



The Perfectionists

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Is there something wrong with you? Do you fail to fit in with your group? Nervous, anxious, ill-at-ease? Happy about it? Lucky you!

Frank Pembroke sat behind the desk of his shabby little office over Lemark's Liquors in downtown Los Angeles and waited for his first customer. He had been in business for a week and as yet had had no callers. Therefore, it was with a mingled sense of excitement and satisfaction that he greeted the tall, dark, smooth-faced figure that came up the stairs and into the office shortly before noon.

"Good day, sir," said Pembroke with an amiable smile. "I see my advertisement has interested you. Please stand in that corner for just a moment."

Opening the desk drawer, which was almost empty, Pembroke removed an automatic pistol fitted with a silencer. Pointing it at the amazed customer, he fired four .22 caliber longs into the narrow chest. Then he made a telephone call and sat down to wait. He wondered how long it would be before his next client would arrive.

The series of events leading up to Pembroke's present occupation had commenced on a dismal, overcast evening in the South Pacific a year earlier. Bound for Sydney, two days out of Valparaiso, the Colombian tramp steamer *Elena Mia* had encountered a dense greenish fog which seemed vaguely redolent of citrus trees. Standing on the forward deck, Pembroke was one of the first to perceive the peculiar odor and to spot the immense gray hulk wallowing in the murky distance.

Then the explosion had come, from far below the waterline, and the decks were awash with frantic crewmen, officers, and the handful of passengers. Only two lifeboats were launched before the *Elena Mia* went down. Pembroke was in the second. The roar of the sinking ship was the last thing he heard for some time.

Pembroke came as close to being a professional adventurer as one can in these days of regimented travel, organized peril, and political restriction. He had made for himself a substantial fortune through speculation in a great variety of properties, real and otherwise. Life had given him much and demanded little, which was perhaps the reason for his restiveness.

Loyalty to person or to people was a trait Pembroke had never recognized in himself, nor had it ever been expected of him. And yet he

greatly envied those staunch patriots and lovers who could find it in themselves to elevate the glory and safety of others above that of themselves.

Lacking such loyalties, Pembroke adapted quickly to the situation in which he found himself when he regained consciousness. He awoke in a small room in what appeared to be a typical modern American hotel. The wallet in his pocket contained exactly what it should, approximately three hundred dollars. His next thought was of food. He left the room and descended via the elevator to the restaurant. Here he observed that it was early afternoon. Ordering a full dinner, for he was unusually hungry, he began to study the others in the restaurant.

Many of the faces seemed familiar; the crew of the ship, probably. He also recognized several of the passengers. However, he made no attempt to speak to them. After his meal, he bought a good corona and went for a walk. His situation could have been any small western American sea-coast city. He heard the hiss of the ocean in the direction the afternoon sun was taking. In his full-gaited walk, he was soon approaching the beach.

On the sand he saw a number of sun bathers. One in particular, an attractive woman of about thirty, tossed back her long, chestnut locks and gazed up intently at Pembroke as he passed. Seldom had he enjoyed so ingenuous an invitation. He halted and stared down at her for a few moments.

"You are looking for someone?" she inquired.

"Much of the time," said the man.

"Could it be me?"

"It could be."

"Yet you seem unsure," she said.

Pembroke smiled, uneasily. There was something not entirely normal about her conversation. Though the rest of her compensated for that.

"Tell me what's wrong with me," she went on urgently. "I'm not good enough, am I? I mean, there's something wrong with the way I look or act. Isn't there? Please help me, please!"

"You're not casual enough, for one thing," said Pembroke, deciding to play along with her for the moment. "You're too tense. Also you're a bit knock-kneed, not that it matters. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Yes, yes—I mean, I suppose so. I can try to be more casual. But I don't know what to do about my knees," she said wistfully, staring across at the smooth, tan limbs. "Do you think I'm okay otherwise? I mean, as a whole I'm not so bad, am I? Oh, please tell me."

"How about talking it over at supper tonight?" Pembroke proposed. "Maybe with less distraction I'll have a better picture of you—as a whole."

"Oh, that's very generous of you," the woman told him. She scribbled a name and an address on a small piece of paper and handed it to him. "Any time after six," she said.

Pembroke left the beach and walked through several small specialty shops. He tried to get the woman off his mind, but the oddness of her conversation continued to bother him. She was right about being different, but it was her concern about being different that made her so. How to explain *that* to her?

Then he saw the weird little glass statuette among the usual bric-a-brac. It rather resembled a ground hog, had seven fingers on each of its six limbs, and smiled up at him as he stared.

