

The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing-at All

I. The Naked and Alone

We looked through the peephole of the hospital door.

Colonel Harkening had torn off his pajamas again and lay naked face down on the floor.

His body was rigid.

His face was turned sharply to the left so that the neck muscles showed. His right arm stuck out straight from the body.

The elbow formed a right angle, with the forearm and hand pointing straight upward. The left arm also pointed straight out, but in this case the hand and forearm pointed downward in line with the body.

The legs were in the grotesque parody of a running position.

Except that Colonel Harkening wasn't running.

He was lying flat on the floor.

Flat, as though he were trying to squeeze himself out of the third dimension and to lie in two planes only. Grosbeck stood back and gave Timofeyev his turn at the peephole.

"I still say he needs a naked woman," said Grosbeck.

Grosbeck always went in for the elementals.

We had atropine, surgital, a whole family of the digitalin ids assorted narcotics, electrotherapy, hydrotherapy, subsonic therapy temperature shock, audiovisual shock, mechanical hypnosis, and gas hypnosis.

None of these had had the least effect on Colonel Harkening.

When we picked the colonel up he tried to lie down.

When we put clothes on him he tore them off.

We had already brought his wife to see him. She had wept because the world had acclaimed her husband a hero, dead in the vast, frightening emptiness of space. His miraculous return had astonished seven continents on Earth and the settlements on Venus and Mars.

Harkening had been test pilot for the new device which had been developed by a team at the Research Office of the Instrumentality.

of Man They called it a chronoplast, though a minority held out for the term plano form

The theory of it was completely beyond me, though the purpose was simple enough. Crudely stated, the theory sought to compress living, material bodies into a two-dimensional frame while skipping the living body and its material adjuncts through two dimensions only to some inconceivably remote point in space.

As our technology now stood it would have taken us a century at the least to reach Alpha Centauri, the nearest star.

Desmond, the Harkening, who held the titular rank of colonel under the Chiefs of the Instrumentality, was one of the best space navigators we had. His eyes were perfect, his mind cool, his body superb, his experience first-rate: What more could we ask?

Humanity had sent him out in a minute spaceship not much larger than the elevator in an ordinary private home. Somewhere between Earth and the Moon with millions of televideo watchers following his course, he had disappeared.

Presumably he had turned on the chronoplast and had been the first man to plano form

We never saw his craft again.

But we found the colonel, all right.

He lay naked in the middle of Central Park in New York, which lay about a hundred miles west of the Ancient Ruins.

He lay in the grotesque position in which we had just observed him in the hospital cell, forming a sort of human starfish.

Four months had passed and we had made very little progress with the colonel.

It was not much trouble keeping him alive since we fed him by massive rectal and intravenous administrations of the requisites of medical survival. He did not oppose us. He did not fight except when we put clothes on him or tried to keep him too long out of the horizontal plane.

When kept upright too long he would awaken just enough to go into a mad, silent, gloating rage, fighting the attendants, the straitjacket, and anything else that got in his way.

We had had one hellish time in which the poor man suffered for an entire week, bound firmly in canvas and struggling every minute of the week to get free and to resume his nightmarish position.

The wife's visit last week had done no more good than I expected Grosbeck's suggestion to do this week.

The colonel paid no more attention to her than he paid to us doctors.

If he had come back from the stars, come back from the cold beyond the Moon, come back from all the terrors of the Up-and Out come back by means unknown to any man living, come back in a form not himself and

nevertheless himself, how could we expect the crude stimuli of previous human knowledge to awaken him?

When Timofeyev and Grosbeck turned back to me after looking at him for the some-thousandth time, I told them I did not think we could make any progress with the case by ordinary means.

"Let's start all over again. This man is here. He can't be here because nobody can come back from the stars, mother-naked in his own skin, and land from outer space in Central Park so gently that he shows not the slightest abrasion from a fall. Therefore, he isn't in that room, you and I aren't talking about anything, and there isn't any problem. Is that right?"

