

# Movers and Shakers

by Tom Easton

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I'm no great shakes. Not for looks. Not for smarts. I've never claimed otherwise. How could I? I make my nut with a battered pickup, moving furniture, junk, garbage, whatever folks'll hire me for. Maybe you've seen my ad: "Light Hauling. Cheap. Reliable. Call 382-5877." It's nothing much, but it feeds me and pays the rent. I'm not married, never have been. Never could find a girl who wanted much to do with me, but then that's one expense I haven't got.

But the alien didn't know all that. I thought. There he was, three feet high, sitting or standing or squatting, whatever he called it, on my doorstep. One squirmy looking finger, like an octopus' arm except it didn't have any suckers, was still hanging in the air where the knocker had been until I opened the door. His eyes, black and wet, with no whites, were buried in folds of scaly skin. He looked like a cross between a fish and a squid. Smelled like one too. He sounded like -- like God knows what. Think of an accordion that's been soaked for a month in molasses. That's not quite it, but it'll give you the flavor of it. His voice was slow and sticky, and it came out of a hole about where you'd expect a mouth to be.

The alien was saying something, but I wasn't hearing. I was staring. I'd read enough sci-fi to know this thing in front of me was an alien. It had to be, though blobs like this had been out of style since the thirties. And even then people had preferred aliens that looked at least vaguely human. Maybe I'd been drinking too much lately?

Too much booze in me or not, this thing was no hallucination. When I didn't answer him right away, he reached out and touched me on the chest with a finger. Or was it an arm? As far as I could see, it and fifty others just like it emerged directly from the creature's side.

That made them arms, right?

He touched me again, in the general neighborhood of the empty buttonhole over my navel. I stopped gaping and said, "What do you want?" Very intelligent of me, but then I told you I wasn't much on smart. Besides, I wasn't altogether cool, calm, and collected at the moment.

"You are over your shock, yes? You have never seen my like before, but you can accept me, yes?" His wheeze was hard to listen to, but I could make it out. He was right, too. I could accept him, at least until he tried to crawl back into a bottle. I nodded vaguely and stepped aside. I waved him inside the door, gaping again when I saw how he moved. Like a centipede on all those arms. Or were they fingers? It really was better that he get inside out of sight. There was no telling what the neighbors would say if they saw him. Get me juggled, for sure. Keeping wild animals, dangerous pets, public nuisances, or something -- if they didn't riot. It was a crummy neighborhood, but good enough so everyone could look down on me.

I closed the door behind him and followed him into the living room. Bedroom, too, for that matter, and kitchen. I sat down on the edge of the couch I used for a bed and waited for him to say something else.

"Call me Wirtz," he said.

"I'm Fordy." Then, thinking he might want something more formal, I added, "Sanford Randall. Though folks just call me Fordy."

"I know this. I also know you are illegitimate and have an IQ of 93. You are a virgin, an alcoholic, and a peeping tom. You shoplift, cheat on your taxes, and chisel more welfare than you deserve. You are also thirty-eight years old. I checked you out."

Speaking of peeping! And all I knew was that he was an ugly, nosy snob. I didn't like him much. "So what do you want?"

"I am a scholar. An experimental scholar. It is my calling to study primitive planets such as this one, to determine the quantal bits in their folklore and to cause the natives to act them out. I then record the results and publish them as holo films on my home world of Calaz. They are quite popular."

I didn't understand more than one word in three, but I got the idea. He was a meddler, like the anthro-whatevers who poke around the jungle gooks right here on Earth. He made money out of it too. Well, as long as a little of it rubbed off on me, he could study me all he wanted. "So where do I come in?" I said.

"These quantal bits -- I have determined them already for your culture." A ripple ran through the boneless arms on one side of his body -- his equivalent of a shrug? -- and a slit opened in his skin. He reached in and pulled out what looked like a small sheet of paper. He held it up in front of his eyes and read aloud from it: "Penny pincher. Food for thought. Rubble rouser. Father knows best. Movers and shakers." He tucked the paper away again and went on. "That will do for a sample, yes. The last is you."

"Movers and shakers? You're going to make a mover and shaker out of me?" Fat chance! Like I said at the beginning, I'm no great shakes, and I know it. He'd have a better chance of making a silk purse out of a pig's ear.