"Can I help you, sir?" a middle-aged saleswoman inquired. "Oh, good heavens, whatever is that thing doing here?"

Pembroke watched with lifted eyebrows as the clerk whisked the bizarre statuette underneath the counter.

"What the hell was that?" Pembroke demanded.

"Oh, you know—or don't you? Oh, my," she concluded, "are you one of the—strangers?"

"And if I were?"

"Well, I'd certainly appreciate it if you'd tell me how I walk."

She came around in front of the counter and strutted back and forth a few times.

"They tell me I lean too far forward," she confided. "But I should think you'd fall down if you didn't."

"Don't try to go so fast and you won't fall down," suggested Pembroke. "You're in too much of a hurry. Also those fake flowers on your blouse make you look frumpy."

"Well, I'm supposed to look frumpy," the woman retorted. "That's the type of person I am. But you can look frumpy and still walk natural, can't you? Everyone says you can."

"Well, they've got a point," said Pembroke. "Incidentally, just where are we, anyway? What city is this?"

"Puerto Pacifico," she told him. "Isn't that a lovely name? It means peaceful port. In Spanish."

That was fine. At least he now knew where he was. But as he left the shop he began checking off every west coast state, city, town, and inlet. None, to the best of his knowledge, was called Puerto Pacifico.

He headed for the nearest service station and asked for a map. The attendant gave him one which showed the city, but nothing beyond.

"Which way is it to San Francisco?" asked Pembroke.

"That all depends on where you are," the boy returned.

"Okay, then where am I?"

"Pardon me, there's a customer," the boy said. "This is Puerto Pacifico."

Pembroke watched him hurry off to service a car with a sense of having been given the runaround. To his surprise, the boy came back a few minutes later after servicing the automobile.

"Say, I've just figured out who you are," the youngster told him. "I'd sure appreciate it if you'd give me a little help on my lingo. Also, you gas up the car first, then try to sell 'em the oil—right?"

"Right," said Pembroke wearily. "What's wrong with your lingo? Other than the fact that it's not colloquial enough."

"Not enough slang, huh? Well, I guess I'll have to concentrate on that. How about the smile?"

"Perfect," Pembroke told him.

"Yeah?" said the boy delightedly. "Say, come back again, huh? I sure appreciate the help. Keep the map."

"Thanks. One more thing," Pembroke said. "What's over that way—outside the city?"

"Sand."

"How about that way?" he asked, pointing north. "And that way?" pointing south.

"More of the same."

"Any railroads?"

"That we ain't got."

"Buses? Airlines?"

The kid shook his head.

"Some city."

"Yeah, it's kinda isolated. A lot of ships dock here, though."

"All cargo ships, I'll bet. No passengers," said Pembroke.

"Right," said the attendant, giving with his perfect smile.

"No getting out of here, is there?"

"That's for sure," the boy said, walking away to wait on another customer. "If you don't like the place, you've had it."

Pembroke returned to the hotel. Going to the bar, he recognized one of the *Elena Mia's* paying passengers. He was a short, rectangular little man in his fifties named Spencer. He sat in a booth with three young women, all lovely, all effusive. The topic of the conversation turned out to be precisely what Pembroke had predicted.

"Well, Louisa, I'd say your only fault is the way you keep wigglin' your shoulders up 'n' down. Why'n'sha try holdin' 'em straight?"

"I thought it made me look sexy," the redhead said petulantly.

"Just be yourself, gal," Spencer drawled, jabbing her intimately with a fat elbow, "and you'll qualify."

"Me, me," the blonde with a feather cut was insisting. "What is wrong with me?"

"You're perfect, sweetheart," he told her, taking her hand.

"Ah, come on," she pleaded. "Everyone tells me I chew gum with my mouth open. Don't you hate that?"

"Naw, that's part of your charm," Spencer assured her.

"How 'bout me, sugar," asked the girl with the coal black hair.

"Ah, you're perfect, too. You are all perfect. I've never seen such a collection of dolls as parade around this here city. C'mon, kids—how 'bout another round?"

But the dolls had apparently lost interest in him. They got up one by one and walked out of the bar. Pembroke took his rum and tonic and moved over to Spencer's booth.

"Okay if I join you?"

"Sure," said the fat man. "Wonder what the hell got into those babes?"

"You said they were perfect. They know they're not. You've got to be rough with them in this town," said Pembroke. "That's all they want from us."

"Mister, you've been doing some thinkin', I can see," said Spencer, peering at him suspiciously. "Maybe you've figured out where we are."

"Your bet's as good as mine," said Pembroke. "It's not Wellington, and it's not Brisbane, and it's not Long Beach, and it's not Tahiti. There are a lot of places it's not. But where the hell it is, you tell me."