"No," they chorused simultaneously.

I turned on Grosbeck as the more obdurate of the two.

"Have it your way then. He is there, major premise. He can't be there, minor premise. We don't exist. Q.E.D. That suit you any better?"

"No, sir and doctor. Chief and Leader," said Grosbeck, sticking to the courtesies even though he was angry.

"You are trying to destroy the entire context of this case, and, by doing so, are trying to lead us even further into unorthodox methods of treatment. Lord and Heaven, sir! We can't go any further that way.

This man is crazy. It doesn't matter how he got into Central Park.

That's a problem for the engineers. It's not a medical problem. His craziness is a medical problem. We can try to cure it, or we can try not to cure it. But we won't get anywhere if we mix the medicine with the engineering " "It's not that bad," interjected Timofeyev gently.

As the older of my associates he had the right to address me by my short title. He turned to me.

"I agree with you, sir and doctor Anderson, that the engineering is mixed up with this man's mental and physical state. After all, he is the first person to go out in a chronoplast and neither we nor the engineers nor anybody else has the faintest idea of what happened to him. The engineers can't find the machine, and we can't find his consciousness. Let's leave the machine to the engineers, but let's persevere on the medical side of the case."

I said nothing, waiting for them to let off steam until they were prepared to reason with me and not just shout at me in their desperation.

They looked at me, keeping their silence grudgingly, and trying to make me take the initiative in the unpleasant case.

"Open the cell door," I said.

"He's not going to run away in that position. All he wants to do is be flat."

"Flatter than a Scotch pancake in a Chinese hell," said Grosbeck, "and

you're not going to get anywhere by leaving him in his flatness. He was a human being once and the only way to make a human being be a human being is to appeal to the human being side of him, not to some imaginary flat side that got thrown into him while he was out wherever he was."

Grosbeck himself smiled a lopsided grin; he was capable of seeing the humor of his own vehemence at times.

"Shall we say he was out underneath space, sir and doctor, Chief and Leader?"

"That's a good way to put it," I said.

"You can try your naked woman idea later on, but I frankly don't think it's going to do any good. That man isn't corticating at a level above that of the simplest invertebrates except when he's in that grotesque position.

If he's not thinking, he's not seeing. If he's not seeing, he won't see a woman any more than anything else. There's nothing wrong with the body. The trouble lies in the brain. I still see it as a problem of getting into the brain."

"Or the soul," breathed Timofeyev, whose full name was Herbert Hoover Timofeyev, and who came from the most religious part of Russia.

"You can't leave the soul out sometimes, doctor..

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We had entered the cell and stood there looking helplessly at the naked man.

The patient breathed very quietly. His eyes were open; we had not been able to make the eyes blink, even with a photoflash. The patient acquired a grotesque and elementary humanity when he was taken out of his flat position. His mind reached, intellectually speaking, a high point no higher than that of a terrorized, panicked, momentarily deranged squirrel. When clothed or out of position he fought madly, hitting indiscriminately at objects and persons.

Poor Colonel Harkening! We three were supposed to be the best doctors on Earth, and we could do nothing for him.

We had even tried to study his way of fighting to see whether the muscular and eye movements involved in the struggle revealed where he had been or what experiences he had undergone. Even that was fruitless. He fought something after the fashion of a nine-month-old infant, using his adult strength, but using it indiscriminately.

We never got a sound out of him.

He breathed hard as he fought. His sputum bubbled. Froth appeared on his lips. His hands made clumsy movements to tear away the shirts and robes and walkers which we put on him.

Sometimes his fingernails or toenails tore his own skin as he got free of gloves or shoes.

He always went back to the same position: On the floor.

Face down.

Arms and legs in swastika form.

There he was back from outer space. He was the first man to return,
and yet he had not really returned.

As we stood there helpless, Timofeyev made the first serious suggestion
we had gotten that day.