"Not make one, no. You already are one. A mover because that is how you make your living, yes? And a Shaker because of your grandmother."

Oh, grandma. She turned Shaker about three years after she qualified as my grandma. Grandpa spent the next five years splitting his time between raising my mom, earning a living, and trying to convince her to come home. Then he divorced her and married again. All I could say was, "She makes me a Shaker too?"

"As much as anyone I could find who was a mover too. But now I must gain your cooperation. It is my understanding that movers and shakers become political leaders, found large corporations, or make great fortunes, and I cannot make you do any of those things. I need your help." That shrug again, but this time no pockets opened. Maybe he just didn't like admitting he couldn't do everything himself. Not that my help would be worth much. I'd never been able to make a fortune for myself, not that I hadn't wished hard enough.

I told him as much, adding that this called for a drink. I leaned over and fetched a bottle out from under the couch. Good booze. The last of a case I'd found squirreled away in a basement I was cleaning out two weeks ago. "Want any?"

"Ethanol agrees with me. We will drink to our partnership, yes?" I nodded at him and found a couple of glasses on the windowsill. I poured, and we both knocked the stuff back. He didn't have any more trouble with it than I did. He wasn't all that alien. He even liked it. His first words on getting the slug down were, "More, yes?"

I poured again, and we got down to business. He stretched out on the floor, on his back, those fifty-odd arms wiggling in the air except for the two that braced the glass on his chest. His head was between my feet, so that his eyes looked up at me whenever I looked down. I kept my eyes on my own glass as

much as I could.

As soon as he was comfortable, he said, "Some ideas from you, yes? What do you wish to move and shake?"

I didn't have any use for politics, and -- really -- I was okay without gobs of money. It would just go for more booze, until I drowned in the stuff. But here he was, looking like a whole can of angle worms escaped from a fish factory. If I could just get him to run across the sidewalk when . . . "Well, there's this broad lives down the street . . ."

"The one you were watching three nights ago, yes?"

Yeahh! "That's right."

"No." He waved his glass at me. "More, please, yes." I poured. I gave myself a splash more while I was at it. "That is not what I mean. A mover and shaker affects the world, not individuals, yes? You need to have bigger plans."

Bigger plans. And I was pretty happy the way I was. But that wouldn't do. This alien, this Wirtz, he called himself, wanted to make something of me. I hadn't run into that since my mom died. "But I don't want that much," I said. "I've got about all I need right now."

He sighed, I swear it. Then he shrugged and opened another pocket. He reached in and pulled out a little sac. He opened the sac and spilled it out onto the floor beside him. I stared, even more than when I'd first seen him. Gold nuggets. Diamonds. Rubies. Jewels I'd never heard the names for. Small ones, though. Nothing big. Nothing flashy.

"First you will sell these. I have more if you need them, in my ship. Ben you will buy some good clothes. Suits and shirts and shiny shoes, yes? More of this excellent ethanol, too. Then you will expand your business."

I must have looked blank, for he sighed again. "You collect garbage, yes? So you will buy a real garbage truck." And he laid it out. He had it all figured. He would make me the garbage king of the county, even the state. First the clothes, to make me look like a prosperous business man. Then the truck, business loans, more trucks, drivers, until I was a goddam monopolist. And then I'd bid to handle the city landfill, cheap, bring in sorting equipment, and start selling scrap metal, glass, and so on. The perfect garbage operation. No dump problem, total recycling, and we could even process the garbage that had already been buried. All I needed was him to steer me along and his diamonds to finance it all.

By now the bottle was almost empty and my head was whirling, more from Wirtz than the booze. I'd had less than half the bottle. Considerably less. He'd had the rest. So I agreed. I'd go along. I'd stooge for him, and I wouldn't have any illusions about it all. He'd really wanted my ideas? Don't make me laugh!

It went just the way he'd laid it out. I sold a small diamond to a fence I knew, no questions, bought the clothes, and took the rest of the sparklers to a legit jeweler in another town. Got a good price that way. Bought the truck then, hired a man, and spent my time bidding cheap on restaurant contracts. Got enough of them so I needed more trucks and talked the bank into buying them. Had the city monopoly in a year, took over the landfill, and that was when Wirtz crawled out from under my couch, where he'd been boozing it up all along. He'd only come out for a fresh bottle or to hand me some more of his jewels.

