

THREE BLIND MICE

UNDER the helicopter, disturbed by the hurricane downblast, the lake was lashed to white foam. The curving dark shape of a bass leaped and vanished. A sailboat tacked and made toward the farther shore. In Barton's mind there flamed for an instant a ravaging madness of hunger and then an intensity or pure ecstasy, as his thought probed down into the depths of the waters and made contact with some form of life in which there was instinct, but no reason-only the raging avidity of life-lust that, after fifteen years, was so familiar to him now. There had been no need for that purely automatic mental

probing. In these calm American waters one found no sharks, no crocodiles, no poisonous sea snakes. It was habit alone, the trained alertness that had helped to make David Barton expert in his field, one of the few vocations available to the minority of telepathic Baldies. And after six months in Africa, what he wanted most of all was not-contact-but something to calm his psychic tension. In the jungle a Baldy can find a communion with nature that out-Thoreau's Thoreau, but at a cost. Beneath that pagan spirit of the primeval beats the urgent pulse of strong instinct: self-preservation almost without reason. Only in the paintings of Rousseau that had survived the Blowup had Barton felt the same vivid, almost insane passion for life.

Where men are weary of green wine, And sick of crimson seas-

Well, he was back now, not far from his grandfather's birthplace near Chicago, and he could rest for a while.

His hands moved over the complicated controls, sending the copter smoothly up, as though by that action he could escape what was inescapable. You lived, for the most part, on the earth, and if you happened to be a telepath, well, there were of course advantages as well as disadvantages. Nobody lynched Baldies any more, of course. Fairly secure, almost accepted, in their cautious self-effacement-italicized by the wigs they invariably wore-they could find jobs and a pattern for living. Specialized jobs, naturally, which must never involve too much power or profit. Jobs in which you turned your specialized talent to the betterment of the social unit. Barton was a naturalist, a collector of big and little game. And that had been his salvation.

Years ago, he remembered, there had been a conference, his parents, and a few other Baldies, drawn together by the deep, sympathetic friendliness and understanding that always had welded telepaths. He could still vividly recall the troubled patterns of thought that had ebbed and flowed in the room, more clearly than the way their faces had looked. Danger, and a shadow, and a desire to help.

... Outlet for his energy ... no scholar ... misfit unless-

-find the right job-

He could not remember the words, only the absolute meanings, with their significant colorations and shadings of implication, those and the-the name-symbol by which the others

thought of him. To them he was not Dave Barton. Their thought-references to him personally, while different to each mind, had always the kernel of individual meaning that belonged to him alone, of all the people in the world. The name that a candle flame might have, secret and unuttered. His alone.

And because of this, and because each Baldy must survive and adjust, for the ultimate good of the racial mutation, they had found the answer. It was all right for non-Baldies to be reasonably swashbuckling; everyone wore daggers and duelled nowadays. But the telepaths themselves lived on borrowed time. They existed only because of the good will they had created. That good will had to be maintained, and it could not be done by arousing antagonism. No one could be jealous of a mild-mannered, studious semantic expert, but a d'Artagnan could be envied-and would be. An outlet, then, for the boy's curiously mixed inheritance, his blood from pioneering, trail-blazing ancestors mixed with the cautious Baldy strain.

So they had found the answer, and Barton did his pioneering in the jungles, matching his keen mind against the brute savagery of tiger and python. Had that solution not been reached, Barton might not have been alive now. For the non-Baldies were still wary, still intolerant.

Yet he was no extrovert; he could not be. Inevitably he grew tired of the ceaseless symphony of thought that rolled like a living tide even in the deserts and the seas. Erecting a mental barrier wasn't enough; behind that protective wall beat the torrents of thought, and they were sensed. Only in the upper air was there escape for a while.

The plane lifted, rocking a little in the wind. Beneath Barton the lake was dime-sized and dime-colored. Around its borders grew, more thickly than it had fifty years before, the Limberlost forests, a swampy wilderness where the small roving bands of malcontents migrated constantly, unable to adjust to communal life in the hundreds of thousands of villages that dotted America, and afraid to unite. They were antisocial, and probably would simply die out eventually.

