The boy had a dog. It was a great, lumbering mass of affection, a shaggy, loving, prankish beast. A protector and a playmate, strong and gentle.

Now that the visitor was in the boy's mind, he adored the animal, and the dog worshiped him.

He fought to be rational. "Come now," he told himself, "don't get carried away." He attempted control. A simple thing. He would have the boy pull the dog's ear, gently. He concentrated, suggested. But all his efforts were thwarted. The boy leaped at the dog, grabbed it around the middle. The dog responded, prancing free.

The visitor gave up. He relaxed.

Great waves of mute, suffocating love enveloped him. He swam for a few minutes in a pool of joy as the boy and dog wrestled, rolled over each other in the tall grass, charged ferociously with teeth bared and growls issuing from both throats, finally to subside panting and laughing on the ground while the clouds swept majestically overhead across the blue sky.

He could swear the dog was laughing, too.

As they lay there, exhausted for the moment, a young woman came upon them. The visitor saw her looking down at them, the soft breeze tugging at her dark hair and skirt. Her hands were thrust into the pockets of her jacket. She was barefoot and she wriggled her toes so that blades of grass came up between them.

"Hello, Jimmy," she said. "Hello, Max, you old monster."

The dog thumped the ground with his tail.

"Hello, Mrs. Tanner," the boy said. "How's the baby coming?"

The girl smiled. "Just fine, Jimmy. It's beginning to kick a little now. It kind of tickles. And you know what?"

"What?" asked Jimmy. The visitor in the boy's mind wanted to know, too.

"I hope it's a boy, and that he grows up to be just like you."

"Aw." The boy rolled over and hid his face in the grass. Then he peered around. "Honest?"

"Honest," she said.

"Gee whiz." The boy was so embarrassed that he had to leave. "Me and Max are going down to the swimmin' hole. You wanta come?"

"No, thanks. You go ahead. I think I'll just sit here in the Sun for a while and watch my toes curl."

As they said good-by, the visitor traveled to the new mind.

With the girl's eyes, he saw the boy and the dog running across the meadow and down to the stream at the edge of the woods.

The traveler experienced a sensation of tremendous fondness as he watched them go.

But he mustn't get carried away, he told himself. He must make another attempt to take command. This girl might be the one he could influence. She was doing nothing active; her mind was relaxed.

The visitor bent himself to the task. He would be cleverly simple. He would have her pick a daisy. They were all around at her feet. He concentrated. Her gaze traveled back across the meadow to the grassy knoll on which she was standing. She sat. She stretched out her arms behind her and leaned back on them. She tossed her hair and gazed into the sky.

She wasn't even thinking of the daisy.

Irritated, he gathered all his powers into a compact mass and hurled them at her mind.

But with a swoop and a soar, he was carried up and away, through the sweet summer air, to a cloud of white softness.

This was not what he had planned, by any means.

A steady, warm breeze enveloped him and there was a tinkle of faraway music. It frightened him and he struggled to get back into contact with the girl's mind. But there was no contact. Apparently he had been cast out, against his will.

The forces of creation buffeted him. His dizzying flight carried him through the clean air in swift journey from horizon to horizon, then up, up and out beyond the limits of the atmosphere, only to return him in a trice to the breast of the rolling meadow. He was conscious now of the steady growth of slim green leaves as they pressed confidently through the nurturing Earth, of the other tiny living things in and on the Earth, and the heartbeat of the Earth itself, assuring him with its great strength of the continuation of all things.

Then he was back with the girl, watching through her eyes a butterfly as it fluttered to rest on a flower and perched there, gently waving its gaudy wings.

He had not been cast out. The young woman herself had gone on that wild journey to the heavens, not only with her mind, but with her entire being, attuned to the rest of creation. There was a continuity, he realized, a oneness between herself, the mother-to-be, and the Universe. With her, then, he felt the stirrings of new life, and he was proud and content.

He forgot for the moment that he had been a failure.

The soft breeze seemed to turn chill. The Sun was still high and unclouded, but its warmth was gone. With the girl, he felt a prickling along the spine. She turned her head slightly and, through her eyes, he saw, a few yards away in tall grass, a creeping man.

The eyes of the man were fixed on the girl's body and the traveler felt her thrill of terror. The man lay there for a moment, hands flat on the ground under his chest. Then he moved forward, inching toward her.