Now, though, he wanted to take a real hand in the operation. He had me get a big pet carrier, one of those plastic-covered masonite boxes with a window in one end, and take him out to the landfill. Once we were there, he had me carry him around and show him the joint. That was a chore! The place was an

old gravel pit, a hole in the ground most of a quarter mile across, half of it filled in with everybody's leavings. I bitched at having to lug him around, but he just said, "Do you want people to see me, no?" No way! I had the money now, but I still hadn't moved. Too much trouble. So the neighbors could still riot.

He didn't explain himself until we'd covered the ground twice. Then he told me, "You will set up the sorting machines over there, where there is no garbage yet. Then you will only need a conveyer to get what has already been buried."

And that's the way it was. I had to have a road bulldozed for the trucks, so they could get around to the back of the landfill pile, and I had to have foundations built for the machinery. But within six months I was all set up; godawful great hoppers that fed the garbage to a shredder, magnets that yanked out the iron and steel, air blowers that separated out the paper and other light crap, shaking screens that sifted out the crushed glass, and a baler for the bits of copper wire, aluminum tubing, and the like that came out at the end. I took one look at the finished noise-maker and named my outfit "Movers and Shakers, Inc." Wirtz had done it, alright. That's what I was. And I had more money than I'd ever dreamed existed. I got paid for picking up the garbage and then I turned around and sold it again. The paper went to a paper company. The glass went to a bottle maker. The metal went to a scrap metal dealer. A healthy profit on every ton, and more going out than my trucks were hauling in, at least until I'd finished sorting out the fifteen years worth of garbage that was buried behind the shredder.

That was when Wirtz came from under the couch again. He said he was bored. He wanted something to do, yes. And it was time to start recording how I was acting out the folklore quantum he had assigned me. He wanted a control room, set up right over the conveyer that brought the stuff out of the landfill. He wanted to be able to start or stop the whole show, or any part of it. He also wanted a grab-arm, like on a pulp truck, so he could pick things out of the garbage stream. As he put it, "There is no sense in letting a rock into the crusher, yes?"

How could I argue? That machinery was expensive. He got his control room, an air-conditioned metal box, four by four by four, with one window looking straight down on the conveyer. How he expected to watch movies that way, I didn't know, but that was what he wanted and it was none of my business anyway. Maybe he had a camera that could see through walls. That would explain how he'd known so much about me.

As long as I knew him after that, he stayed in that box. I brought him booze and food, whatever he asked for, and let him shut the conveyor down when he wanted to sleep. I hung around in the evenings, too, just to talk the way we had when he was living under my couch. I told him how things were going, how other towns were beginning to copy our setup, how the power company was talking about building a small plant near us to burn the paper and other combustibles we sorted out. If they did, we'd get a better price. Coal was more valuable than wood pulp, and that's what we'd be competing with. I bitched about all the paperwork too. I said I wanted to hire a lawyer to handle it for us. He said no. I should do it myself. It was good for me, yes? He sounded just like my mom.

I must have messed up the paperwork, though, because it wasn't long before we had an OSHA inspector checking us out. He looked at everything, talked to the employees, and filled out wads of forms. When he was done, he ticked me off for not having seat belts in the trucks, not having a railing around the shredder, not this, and not that. He said if I didn't make the place safer, I'd be paying fines, so much a day until I was "in compliance."

And then he asked me what that box over the conveyer was. So what could I do? I told him. "It's a control room."

"Not that small, it isn't. Unless you're violating the child labor laws too." He was a smartass, he was. But

then weren't they all?

"No kids," I protested. And then I put my foot in it. "No midgets or dwarfs, either."

"So who runs it? I don't see you paying anyone enough to squeeze himself in there." He paused for a moment. Then he hauled his sheaf of forms out of his pocket again and said, "Maybe you'd better let me have a look inside."

I backed off, quick. "Why bother? It's just machinery inside, you know? Automated." Oh boy! I didn't want him seeing Wirtz. Not at all. He was trouble enough already, and I sure didn't want the feds walking off with my diamond supply. They would, too, if they realized what it was.

But he insisted. "I see a door. Open it up."

