

## HINDSIGHT

Lacey clambered down to the ground from the cabin of the big helicopter. He was the only passenger to alight. He walked quickly away from the machine so as to be clear of the cloud of dust that would be raised by the downdraught when the great vanes started to whirl again. He heard the little jet units at the tip of each blade cough, heard their high whistle increase in intensity. He turned, watched the aircraft lift into the purple, cloudless sky, watched it eclipse the crimson orb of the sun as it flew eastwards.

There was a sense of finality about its departure, a feeling that a river had been crossed, a bridge burned. Lacey smiled wryly at the thought, at the absurdity of it. He knew that he would again be a passenger in the same helicopter later in the day when it made one of its return flights westwards, from Port Dubuque to Carson City. But would it, he wondered, be the same Lacey who boarded her?

He hoped not.

The Earthman looked at the half dozen villagers who had watched the arrival and departure of the aerial coach. They were ugly brutes — but he had seen uglier on his wide travels. Even so, they barely merited humanoid classification. They had two legs, multi-jointed, and two arms that were more than a little tentacular. Between the terminal joints of these limbs there was a roughly cylindrical body, covered, as were the arms and legs, by sparse, grey hair through which shone the pink skin. The head was little more than an extension of the trunk with eyes — three of them, equally spaced — breathing holes, analagous to human nostrils, and below them an almost circular mouth.

Lacey addressed the group of natives, speaking slowly and distinctly. "Do you know," he asked, "where Drinnamon lives?" He repeated the question. The villagers stared at him with their slitted, gleaming eyes but made no reply.

Lacey shrugged, started to walk into the village.

He was a youngish man, this Lacey, and, in spite of his civilian clothing, was obviously a spaceman. His walk was the slouch of one accustomed to sliding magnetised steel soled shoes over a polished steel deck, of one who finds the pull of planetary gravity a little too much of a burden. Yet it was not his bodily weight alone that gave him the stooping posture; it was the burden that he carried in his mind, the burden that could not be measured in terms of physical mass.

Before him was the village, the long, straight street running through its centre. It had all the charm of the primitive, and the charm that is indicative of a generations old, non-technical culture. The houses looked as though they had grown rather than been built, native timber and roughly hewn stone blending with the landscape, merging with the short grass that was brown rather than green, echoing the curvature of the low hills along the horizon, the undulations of the land sea. There were trees — explosions of orange foliage and scarlet blossom — placed, apparently, at random; but

a human landscape gardener would have striven hard and in vain for the same effect.

Lacey walked slowly down the street, scanning the houses to either side of him. He pulled a crumpled sheet of paper from the breast pocket of his shirt, studied it. He looked at the symbols drawn upon it — the ideograph like a gate, the wavy line, the circle—and compared them with the symbols upon some, but not all, of the doors of the houses that he was passing. He thought, I suppose that only those who have goods or services to sell label themselves. I should be ashamed of myself for not knowing. After all, I've been on this world for four years now, and nobody compelled me to stay in the bounds of the Terran colony all the time ...

He saw a door upon which were the symbols for which he was searching. He turned sharply — and then walked with hesitation up the short, flagged path to the doorway. What could a native of this primitive world, a non-human, do that Terran psychologists were unable to do? These people had a culture—he admitted that—but no science. No doubt they were well able to cope with the cure of their own minds — should this ever be needed — but surely the mind of a member of an alien species must be beyond their capabilities. But there comes a time, thought Lacey, when a man will clutch at straws, when straws are all that he has left to clutch.

Decisively he knocked on the door.

He heard sounds of movement inside the house — a slithering rather than the noise of footsteps — and began to regret his having come here. But it was too late now to withdraw.

The door opened.

The being who stood in the aperture was like the villagers whom Lacey had already seen. Like most of the Earthmen on Taranrog he subscribed to the belief that it was impossible to tell one Taranrogian from another. But this one, he felt, was different. He was the possessor of power, and the power in him was an almost visible, almost tangible aura. The grotesque, by Terran standards, body meant nothing. It was the mind that it housed that counted.

"You are Captain Lacey," said Drinnamon in unaccented English, making a statement rather than asking a question.

"Yes. But how did you know I was coming?"