The girl screamed. Her terror gripped the visitor. He was helpless. His thoughts whirled into chaos, following hers.

The eyes of the creeping man flicked from side to side, then up. The visitor quivered and cringed with the girl when she screamed again. As the torrent of frightened sound poured from her throat, the creeping man looked into her eyes. Instantly the visitor was sucked into his mind.

It was a maelstrom. A tremendous conflict was going on in it. One part of it was urging the body on in its fantastic crawl toward the young woman frozen in terror against the sky. The visitor was aware of the other part, submerged and struggling feebly, trying to get through with a message of reason. But it was handicapped. The visitor sensed these efforts being nullified by a crushing weight of shame.

The traveler fought against full identification with the deranged part of the mind. Nevertheless, he sought to understand it, as he had understood the other minds he'd visited. But there was nothing to understand. The creeping man had no plan. There was no reason for his action.

The visitor felt only a compulsion which said, "You must! You must!"

The visitor was frightened. And then he realized that he was less frightened than the man was. The terror felt by the creeping man was greater than the fear the visitor had experienced with the girl.

There were shouts and barking. He heard the shrill cry of a boy. "Go get him, Max!"

There was a squeal of brakes from the road and a pounding of heavy footsteps coming toward them.

With the man, the visitor rose up, confused, scared. A great shaggy weight hurled itself and a growling, sharp-toothed mouth sought a throat.

A voice yelled, "Don't shoot! The dog's got him!"

Then blackness.

"Mersey." The voice summoned the visitor, huddling in a corner of the deranged mind, fearing contamination.

The eyes opened, looked up at the ceiling of a barred cell.

"Dr. Cloyd is here to see you," the voice said.

The visitor felt the mind of his host seeking to close out the words and the world, to return to sheltering darkness.

There was a rattle of keys and the opening of an iron door.

The eyes opened as a hand shook the psychotic Mersey by the shoulder. The visitor sought escape, but the eyes avoided those of the other.

"Come with me, son," the doctor's voice said. "Don't be frightened. No one will hurt you. We'll have a talk."

Mersey shook off the hand on his shoulder.

"Drop dead," he muttered.

"That wouldn't help anything," the doctor said. "Come on, man."

Mersey sat up and, through his eyes, the traveler saw the doctor's legs. Were they legs or were they iron bars? The traveler cringed away from the mad thought.

A room with a desk, a chair, a couch, and sunlight through a window. Crawling sunlit snakes. The visitor shuddered. He sought the part of the mind that was clear, but he sought in vain. Only the whirling chaos and the distorted images remained now.

There was a pain in the throat and with Mersey he lifted a hand to it. Bandaged—gleaming teeth and a snarling animal's mouth—fear, despair and hatred. With the prisoner, he collapsed on the couch.

"Lie down, if you like," said Dr. Cloyd's voice. "Try to relax. Let me help you."

"Drop dead," Mersey replied automatically. The visitor felt the tenseness of the man, the unreasoning fear, and the resentment.

But as the man lay there, the traveler sensed a calming of the turbulence. There was an urgent rational thought. He concentrated and tried to help the man phrase it.

"The girl—is she all right? Did I...?"

"She's all right." The doctor's voice was soothing. It pushed back the shadows a little. "She's perfectly all right."

The visitor sensed a dulled relief in Mersey's mind. The shadows still whirled, but they were less ominous. He suggested a question, exulted as Mersey attempted to phrase it: "Doctor, am I real bad off? Can...?"

But still the shadows.

"We'll work together," said the doctor's voice. "You've been ill, but so have others. With your help, we can make you well."

The traveler made a tremendous effort. He urged Mersey to say: "I'll help, doctor. I want to find peace."

But then Mersey's voice went on: "I must find a new home. We need a new home. We can't stay where we are."

The traveler was shocked at the words. He hadn't intended them to come out that way. Somehow Mersey had voiced the underlying thoughts of his people. The traveler sought the doctor's reaction, but Mersey wouldn't look at him. The man's gaze was fixed on the ceiling above the couch.

"Of course," the doctor said. His words were false, the visitor realized; he was humoring the madman.