"And, by the way," he added, "I hope you like it in Puerto Pacifico. Because there isn't any place to go from here and there isn't any way to get there if there were."

"Pardon me, gentlemen, but I'm Joe Valencia, manager of the hotel. I would be very grateful if you would give me a few minutes of honest criticism."

"Ah, no, not you, too," groaned Spencer. "Look, Joe, what's the gag?"

"You are newcomers, Mr. Spencer," Valencia explained. "You are therefore in an excellent position to point out our faults as you see them."

"Well, so what?" demanded Spencer. "I've got more important things to do than to worry about your troubles. You look okay to me."

"Mr. Valencia," said Pembroke. "I've noticed that you walk with a very slight limp. If you have a bad leg, I should think you would do better to develop a more pronounced limp. Otherwise, you may appear to be self-conscious about it."

Spencer opened his mouth to protest, but saw with amazement that it was exactly this that Valencia was seeking. Pembroke was amused at his companion's reaction but observed that Spencer still failed to see the point.

"Also, there is a certain effeminateness in the way in which you speak," said Pembroke. "Try to be a little more direct, a little more brusque. Speak in a monotone. It will make you more acceptable."

"Thank you so much," said the manager. "There is much food for thought in what you have said, Mr. Pembroke. However, Mr. Spencer, your value has failed to prove itself. You have only yourself to blame. Cooperation is all we require of you."

Valencia left. Spencer ordered another martini. Neither he nor Pembroke spoke for several minutes.

"Somebody's crazy around here," the fat man muttered after a few moments. "Is it me, Frank?"

"No. You just don't belong here, in this particular place," said Pembroke thoughtfully. "You're the wrong type. But they couldn't know that ahead of time. The way they operate it's a pretty hit-or-miss operation. But they don't care one bit about us, Spencer. Consider the men who went down with the ship. That was just part of the game."

"What the hell are you sayin'?" asked Spencer in disbelief. "You figure *they* sunk the ship? Valencia and the waitress and the three babes? Ah, come on."

"It's what you think that will determine what you do, Spencer. I suggest you change your attitude; play along with them for a few days till the picture becomes a little clearer to you. We'll talk about it again then."

Pembroke rose and started out of the bar. A policeman entered and walked directly to Spencer's table. Loitering at the juke box, Pembroke overheard the conversation.

"You Spencer?"

"That's right," said the fat man sullenly.

"What don't you like about me? The *truth*, buddy."

"Ah, hell! Nothin' wrong with you at all, and nothin'll make me say there is," said Spencer.

"You're the guy, all right. Too bad, Mac," said the cop.

Pembroke heard the shots as he strolled casually out into the brightness of the hotel lobby. While he waited for the elevator, he saw them carrying the body into the street. How many others, he wondered, had gone out on their backs during their first day in Puerto Pacifico?

Pembroke shaved, showered, and put on the new suit and shirt he had bought. Then he took Mary Ann, the woman he had met on the beach, out to dinner. She would look magnificent even when fully clothed, he decided, and the pale chartreuse gown she wore hardly placed her in that category. Her conversation seemed considerably more normal after the other denizens of Puerto Pacifico Pembroke had listened to that afternoon.

After eating they danced for an hour, had a few more drinks, then went to Pembroke's room. He still knew nothing about her and had almost exhausted his critical capabilities, but not once had she become annoyed with him. She seemed to devour every factual point of imperfection about herself that Pembroke brought to her attention. And, fantastically enough, she actually appeared to have overcome every little imperfection he had been able to communicate to her.

It was in the privacy of his room that Pembroke became aware of just how perfect, physically, Mary Ann was. Too perfect. No freckles or moles anywhere on the visible surface of her brown skin, which was more than a mere sampling. Furthermore, her face and body were meticulously symmetrical. And she seemed to be wholly ambidextrous.

"With so many beautiful women in Puerto Pacifico," said Pembroke probingly, "I find it hard to understand why there are so few children."

"Yes, children are decorative, aren't they," said Mary Ann. "I do wish there were more of them."

"Why not have a couple of your own?" he asked.

"Oh, they're only given to maternal types. I'd never get one. Anyway, I won't ever marry," she said. "I'm the paramour type."

It was obvious that the liquor had been having some effect. Either that, or she had a basic flaw of loquacity that no one else had discovered. Pembroke decided he would have to cover his tracks carefully.

"What type am I?" he asked.

"Silly, you're real. You're not a type at all."

"Mary Ann, I love you very much," Pembroke murmured, gambling everything on this one throw. "When you go to Earth I'll miss you terribly."