"It does not matter. Come in."

Lacey followed the native into the house. He found himself in a room with curved walls, whose ceiling was a shallow dome, dimly lit by the sunlight that filtered through the gauzy cloth that covered the windows. He saw the low table and the two couches on either side of it, and, garishly incongruous, the bright metal and plastic reclining chair of Terran manufacture. "Be seated," said Drinnamon.

His voice could have been that of a cultured Earthman. Lacey wondered what it was really like, wondered if the hypnotic powers of which he had

heard were responsible for conveying a false impression.

He sat on the reclining chair, pressed the control button until it moulded itself to his long body. He watched the native as he stretched himself on one of the couches, turning on his side so that he faced the Earthman. "Why," asked Drinnamon, "have you come to me?"

"I have heard stories," replied Lacey. "Tallifer — he's one of the Port Engineers — had troubles similar to mine. He said that you cured him."

"He cured himself."

"But . . ."

"I may have helped," said the native.

"Can you help me?"

"Perhaps. What is your trouble?"

Lacey spoke slowly and carefully. He said, "I suppose you know something about our mating habits, our sexual mores. You must do. Our colony on this planet was established over two hundred years ago ..."

"I know," said Drinnamon, "that you people are obsessed with sex."

"Are we? I suppose we are. And sex is like money—the less you have, the more you worry about it. It must be different for you — a brief mating season once a year and not a care in the world between times ..."

"There are," suggested the native, "other things to worry about. Including money. I suppose that you brought my fee? I suppose that you heard that I insist on payment before I commence treatment?"

"I heard that." Lacey's hand went to the pocket in which he kept his wallet. "I've got the hundred Federation dollars with me. But why do you insist on advance payment? Is your treatment dangerous?"

"No. But after it the patient is not always in a position to pay his bills. But continue with your story."

"I was born on Earth," said Lacey. "I had the usual upbringing. I should, perhaps, have become an industrial chemist, but I became a spaceman instead. I was an officer in the Interstellar Transport Commission's ships. I married, on one of my leaves, a girl whom I had known at school. The marriage went off the rails, somehow. It was the long absences from home, perhaps. But I was still married when I met my present wife — she was travelling out to Taranrog in Bela Caronis, of which ship I was Chief Officer. She was recently widowed. We sort of caught each other on the rebound — although, as I've said, my first marriage was yet to break up properly."

"During the stopover at Port Dubuque I made enquiries about the possibility of getting a job here, found that there were vacancies in the ferry rockets running to the mining colonies on the two moons. I couldn't resign from the Commission's service, however, until the ship had returned to Earth. Cutting a long story short, I almost didn't do it. It was a wrench. I regarded

the Commission as a sort of father substitute, I suppose, and its ships as a mother substitute. And, much as I loved Claire, I still loved my first wife and my two children. But I did it — although it was a hellish time for everybody, including Claire. The Commission shouted me a free passage back out here—and when I arrived, at last, Claire received me with something less than wild enthusiasm.

"That was when the trouble started."

"What trouble?"

"Man-woman relationship," said Lacey, "is essentially a matter of tension. Tension builds up between them, and is discharged. It builds up again — and once again is discharged. Put it this way; I could no longer do the right thing to discharge the tension . . . I still can't.

"There are quite a number of Terran doctors in Carson City, including specialists in various branches of psychology. I must have seen every psychoanalyst and psychiatrist on the whole damned planet. I could talk to you for hours about the Oedipus Complex, symbolic castration and all the rest of it. It's all been very interesting, and it's all cost money, and it's got me — us, rather — precisely nowhere."

"Is it essential that you and the woman relieve the tension, as you put it, with each other?"

"It's better that way. But I couldn't release the tension with anybody, anybody at all. I'm dead.

"Anyhow, the last man I went to was more helpful than any of the others. He tried a total recall technique, pumped me full of some damned drug that stimulated the memory centre of the brain. While I was under its influence I was supposed to jot down all the thoughts that passed through my mind. I did so. And now the trouble is this. He's very heavily booked up and just can't fit my appointments in. The ferry rockets, as you may know, don't run to anything like a regular schedule and it's quite impossible for me to say where I shall be in even as short a time as a week from now."