"Do you dare to try a secondary tele path

Grosbeck looked shocked.

I dared to give the subject thought. Secondary tele paths were in bad repute because they were supposed to come into the hospitals and have their telepathic capacities removed once it had been proved that they were not true tele paths with a real capacity for complete interchange.

Under the Ancient Law many of them could and did elude us.

With their dangerous part-telepathic capacities they took up charlatan-ism and fakery of the worst kind, pretending to talk with the dead, precipitating neurotics into psychotics, healing a few sick people and bungling ten other cases for each case that they did heal, and, in general, disturbing the good order of society.

And yet, if everything else had failed . . .

II. The Secondary Telepath A day later we were back in Harkening's hospital cell, almost in the same position.

The three of us stood around the naked body on the floor.

There was a fourth person with us, a girl.

Timofeyev had found her. She was a member of his own religious group, the Post-Soviet Orthodox Eastern Quakers. You could tell when they spoke Anglic because they used the word "thou" from the Ancient English Language instead of the word "thee."

Timofeyev looked at me.

I nodded at him very quietly.

He turned to the girl.

"Canst thou help him, sister?"

The child was scarcely more than twelve. She was a little girl with a long, lean face, a soft, mobile mouth, quick gray-green eyes, a mop of tan hair that fell over her shoulders. She had expressive, tapering hands. She showed no shock at all at the sight of the naked man lost in the depths of his insanity.

She knelt down on the floor and spoke gently directly into the ear of Colonel Harkening.

"Canst thou hear me, brother? I have come to help thee. I am thy sister Liana. I am thy sister under the love of God. I am thy sister born of the flesh of man. I am thy sister under the sky. I am thy sister come to help thee. I am thy sister, brother. I am thy sister. Waken a little and I can help thee. Waken a little to the words of thy sister. Waken a little for the love and the hope.

Waken to let the love come in. Waken to let the love awaken thee further. Waken to let mankind get thee. Waken to return again, return

again to the realm of man. The realm of man is a friendly realm.

The friendship of man is a friendly thing. Thy friend is thy sister, by the name of Liana. Thy friend is here. Waken a little to the words of thy friend ..."

As she talked on I saw that she made a gentle movement with her left hand, motioning us out of the room.

I nodded to my two colleagues, jerking my head to indicate that we should step out in the corridor. We stepped just beyond the door so that we could still look in.

The child went on with her endless chant.

Grosbeck stood rigid, glaring at her as though she were an intrusion into the field of regular medicine. Timofeyev tried to look sweet, benevolent, and spiritual; he forgot and, instead, just looked excited. I got very tired and began to wonder when I could interrupt the child. It did not seem to me that she was getting anywhere.

She herself settled the matter.

She burst into tears.

She went on talking as she wept, her voice broken with sobs, the tears from her eyes pouring down her cheeks and dropping on the face of the colonel just below her face.

The colonel might as well have been made of porcelainized concrete.

I could see his breathing, but the pupils of his eyes did not move. He was no more alive than he had been all these weeks. No more alive, and no less alive.

No change. At last the girl gave up her weeping and talking and came out to the corridor to us.

She spoke to me directly.

"Art thou a brave man, Anderson, sir and doctor. Chief and Leader."

It was a silly question. How does anybody answer a question like that? All I could say was

"I suppose so. What do you want to do?"

"I want you three," said she as solemnly as a witch.

"I want you three to wear the helmet of the pin lighters and ride with me into hell itself. That soul is lost. It is frozen by a force I do not know, frozen out beyond the stars, where the stars caught it and made it their own, so that the poor man and brother that thou se est is truly among us, but his soul weeps in the unholy pleasure between the stars where it is lost to the mercy of God and to the friendship of mankind. Wilt thou, o brave man, sir and doctor, Chief and Leader, ride with me to hell itself?"

What could I say but yes?

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Late that night we made the return from the Nothing-at-All.