"We had so much, but now there is no future," Mersey said. The visitor tried to stop him. He would not be stopped. "We can't stay much longer. We'll die. We must find a new world. Maybe you can help us."

Dr. Cloyd spoke and there was no hint of surprise in his voice.

"I'll help you all I can. Would you care to tell me more about your world?"

Desperately, the visitor fought to control the flow of Mersey's words. He had opened the gate to the other world—how, he did not know—and all of his knowledge and memories now were Mersey's. But the traveler could not communicate with the disordered mind. He could only communicate through it, and then involuntarily. If he could escape the mind ... but he could not escape. Mersey's eyes were fixed on the ceiling. He would not look at the doctor.

"A dying world," Mersey said. "It will live on after us, but we will die because we have finished. There's nothing more to do. The Change is upon us, and we must flee it or die. I have been sent here as a last hope, as an emissary to learn if this world is the answer. I have traveled among you and I have found good things. Your world is much like ours, physically, but it has not grown as fast or as far as ours, and we would be happy here, among you, if we could control."

The words from Mersey's throat had come falteringly at first, but now they were strong, although the tone was flat and expressionless. The words went on:

"But we can't control. I've tried and failed. At best we can co-exist, as observers and vicarious participants, but we must surrender choice. Is that to be our destiny—to live on, but to be denied all except contemplation—to live on as guests among you, accepting your ways and sharing them, but with no power to change them?"

The traveler shouted at Mersey's mind in soundless fury: "Shut up! Shut up!"

Mersey stopped talking.

"Go on," said the doctor softly. "This is very interesting."

"Shut up!" said the traveler voicelessly, yet with frantic urgency.

The madman was silent. His body was perfectly still, except for his calm breathing. The visitor gazed through his eyes in the only possible direction—up at the ceiling. He tried another command. "Look at the doctor."

With that glance, the visitor told himself, he would flee the crazed mind and enter the doctor's. There he would learn what the psychiatrist thought of his patient's strange soliloquy—whether he believed it, or any part of it.

He prayed that the doctor was evaluating it as the intricate raving of delusion.

Slowly, Mersey turned his head. Through his eyes, the visitor saw the faded green carpet, the doctor's dull-black shoes, his socks, the legs of his trousers. Mersey's glance hovered there, around the doctor's knees. The visitor forced it higher, past the belt around a tidy waist, along the buttons of the opened vest to the white collar, and finally to the kindly eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses.

Again he had commanded this human being and had been obeyed. The traveler braced himself for the leap from the tortured mind to the sane one.

But his gaze continued to be that of Mersey.

The gray eyes of the doctor were on his patient. Intelligence and kindness were in those eyes, but the visitor could read nothing else.

He was caught, a prisoner in a demented mind. He felt panic. This must be the mind-screen he'd been warned about.

"Look down," the visitor commanded Mersey. "Shut your eyes. Don't let him see me."

But Mersey continued to be held by the doctor's eyes. The visitor cowered back into the crazed mental tangle.

Gradually, then, his fear ebbed. There was more likelihood that Cloyd did not believe Mersey's words than that he did. The doctor treated hundreds of patients and surely many of them had delusions as fanciful as this one might seem.

The traveler's alarm simmered down until he was capable of appreciating the irony of the situation.

But at the same time, he thought with pain, "Is it our fate that of all the millions of creatures on this world, we can establish communication only through the insane? And even then to have only imperfect control of the

mind and, worse, to have it become a transmitter for our most secret thoughts?"

It was heartbreaking.

Dr. Cloyd broke the long silence. Pulling at his ear, he spoke calmly and matter-of-factly:

"Let me see if I understand your problem, Mersey. You believe yourself to be from another world, from which you have traveled, although not physically. Your world is not a material one, as far as its people are concerned. Your civilization is a mental one, which has been placed in danger. You must resettle your people, but this cannot be done here, on Earth, except in the minds of the mentally ill—and that would not be a satisfactory solution. Have I stated the case correctly?"

"Yes," Mersey's voice said over the traveler's mental protests. "Except that it is not a 'case,' as you call it. I am not Mersey. He is merely a vehicle for my thoughts. I am not here to be treated or cured, as the human being Mersey is. I'm here with a life-or-death problem affecting an entire race, and I would not be talking to you except that, at the moment, I'm trapped and confused."