"You read your own notes?"

"Of course. Claire and I went through them carefully. We think we've found the trouble."

"Tell me."

"Well, it seems to stem from a deep seated distrust of the female sex. It was the way in which Claire received me when I came out here for good that triggered things. It was the proof that she, whom I had idolised, was just the same as other women — and, as such, not to be trusted with any part of me.

"I told you, I think, that I should have been an industrial chemist. Chemistry was always my pet subject at school. I was always top. Well, there was a very important end of term examination. Those who passed would move to a higher form and from there to the University, those who

failed would stay where they were for another year and lose their chance of a University education.

"I had quite a few weak subjects, but hoped that my high marks in the strong ones, including chemistry, would pull me through. They always had done in the past.

"The chemistry instructor was a woman. She was rather good looking in a severe kind of way. She was, in fact, the type of woman for whom I always fall, even now. And I was her blue eyed boy, her little woolly lamb. I was the prize student."

Lacey paused, then asked, "I suppose you're familiar with Terran examination procedure?"

"Vaguely. I have read of these things. I have heard that cheating, rather than being regarded as laudable ingenuity, is frowned upon."

"Too right it is. And so is talking during an examination.

"Anyhow, it was the practical chemistry examination in which I came to grief. There was the school lab, and there were all the candidates, including myself, two to a bench. There was Miss Maybury presiding, whacking out to each of us the jars or dishes or bottles of organic compounds that we were supposed to analyse within the time limit.

"I was just about to start when my benchmate, a dim sort of clot called Harry Wilkins, asked me in a whisper as he looked at the dish of pink goo that he had drawn, 'What do I do with this?' I replied, also in a whisper, 'Shut up, you bloody fool!' Miss Maybury, not in a whisper, demanded, 'Lacey, were you talking?' I, having mistaken ideas about schoolboy honour and thinking Wilkins would confess, said, 'Yes, Miss Maybu."What were you saying?" she asked. 'I'd rather not say,' I told her. She said, 'You know the rules.'

"Yes. I knew the rules. I knew that the penalty for talking during an examination was the forfeiture of all marks. But I knew, too, that I was the prize student and believed that Miss Maybury would not be so stupid as to think that I, of all people, would have to ask advice —and from a dimwit like Wilkins! — about a simple job of analysis.

"I waited until the results were published. As usual, Lacey's name led all the rest. But against it was a note to the effect that all marks had been forfeited and that my actual score was zero.

"Needless to say, I didn't pass up into the next form. The prospects of a solid year spent marking time were grim. And then there was another examination — a competitive one for entry into the Space Academy. They were rather short of spacemen just then. I took it, and just scraped in."

"And so," said Drinnamon, "you are here. Are you sorry to be here?"

"No," admitted Lacey. "No. I've the sort of home, the sort of wife I've always wanted. If only it weren't for that ... that thing that comes between us ... This is wasted on you, I know — but an old Terran philosopher once

said that marriage is more than four bare legs in bed. It is. My first marriage was satisfactory enough from the sexual viewpoint. But marriage without physical release for man and wife is ... is ..." He groped for words, then concluded the sentence with, "pretty bloody."

"I think I see," said the native. "I have made a study of you people ever since the first Survey Ship landed here. It has been a fascinating study, and because I have made it you Earthmen have contributed satisfactorily to my income. I am able to buy your books and your recordings, in spite of the high freight rates. And the more I read, and the more of your music I listen to, the better I understand you.

"This, then, is my analysis. That long-ago incident planted the seeds of a deep hostility towards and deep distrust of the female sex ..."

"The last psychiatrist I went to has already told me that."

"Please let me finish. The cure, I think, will be for you to act out the incident again. But, before you do so, I must have my fee."

"Is it dangerous?" demanded the spaceman. "Not that I give a damn if it is — but I'd just like to know before we start."

"No. It is not dangerous. Will you go through with it?"

"Yes."

Lacey pulled the wallet from his pocket, counted out the notes. The native took them in his hand, the seemingly boneless fingers closing around them like writhing worms. He got up from his couch, walked from the room. When he returned he was carrying a box and a cigarette lighter of Terran manufacture.