There were five pin lighters helmets, crude things, mechanical correctives to natural telepathy, devices to throw the synapses of one mind into another so that all five of us could think the same thoughts.

It was the first time that I had been in contact with the minds of Grosbeck and Timofeyev. They surprised me.

Timofeyev really was clean all the way through, as clean and simple as washed linen. He was really a very simple man. The urgencies and pressures of his everyday life did not go down to the insides.

Grosbeck was very different. He was as alive, as cackling, and as violent as a whole barnyard full of fowl: His mind was dirty in spots, clean in others. It was bright, smelly, alive, vivid, moving.

I caught an echo of my own mind from them. To Timofeyev I seemed cold, high, icy, and mysterious; to Grosbeck I looked like a solid lump of coal. He couldn't see into my mind very much and he didn't even want to.

We all sensed out toward Liana, and in reaching for the sense of-the-mind of Liana we encountered the mind of the colonel . . .

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Never have I encountered something so terrible.

It was raw pleasure.

As a doctor I have seen pleasure the pleasure of morphine which destroys, the pleasure of fen nine which kills and ruins, even the pleasure of the electrode buried in the living brain.

As a doctor I had been required to see the wicked est of men kill themselves under the law. It was a simple thing we did. We put a thin wire directly into the pleasure center of the brain. The bad man then put his head near an electric field of the right phase and voltage. It was simple enough. He died of pleasure in a few hours.

This was worse.

This pleasure was not in human form.

Liana was somewhere near and I caught her thoughts as she said,

"We must go there, sirs and doctors, Chiefs and Leaders.

"We must go there together, the four of us, go to where no man was, go to the Nothing-at-All, go to the hope and the heart of the pain, go to the pain which return may this man, go to the power which is greater than space, go to the power which has sent him home, go to the place which is not a place, find the force which is not a force, force the force which is not a force to give this heart and spare it back to us.

"Come with me if you come at all. Come with me to the end of things.

Come with me " Suddenly there was a flash as of sheet lightning in our minds.

of Man It was bright lightning, bright, delicate, multicolored, gentle.

Suffusing everything, it was like a cascade of pure color, paste! in hue, but intense in its brightness. The light came.

The light came, I say.

Strange.

And it was gone.

That was all.

The experience was so quick that it could hardly be called instantaneous. It seemed to happen less than instantaneously, if you can imagine that. We all five felt that we had been befriended, looked at. We felt that we had been made the toys or the pets of some gigantic form of life immensely beyond the limits of human imagination, and that that life in looking at the four of us the three doctors and Liana had seen us and the colonel and had realized that the colonel needed to go back to his own kind.

Because it was five, not four, who stood up.

The colonel was trembling, but he was sane. He was alive. He was human again. He said very weakly: "Where am I? Is this an Earth hospital?"

And then he fell into Timofeyev's arms.

Liana was already gliding out the door.

I followed her out.

She turned on me.

"Sir and doctor, Chief and Leader, all I ask is no thanks, and no money, no notice and no word of what has happened. My powers come from the goodness of the Lord's grace and from the friendliness of mankind. I should not intrude into the field of medicine. I should not have come if thy friend Timofeyev had not asked me as a matter of common mercy. Claim the credit for thy hospital, sir and doctor. Chief and Leader, but thou and thy friends should forget me."

I stammered at her,

"But the reports? . . ."

"Write the reports any way thou wishes, but mention me not."

"But our patient. He is our patient, too. Liana."

She smiled a smile of great sweetness, of girlish and childish friendliness.

"If he need me, I shall come to him . . ."

The world was better, but not much the wiser.

The chronoplast spaceship was never found. The colonel's return was never explained. The colonel never left Earth again.

All he knew was that he had pushed a button out somewhere near the Moon and that he had then awakened in a hospital after four months had been unaccountably lost.

And all the world knew was that he and his wife had unaccountably adopted a strange but beautiful little girl, poor in family, but rich in the mild generosity of her own spirit.