"Oh, but you'll be dead by then," she pouted. "So I mustn't fall in love with you. I don't want to be miserable."

"If I pretended I was one of you, if I left on the boat with you, they'd let me go to Earth with you. Wouldn't they?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure they would."

"Mary Ann, you have two other flaws I feel I should mention."

"Yes? Please tell me."

"In the first place," said Pembroke, "you should be willing to fall in love with me even if it will eventually make you unhappy. How can you

be the paramour type if you refuse to fall in love foolishly? And when you have fallen in love, you should be very loyal."

"I'll try," she said unsurely. "What else?"

"The other thing is that, as my mistress, you must never mention me to anyone. It would place me in great danger."

"I'll never tell anyone anything about you," she promised.

"Now try to love me," Pembroke said, drawing her into his arms and kissing with little pleasure the smooth, warm perfection of her tanned cheeks. "Love me my sweet, beautiful, affectionate Mary Ann. My paramour."

Making love to Mary Ann was something short of ecstasy. Not for any obvious reason, but because of subtle little factors that make a woman a woman. Mary Ann had no pulse. Mary Ann did not perspire. Mary Ann did not fatigue gradually but all at once. Mary Ann breathed regularly under all circumstances. Mary Ann talked and talked and talked. But then, Mary Ann was not a human being.

When she left the hotel at midnight, Pembroke was quite sure that she understood his plan and that she was irrevocably in love with him. Tomorrow might bring his death, but it might also ensure his escape. After forty-two years of searching for a passion, for a cause, for a loyalty, Frank Pembroke had at last found his. Earth and the human race that peopled it. And Mary Ann would help him to save it.

The next morning Pembroke talked to Valencia about hunting. He said that he planned to go shooting out on the desert which surrounded the city. Valencia told him that there were no living creatures anywhere but in the city. Pembroke said he was going out anyway.

He picked up Mary Ann at her apartment and together they went to a sporting goods store. As he guessed there was a goodly selection of firearms, despite the fact that there was nothing to hunt and only a single target range within the city. Everything, of course, had to be just like Earth. That, after all, was the purpose of Puerto Pacifico.

By noon they had rented a jeep and were well away from the city. Pembroke and Mary Ann took turns firing at the paper targets they had purchased. At twilight they headed back to the city. On the outskirts, where the sand and soil were mixed and no footprints would be left, Pembroke hopped off. Mary Ann would go straight to the police and report that Pembroke had attacked her and that she had shot him. If

necessary, she would conduct the authorities to the place where they had been target shooting, but would be unable to locate the spot where she had buried the body. Why had she buried it? Because at first she was not going to report the incident. She was frightened. It was not airtight, but there would probably be no further investigation. And they certainly would not prosecute Mary Ann for killing an Earthman.

Now Pembroke had himself to worry about. The first step was to enter smoothly into the new life he had planned. It wouldn't be so comfortable as the previous one, but should be considerably safer. He headed slowly for the "old" part of town, aging his clothes against buildings and fences as he walked. He had already torn the collar of the shirt and discarded his belt. By morning his beard would grow to blacken his face. And he would look weary and hungry and aimless. Only the last would be a deception.

Two weeks later Pembroke phoned Mary Ann. The police had accepted her story without even checking. And when, when would she be seeing him again? He had aroused her passion and no amount of long-distance love could requite it. Soon, he assured her, soon.

"Because, after all, you do owe me something," she added.

And that was bad because it sounded as if she had been giving some womanly thought to the situation. A little more of that and she might go to the police again, this time for vengeance.

Twice during his wanderings Pembroke had seen the corpses of Earthmen being carted out of buildings. They had to be Earthmen because they bled. Mary Ann had admitted that she did not. There would be very few Earthmen left in Puerto Pacifico, and it would be simple enough to locate him if he were reported as being on the loose. There was no out but to do away with Mary Ann.

Pembroke headed for the beach. He knew she invariably went there in the afternoon. He loitered around the stalls where hot dogs and soft drinks were sold, leaning against a post in the hot sun, hat pulled down over his forehead. Then he noticed that people all about him were talking excitedly. They were discussing a ship. It was leaving that afternoon. Anyone who could pass the interview would be sent to Earth.

Pembroke had visited the docks every day, without being able to learn when the great exodus would take place. Yet he was certain the first lap would be by water rather than by spaceship, since no one he had talked

to in the city had ever heard of spaceships. In fact, they knew very little about their masters.