He opened the box, offered it to Lacey. The Earthman stared at the row of brown cylinders inside it.

"Cigars?" he demanded.

"I suppose that you could call them that — but the leaf is not tobacco."

"What, then?"

"You must allow us some secrets. Take one. A light? Now — inhale."

Lacey inhaled, feeling the oily, oversweet smoke sliding down his windpipe, into his lungs. He relaxed in the long chair, looking up at Drinnamon, who was standing beside him. He noticed something that, until now, had escaped his observation; the native was wearing a large and ornate wristwatch. He tried to focus his eyes, tried hard to determine whether or not the second hand was actually running counter-clockwise.

He set the dish of white powder down on the stained surface of the laboratory bench. Solubility, he thought. The first step. But I have to wait until Miss Maybury gives the go ahead . . . He looked up to where the instructor was seated on her dais, handing out jars and dishes to the other candidates. He thought, as he watched her thin, handsome face, I wish

that I were older or that she were younger . . .

Harry Wilkins came with the dish of pink goo that he had been given, set it down with a faint clatter on his half of the bench. He glared at it as though it wore a deadly enemy, scowling ferociously. A big, dumb ox, thought Lacey contemptuously, face to face with modern science . . .

All the students were back at their benches. Miss Maybury raised a slim wrist, looked at her watch. She said, in her clear voice, "You may begin.

The rest of her words were drowned by a screaming roar from outside, a sound that rose rapidly to crescendo and as rapidly diminished. The Lunar Mail, thought Lacey. But who'd be a spaceman, anyhow? And then, before his mind's eye, there was the blackness of Outer Space, a blackness in which the sparse stars were queerly distorted whorls of glimmering light, and in his ears was the shrill, high whining of the ever-precessing gyroscopes of the Interstellar Drive. But how do I know? he asked himself, with the beginnings of panic. How do I know what it's like?

Wilkins was whispering something. Lacey heard it vaguely, paid no attention, was still engrossed with the vision of Deep Space. Wilkins repeated his question in a louder voice. "What do I do with this?" "Wilkins," asked Miss Maybury severely, "were you talking?"

"No Miss Maybury."

"Not only are you a cheat," she told him, "but you are also a liar. Leave the laboratory at once, and report to the Headmaster."

"But, Miss Maybury ..."

"Leave the laboratory, I said."

I'd hate to be on the wrong side of her, thought Lacey. But the bloody fool. asked for it. Now, let me see . . . Solubility first ...

Lacey clambered down to the ground from the cabin of the big helicopter, joining there the other passengers, the tourists from the cruise liner. He looked up at purple, cloudless sky, at the great, crimson orb of the sun. So familiar, he thought. So familiar—but it can't be. This voyage is the first time I've been off Earth, unless you count my spell in the Lunar City labs. And these natives, with three eyes and no necks, and those solid but graceful houses of timber and stone ...

What is the name for this sort of thing? Deja vu or something . . . all been explained — a time lag between the two halves of the brain, isn't it? But I'm a chemist, not a psychologist ...

And I suppose that it was deja vu last night . . . That girl in the cafe in Carson City . . . I could have sworn I'd seen her before, and I think that she half recognised me ... If Molly hadn't been with me, and if her husband hadn't been with her, we could have gotten together over a couple or three drinks and compared notes ...

"William!" His wife's sharp voice broke into his thoughts. "Don't stand there woolgathering! Don't you want to see the village?"

"All right," he said vaguely. "All right. I'll be along ..."

"I'm not waiting for you."

"Don't" he muttered.

He saw the knot of tourists, his wife among them, clustered around the guide, marching purposefully on the village. He shrugged his shoulders, decided that he might as well follow. He made no great effort to catch up.

Lacey walked slowly down the street, scanning the houses — but why, he did not know—to either side of him. The doors of some of them, he noticed, were marked with symbols. He thought, I suppose that only those who have goods or services to sell label themselves. I wonder what those goods and services are? And I wonder what the material of the signs is ... Could be metal, could be plastic.