So I did. I didn't say another word while we walked the few yards across to Wirtz's little metal box. I led him right up to the door and opened it. And when he turned white I was too busy laughing to pay much attention to Wirtz's look of surprise. "What is it?" he gasped.

"It's a sea cucumber." I crossed my fingers.

"The hell it is." He straightened up, the color coming back to his face. I closed the door again. Wirtz would have to wait for an explanation. "The hell it is."

"Sure it is. I caught him off Cape Cod. Trained him to spot rocks and keep them out of the shredder."

"The hell you did. That's no sea . . . that's . . . not that big. Not with all those legs."

"So you tell me. Maybe I don't know a sea cucumber from a sea cabbage. Anyway, it's a trained animal." If he would swallow that, I was okay. The worst he could do was sic the SPCA on me.

"Yeah. A trained animal." He shook his head. I could see he didn't know what to think. Fumes from all the garbage, maybe? He'd probably wind up passing the buck to his boss, but it would be a few days before he got back to the office. We had a little time anyway.

As I walked him back out to the parking lot, I heard the conveyer speed up. Wirtz had probably heard it all, the damn peeper, but why should he be in a hurry now? Speeding up his cameras wouldn't get him done and out of the way any faster. Besides, the conveyer wasn't a camera.

Once I was rid of the snoop, I headed back to Wirtz as fast as I could, but it didn't do me any good. He was hunched over his window, staring down at the garbage zipping by on the conveyer twice as fast as usual. He was concentrating so hard I don't think he even heard me shouting at him. So I just watched, while he touched controls to speed up the shredder to keep up with the conveyer and the sorters to keep up with the shredder. By then I couldn't hear myself think, much less shout, so I headed back to the office: soundproofed, thank God.

Wirtz was more of a puzzle than I'd ever stopped to think. It had taken the OSHA guy to show me that. If I wasn't a boozier from way back, I might have reacted like him the day Wirtz showed up on my doorstep. But I didn't. And now look at me. A businessman. An industrialist, yet. Getting rich, even. It was like having a fairy godmother. But how long was it going to last? Wirtz was in a hurry now, which meant he intended or hoped to be done soon, probably before the snoops came back. I had to wonder if I could hack it without him. I certainly never had before.

As it turned out, it was a good two weeks before the feds came back, and by then the control room was a comfortable ten by twelve by eight, occupied by a college kid picking up a little cash for the fall. Wirtz,

you see, had been done in ten days.

Four or five days before the feds showed up again, I came to work and found the place quiet. Shut down. Nothing running. Piles of garbage beside the hoppers where the trucks had dumped their loads. And the door to the control room wide open.

I walked -- walked, hell, I ran -- over to ask Wirtz what he was up to. Was he molting or something? But I never got a chance to open my mouth. The control room was empty. Wirtz was gone. In his place, lying on the control room floor beside the window, was a piece of paper.

It was an apology. Wirtz, it seemed, was no scholar. He was a shipwreck. He'd been cruising over town one night when a piece of his engine fell off. It wasn't much, just a little doohickey that looked like a piece of twisted pipe and let him go home in a month instead of a century, so he had been able to land safely and hide his ship. But when he went looking for the doohickey, he couldn't find it. It was moving through the city, his instruments told him, faster than he could move without his ship. He caught up with it when it stopped moving, though, and found it buried under ten feet of garbage and fill, well beyond his solitary reach. So he had found me and set things up so he could search the whole damned landfill if he had to. And he had finally found his doohickey. Now he was on his way home, but he'd be back. And I should have a bottle waiting.

I laughed. I'd been had, conned by a friendly little boozer just my style. I looked forward to seeing him again. In the meantime, I was off my uppers for a change. I'd gotten as much out of it as he had. And I could get a little more, too, if I could just get on the stick and get that control room replaced in time.

It took two days and a lot of overtime to get the new structure built. Two-by-fours and plywood and tarpaper. The same air conditioner. The same controls, though with bigger handles. Windows in the walls in addition to the one in the floor. And it was worth it. When the OSHA guy came back, he was totally confused. Had he been seeing things? I could see the answer in his buddies' faces: he must have, with the story he'd been telling, and he wouldn't have his job all that much longer.

I'd been had, sure, but so had he. I'd passed it on, and that's what makes life bearable.

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