The madman was doing it again, the traveler thought helplessly—spilling out his knowledge, betraying him and his kind. Was there no way to muffle him?

"I must admit that I'm confused myself," Dr. Cloyd said. "Humor me for a moment while I think out loud. Let me consider this in my own framework, first, and then in yours, without labeling either one absolutely true or false.

"You see," the doctor went on, "this is a world of vitality. My world—Earth. Its people are strong. Their bodies are developed as well as their minds. There are some who are not so strong, and some whose minds have been injured. But for the most part, both the mind and the body are in balance. Each has its function, and they work together as a coordinated whole. My understanding of your world, on the other hand, is that it's in a state of imbalance, where the physical has deteriorated almost to extinction and the mind has been nurtured in a hothouse atmosphere. Where, you might say, the mind has fed on the decay of the body."

"No," said Mersey, voicing the traveler's conviction. "You paint a highly distorted picture of our world."

"I theorize, of course," Dr. Cloyd agreed. "But it's a valid theory, based on intimate knowledge of my own world and what you've told me of yours."

"You make a basic error, I think," Mersey said, speaking for the unwilling visitor. "You assume that I have been able to make contact only with this deranged mind. That is wrong. I have shared the experiences of many of you—a man, a boy, a woman about to bear a child. Even a cat. And with each of these, my mind has been perfectly attuned. I was able to share and enjoy their experiences, their pleasures, to love with them and to fear, although they had no knowledge of my presence."

"Only since I came to this poor mind have I failed to achieve true empathy. I have been shocked by his madness and I've tried to resist it, to help him overcome it. But I've failed and it apparently has imprisoned me. Whereas I was able to leave the minds of the others almost at will, with poor Mersey I'm trapped. I can't transfer to you, for instance, as I could normally from another. If there's a way out, I haven't found it. Have you a theory for this?"

In spite of his distress at these revelations, the traveler was intrigued, now that they had been voiced for him, and he was eager to hear Dr. Cloyd's interpretation of them.

The psychiatrist took a pipe out of his pocket, filled it, lighted it and puffed slowly on it until it was drawing well.

"Continuing to accept your postulate that you're not Mersey, but an alien inhabiting his mind," the doctor said finally, "I can enlarge on my theory without changing it in any basic way."

"Your world is not superior to ours, much as it may please you to believe that it is. Nature consists of a balance, and that balance must hold true whether in Sioux City, or Mars, or in the fourth dimension, or in your world, wherever that may be. Your world is out of balance. Evidently it has been going out of balance for some time."

"Your salvation lies not in further evolution in your world—since your way of evolving proved wrong, and may prove fatal—but in a change in course, back along the evolutionary path to a society which developed naturally, with the mind and the body in balance. That society is the one you have found here, in our world. You found it pleasant and attractive, you say, but that doesn't mean you're suited to it."

"Nature's harsh rules may have operated to let you observe a way of life here that you enjoy, but to exclude you otherwise—except from a mind that is not well. In nature's balance, it could be that the refuge on this world most closely resembling your needs is in the mind of the

psychotic. One conclusion could be that your race is mentally ill—by our standards, if not by yours—and that the type of person here most closely approximating your way of life is one with a disordered mind."

Dr. Cloyd paused. Mersey had no immediate reply.

The traveler made use of the silence to consider this plausible, but frightening theory. To accept the theory would be to accept a destiny of madness here on this world, although the doctor had been kind enough to draw a distinction between madness in one dimension and a mere lack of natural balance in another.

Mersey again seized upon the traveler's mind and spoke its thoughts. But as he spoke, he voiced a conclusion which the traveler had not yet admitted even to himself.

"Then the answer is inescapable," Mersey said, his tone flat and unemotional. "It is theoretically possible for all of our people to migrate to this world and find refuge of a sort. But if we established ourselves in the minds of your normal people, we'd be without will. As mere observers, we'd become assimilated in time, and thus extinguished as a separate race. That, of course, we could not permit. And if we settled in the minds most suitable to receive us, we would be in the minds of those who by your standards are insane—whose destiny is controlled by the others. Here again we could permit no such fate.

"That alone would be enough to send me back to my people to report failure. But there is something more—something I don't think you will believe, for all your ability to synthesize acceptance of another viewpoint."