He walked slowly up a short, flagged path to a doorway. He looked with interest at the symbols on the door—an ideograph like a gate, a wavy line, a circle. Damn it all, he thought. I must see a head shrinker. I've had nothing but *deja vu* since we stepped ashore here. But I wish I knew where I've seen that girl before. I wish I knew that girl ...

He heard sounds of movement inside the house — a slithering rather than the noise of footsteps — and began to regret the curiosity that had brought him here. The occupant of the dwelling would have every right to be hostile.

The door opened.

The being who stood in the aperture was like the villagers whom Lacey had already seen. Like most Earthmen, he subscribed to the belief that it was impossible to tell one native of a foreign planet from another. But this one, he felt, was different. He was the possessor of power, and the power in him was an almost visible, almost tangible aura. The grotesque, by Terran standards, body meant nothing. It was the mind that it housed that counted.

"You are Captain Lacey," said the native in unaccented English, making a statement rather than asking a question.

"Doctor Lacey," corrected the Earthman. "But how did you know my name?"

"It does not matter. Come in."

Lacey followed the native into the house. He found himself in a room with curved walls, whose ceiling was a shallow dome, dimly lit by the sunlight that filtered through the gauzy cloth that covered the window. He saw the low table and the two couches on either side of it and, garishly incongruous, the bright metal and plastic reclining chair of Terran manufacture.

"Be seated," said the native.

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vaguely heard were responsible for conveying a false impression.

He sat on the reclining chair, pressed the control button until it moulded itself to his long body. He watched the native as he stretched himself on one of the couches, turning on his side so that he faced the Earthman.

"Why," asked his host, "have you come to me?"

"I don't know, admitted Lacey. "I was wondering if the signs on some of the doors of the village indicated vendors of goods or services ..."

"They do."

"Then what do you sell?" asked Lacey abruptly.

"I suppose," replied the other, "that you could call me a psychiatrist. Do you need my services?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I do. I'll tell you. This holiday cruise is my first time off Earth—and yet ever since the Deep Space voyage commenced I've had the damnedest feeling of I've been-here-before. But it wasn't really strong until we landed on this world. What brought it to a head, I think, was that girl last night ..."

"What girl was that?"

"I don't know. I wish I did know. I heard her husband call her Claire. Damn it all, I'm married, and I've no right to go lusting after other men's wives, but, ... I tell you, I knew her, better than I know my own wife, and she knew me. There's more to it than this business of a time lag between the two halves of the brain. But that's what our own psychiatrists will tell me if I go to them."

"Perhaps I can help you," said the native. "Perhaps I can help you to help yourself."

"What is your fee?" demanded Lacey, hating himself for his boorishness.

"There is no fee, I have already been paid. Look at it this way. There was another case, and the patient paid in advance. The course of treatment was uncompleted. His fee will pay for your treatment."

The native got up from his couch, walked from the room. When he returned he was carrying a box and a cigarette lighter of Terran manufacture. He opened the box, offered it to Lacey. The Earthman stared at the row of brown cylinders inside it.

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"I suppose that you could call them that — but the leaf is not tobacco."

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"You must allow us some secrets. Take one. A light? Now — inhale."

Lacey inhaled, heeling the oily, oversweet smoke sliding down his windpipe, into his lungs, thinking that he, of all people, should have known better

than to have been caught up in this folly. Nevertheless, he relaxed in the long chair, looking up at the other, who was standing beside him. He noticed something that, until now, had escaped his observation; the native was wearing a large and ornate wristwatch. He tried to focus his eyes, tried hard to determine whether or not the second hand was actually running counter-clockwise.

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The rest of her words were drowned by a screaming roar from outside, a sound that rose rapidly to crescendo and as rapidly diminished. The Lunar Mail, thought Lacey. But that's only puddle jumping these days and then, before his mind's eye, there was the blackness of Outer Space, a blackness in which the sparse stars were queerly distorted whorls of glimmering light, and in his ears was the shrill, high whining of the ever-precising gyroscopes of the Interstellar Drive. But how do I know what it's like? he asked himself.

Wilkins was whispering something, Lacey dismissed the vision of Deep Space from his mind, heard, "What do I do with this?"

He replied, "Shut up, you bloody fool!"

"Lacey," asked Miss Maybury, "were you talking?"

"Yes," replied Lacey firmly.