The lake became a pinpoint and vanished. A freighter copter, with its string of gliders, whipped westward below, laden perhaps with cod from the Great Banks towns, or with wine grapes from the New England vineyards. Names had not changed much as the country changed. The heritage of lan-

guage was too strong for that. But there were no towns named New York, or Chicago, or San Francisco; there was a psychological taboo there, the familiar fugue that took the form of never naming one of the new, small, semi-specializing villages after the cancerous areas of desolation once called New Orleans or Denver. From American history, thence world history, the names came-Modoc and Lafitte, Lincoln, Roxy, Potomac, Mowhasset, American Gun, and Conestoga. Lafitte, on the Gulf of Mexico, shipped the delicate-fleshed porgie and pompano to Lincoln and Roxy, in the agricultural belt; American Gun turned out farm equipment, and Conestoga, from which Barton had just come, was in mining land. It also had a temperate-zone zoo, one of the many that Barton serviced from Puget to Florida End.

He closed his eyes. Baldies by necessity were socially conscious, and when

the world lay spread out maplike below, it was difficult not to visualize it speckled with the heads of colored pins; very many black ones, and a very few white ones. Non-Baldies and Baldies. There was something to be said for intelligence, after all. In the jungle, a monkey with a red flannel coat would be torn to pieces by its undressed colleagues.

The blue, empty wastes of air were all about Barton now; the torrents of world-thought had lessened to a faint, nearly imperceptible beat. He closed the cabin, turned on air and heat controls, and let the copter rise. He lay back in the cushioned seat, a distant alertness ready to galvanize his hands into action if the copter should go into one of its unpredictable tantrums. Meanwhile he rested, alone, in a complete silence and vacancy.

His mind was washed clean. Pure calm, a sort of Nirvana, soothed him. Far below the turbulent world sent vibrations jangling through subetheric levels, but few radiations reached this height, and those did not disturb Barton. His eyes shut, utterly relaxed, he looked like someone who had, for a while, forgotten to live.

It was the panacea for abnormally sensitive minds. At first glance, few took Barton for a Baldy; he wore his brown wig close-cropped, and his years in the jungle had made him almost unhealthily thin. Baldies, naturally self-barred from competitive athletics except among themselves, were apt to grow soft, but Barton was not soft. Outguessing predators had kept him in good trim. Now he relaxed, high above the

earth, as hundreds of other Baldies were resting their taxed minds in the blue calm of the upper air.

Once he opened his eyes and looked up through the transparent ceiling panel. The sky was quite dark, and a few stars were visible. He lay there for a while, simply watching. Baldies, he thought, will be the first to develop interplanetary travel. Out there are clean new worlds, and a new race needs a new world.

But it could wait. It had taken a long time for Barton to realize that his race, not himself, was important. Not until that knowledge came to a Baldy was he really mature. Until then, he was always a possible potential danger. Now, though, Barton was oriented, and had found, like most Baldies, a compromise between self and race. And it involved, chiefly, development of the social instinct and diplomacy.

Several hours had gone past quickly. Barton found a packet of food concentrate in a compartment, grimaced at the brown capsules, and stuffed them back in their place. No. While he was back in America, he wanted the luxuries of civilization. In Africa he had eaten enough concentrate to blast his taste buds. That was because certain game was psychically repugnant to him, after contact with the animal minds. He was not a vegetarian; he could rationalize most of the feeling away, but-for example-he could certainly never eat monkey.

But he could eat catfish, and anticipated the crisp flakiness of white, firm flesh between his teeth. This 'was good cat country. There was a restaurant in downtown Conestoga that Barton knew, and he headed the helicopter

toward the airfield nearest to it, circling the village itself to avoid raising dust storms by his low altitude.

He felt refreshed, ready to take his place in the world again. There were, as far as he knew, no Baldies living in Conestoga, and it was with surprise-pleasant surprise-that he felt a thought probe into his mind. It held question.

It was a woman's thought, and she did not know him. That he could tell by the superficialities of the identity-queries. It was like the outspread fingers of a hand reaching out gently in search of another hand that would interlock with its grip. But the searcher's cognizance of Barton as a personality was lacking. No, she did not know him. She knew of him, probably through-Denham? Courtney? He seemed

to recognize the personality-keys of Denham and Courtney sifted through her query.

He answered her question. Available. Here. A courteous, friendly greeting, implying-you are one of Us; a willing desire to help.

Her name, Sue Connaught, with its curious shadings of how Sue Connaught realized her own identity-an indescribable key thought that could never afterwards be mistaken. The mental essence of pure ego.

She was a biologist, she lived in Alamo, she was afraid-

Let me help.

f" (Vital urgency Must see you) -f Danger, eyes watching secretly

[_ (Beasts around-Sue Connaught Danger-now?

The complicated thought meshed and interlocked as he increased his pace.

C ("I" of all the world knowing- Utterly alone)