Now the ship had arrived and was to leave shortly. If there was any but the most superficial examination, Pembroke would no doubt be discovered and exterminated. But since no one seemed concerned about anything but his own speech and behavior, he assumed that they had all qualified in every other respect. The reason for transporting Earth People to this planet was, of course, to apply a corrective to any of the Pacificos' aberrant mannerisms or articulation. This was the polishing up phase.

Pembroke began hobbling toward the docks. Almost at once he found himself face to face with Mary Ann. She smiled happily when she recognized him. *That* was a good thing.

"It is a sign of poor breeding to smile at tramps," Pembroke admonished her in a whisper. "Walk on ahead."

She obeyed. He followed. The crowd grew thicker. They neared the docks and Pembroke saw that there were now set up on the roped-off wharves small interviewing booths. When it was their turn, he and Mary Ann each went into separate ones. Pembroke found himself alone in the little room.

Then he saw that there was another entity in his presence confined beneath a glass dome. It looked rather like a groundhog and had seven fingers on each of its six limbs. But it was larger and hairier than the glass one he had seen at the gift store. With four of its limbs it tapped on an intricate keyboard in front of it.

"What is your name?" queried a metallic voice from a speaker on the wall.

"I'm Jerry Newton. Got no middle initial," Pembroke said in a surly voice.

"Occupation?"

"I work a lot o' trades. Fisherman, fruit picker, fightin' range fires, vineyards, car washer. Anything. You name it. Been out of work for a long time now, though. Goin' on five months. These here are hard times, no matter what they say."

"What do you think of the Chinese situation?" the voice inquired.

"Which situation's 'at?"

"Where's Seattle?"

"Seattle? State o' Washington."

And so it went for about five minutes. Then he was told he had qualified as a satisfactory surrogate for a mid-twentieth century American male, itinerant type.

"You understand your mission, Newton?" the voice asked. "You are to establish yourself on Earth. In time you will receive instructions. Then you will attack. You will not see us, your masters, again until the atmosphere has been sufficiently chlorinated. In the meantime, serve us well."

He stumbled out toward the docks, then looked about for Mary Ann. He saw her at last behind the ropes, her lovely face in tears.

Then she saw him. Waving frantically, she called his name several times. Pembroke mingled with the crowd moving toward the ship, ignoring her. But still the woman persisted in her shouting.

Sidling up to a well-dressed man-about-town type, Pembroke winked at him and snickered.

"You Frank?" he asked.

"Hell, no. But some poor punk's sure red in the face, I'll bet," the man-about-town said with a chuckle. "Those high-strung paramour types always raising a ruckus. They never do pass the interview. Don't know why they even make 'em."

Suddenly Mary Ann was quiet.

"Ambulance squad," Pembroke's companion explained. "They'll take her off to the buggy house for a few days and bring her out fresh and ignorant as the day she was assembled. Don't know why they keep making 'em, as I say. But I guess there's a call for that type up there on Earth."

"Yeah, I reckon there is at that," said Pembroke, snickering again as he moved away from the other. "And why not? Hey? Why not?"

Pembroke went right on hating himself, however, till the night he was deposited in a field outside of Ensenada, broke but happy, with two other itinerant types. They separated in San Diego, and it was not long before Pembroke was explaining to the police how he had drifted far from the scene of the sinking of the *Elena Mia* on a piece of wreckage, and had been picked up by a Chilean trawler. How he had then made his way, with much suffering, up the coast to California. Two days later, his identity established and his circumstances again solvent, he was headed for Los Angeles to begin his save-Earth campaign.

Now, seated at his battered desk in the shabby rented office over Lemark's Liquors, Pembroke gazed without emotion at the two demolished Pacificos that lay sprawled one atop the other in the corner. His watch said one-fifteen. The man from the FBI should arrive soon.

There were footsteps on the stairs for the third time that day. Not the brisk, efficient steps of a federal official, but the hesitant, self-conscious steps of a junior clerk type.

Pembroke rose as the young man appeared at the door. His face was smooth, unpimpled, clean-shaven, without sweat on a warm summer afternoon.

"Are you Dr. Von Schubert?" the newcomer asked, peering into the room. "You see, I've got a problem—"

The four shots from Pembroke's pistol solved his problem effectively. Pembroke tossed his third victim onto the pile, then opened a can of lager, quaffing it appreciatively. Seating himself once more, he leaned back in the chair, both feet upon the desk.

He would be out of business soon, once the FBI agent had got there. Pembroke was only in it to get the proof he would need to convince people of the truth of his tale. But in the meantime he allowed himself to admire the clipping of the newspaper ad he had run in all the Los Angeles papers for the past week. The little ad that had saved mankind from God-knew-what insidious menace. It read:

ARE YOU IMPERFECT?

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