"And what is that?"

"First I must ask a question. In speaking to me now, do you still believe yourself to be addressing Mersey, your fellow human being, and humoring him in a delusion? Or do you think you are speaking through him to me, the inhabitant of another world who has borrowed his mind?"

The doctor smiled and took time to relight his pipe.

"Let me answer you in this way," he said. "If I were convinced that Mersey was merely harboring a delusion that he was inhabited by an alien being, I would accept that situation clinically. I would humor him, as you put it, in the hope that he'd be encouraged to talk freely and perhaps give me a clue to his delusion so I could help him lose it. I

would speak to him—or to you, if that were his concept of himself—just as I am speaking now.

"On the other hand, if I were convinced by the many unusual nuances of our conversation that the mind I was addressing actually was that of an alien being—I would still talk to you as I am talking now."

The doctor smiled again. "I trust I have made my answer sufficiently unsatisfactory."

The visitor's reaction was spoken by Mersey. "On the contrary, you have unwittingly told me what I want to know. You'd want your answer to be satisfactory if you were speaking to Mersey, the lunatic. But because you'd take delight in disconcerting me by scoring a point—something you wouldn't do with a patient—you reveal acceptance of the fact that I am not Mersey. Your rules would not permit you to give him an unsatisfactory answer."

"Not quite," contradicted Dr. Cloyd, still smiling. "To Mersey, my patient, troubled by his delusion and using all his craft to persuade both of us of its reality, the unsatisfactory answer would be the satisfactory one."

Mersey's voice laughed. "Dr. Cloyd, I salute you. I will leave your world with a tremendous respect for you—and completely unsure of whether you believe in my existence."

"Thank you."

"I am leaving, you know," Mersey's voice replied.

The traveler by now was resigned to letting the patient be his medium and speak his thoughts. Thus far, he had spoken them all truly, if somewhat excessively. The traveler thought he knew why, now, and expected Mersey to voice the reason for him very shortly. He did.

"I'm leaving because I must report failure and advise my people to look elsewhere for a new home. Part of the reason for that failure I haven't yet mentioned:

"Although it might appear that I, the visitor, am manipulating Mersey to speak the thoughts I wished to communicate, the facts are almost the opposite. My control over either Mersey's body or mind is practically nil.

"What you have been hearing and what you hear even now are the thoughts I am thinking—not necessarily the ones I want you to know. What has happened is this, if I may borrow your theory:

"My mind has invaded Mersey's, but his human vitality is too strong to permit him to be controlled by it. In fact, the reverse is true. His vitality is making use of my mind for its own good, and for the good of your human race. His own mind is damaged badly, but his healthy body has

taken over and made use of my mind. It is using my mind to make it speak against its will—to speak the thoughts of an alien without subterfuge, as they actually exist in truth. Thus I am helplessly telling you all about myself and the intentions of my people.

"What is in operation in Mersey is the human body's instinct of self-preservation. It is utilizing my mind to warn you against that very mind. Do you see? That would be the case, too, if a million of us invaded a million minds like Mersey's. None of us could plot successfully against you, if that were our desire—which, of course, it is—because the babbling tongues we inherited along with the bodies would give us away."

The doctor no longer smiled. His expression was grave now.

"I don't know," he said. "Now I am not sure any longer. I'm not certain that I follow you—or whether I want to follow you. I think I'm a bit frightened."

"You needn't be. I'm going. I'll say good-by, in your custom, and thank you for the hospitality and pleasures your world has given me. And I suppose I must thank Mersey for the warning of doom he's unknowingly given my people, poor man. I hope you can help him."

"I'll try," said Dr. Cloyd, "though I must say you've complicated the diagnosis considerably."

"Good-by. I won't be back, I promise you."

"I believe you," said the doctor. "Good-by."

Mersey slumped back on the couch. He looked up at the ceiling, vacantly.

For a long time there was no sound in the room.
Then the doctor said: "Mersey."

There was no answer. The man continued to lie there motionless, breathing normally, looking at the ceiling.

"Mersey," said the doctor again. "How do you feel?"

The man turned his head. He looked at the doctor with hostility, then went back to his contemplation of the ceiling.

"Drop dead," he muttered.

—RICHARD WILSON

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