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Author: George O. Smith

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START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK STOP LOOK AND DIG

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by George O. Smith

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[pg 051]

Stop Look and Dig

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

The enlightened days of mental telepathy and ESP should have made the world a better place, But the minute the Rhine Institute opened up, all the crooks decided it was time to go collegiate!

Someone behind me in the dark was toting a needle-ray. The impression came through so strong that I could almost read the filed-off serial number of the thing, but the guy himself I couldn't dig at all. I stopped to look back but the only sign of life I could see was the fast flick of taxicab lights as they

crossed an intersection about a half mile back. I stepped into a doorway so that I could think and stay out of the line of fire at the same time.

The impression of the needle-ray did not get any stronger, and that tipped me off. The bird was following me. He was no peace-loving citizen because honest men do not cart weapons with the serial numbers filed off. Therefore the character tailing me was a hot papa with a burner charge labelled "Steve Hammond" in his needler.

I concentrated, but the only impression I could get would have specified ninety-eight men[pg 052] out of a hundred anywhere. He was shorter than my six-feet-two and lighter than my one-ninety. I could guess that he was better looking. I'd had my features arranged by a blocked drop kick the year before the National Football League ruled the Rhine Institute out because of our use of mentals and perceptives. I gave up trying--I wanted details and not an overall picture of a hotbird carrying a burner.

I wondered if I could make a run for it.

I let my sense of perception dig the street ahead, casing every bump and irregularity. I passed places where I could zig out to take cover in front of telephone poles, and other places where I could zag in to take cover beyond front steps and the like. I let my perception run up the block and by the time I got to the end of my range, I knew that block just as well as if I'd made a practise run in the daytime.

At this point I got a shock. The hot papa was coming up the sidewalk hell bent for destruction. He was a mental sensitive, and he had been following my thoughts while my sense of perception made its trial run up the street. He was running like the devil to catch up with my mind and burn it down per schedule. It must have come as quite a shock to him when he realized that while the mind he was reading was running like hell up the street, the hard old body was standing in the doorway waiting for him.

I dove out of my hiding place as he came close. I wanted to tackle him hard and ask some pointed questions. He saw me as I saw him skidding to an unbalanced stop, and there was the dull glint of metal in his right hand. His needle-ray came swinging up and I went for my armpit. I found time to curse my own stupidity for not having hardware in my own fist at the moment. But then I had my rod in my fist. I felt the hot scorch of the needle going off just over my shoulder, and then came the godawful racket of my ancient forty-five. The big slug caught him high in the belly and tossed him back. It folded him over and dropped him in the gutter while the echoes of my cannon were still racketing back and forth up and down the quiet street.

I had just enough time to dig his wallet, pockets, and billfold before the whole neighborhood was up and out. Sirens howled in the distance and from above I could hear the thin wail of a jetcopter. Someone opened a window and called: "What's going on out there? Cut it out!"

[pg 053]



"Tea party," I called back. "Go invite the cops, Tommy."

The window slammed down again. He didn't have to invite the law. It arrived in three ground cruisers and two jetcopter emergency squads that came closing in like a collapsing balloon.

The leader of the squadron was a Lieutenant Williamson whom I'd never met before. But he knew all about me before the 'copter hit the ground. I could almost feel his sense of perception frisking me from the skin outward, going through my wallet and inspecting the Private Operator's license and my Weapon-Permit. I found out later that Williamson was a Rhine Scholar with a Bachelor's Degree in Perception, which put him head and shoulders over me. He came to the point at once.

"Any ideas about this, Hammond?"

I shook my head. "Nope," I replied. He looked at one of his men.

The other man nodded. "He's levelling," he said.

"Now look, Hammond," said the lieutenant pointedly, "You're clean and we know it. But hot papas don't go out for fun. Why was he trying to burn you?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm as blank as any perceptive when it comes to reading minds. I was hoping to collect him whole enough to ask questions, but he forced my hand." I looked to where some of the clean-up squad were tucking the corpse into a basket. "It was one of the few times I'd have happily swapped my perception for the ability to read a mind."

The lieutenant nodded unhappily. "Mind telling me why you were wandering around in this neighborhood? You don't belong here, you know."

"I was doing the job that most private eyes do. I was tailing a gent who was playing games off the reservation."

"You've gone into this guy's wallet, of course?"

I nodded. "Sure. He *was* Peter Rambaugh, age thirty, and----"

"Don't bother. I know the rest. I can add only one item that you may not know. Rambaugh was a paid hotboy, suspected of playing with Scarmann's mob."

"I've had no dealings with Scarmann, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant nodded absently. It seemed to be a habit with him, probably to cover up his thinking-time. Finally he said, "Hammond, you're clean. As soon as I identified you I took a dig of your folder at headquarters. You're a bit rough and fast on that prehistoric cannon of yours, but----"

"You mean you can dig a[pg 055] folder at central files all the way from here?"

"I did."

Here was a *real* esper for you. I've got a range of about two blocks for good, solid, permanent things like buildings and street-car tracks, but unfamiliar things get foggy at about a half a block. I can dig lethal machinery coming in my direction for about a block and a half because I'm a bit sensitive about such things. I looked at Lieutenant Williamson and said, "With a range like yours, how come there's any crime in this town at all?"

He shook his head slowly. "Crime doesn't out until it's committed," he said. "You'll remember how fast we got here after you pulled the trigger. But you're clean, Hammond. Just come to the inquest and tell all."

"I can go?"

"You can go. But just to keep you out of any more trouble, I'll have one of the jetcopters drop you off at home. Mind?"

"Nope. But isn't that more than the police are used to doing?"

He eyed me amusedly. "If I were a mental," he said, "I could read your mind and know that you were forming the notion of calling on Scarmann and asking him what-for. But since I'm only a mind-blank esper, all I can do is to fall back on experience and guesswork. Do I make myself clear?"

Lieutenant Williamson's guess-work and experience were as good as mental sensitivity, but I didn't think it wise to admit that I had been considering just exactly how to get to Scarmann. I was quickly and firmly convoyed home in a jetcopter but once I saw them take off I walked out of the apartment again.

I had more or less tacitly agreed not to go looking for Scarmann, but I had not mentioned taking a dig at the apartment of the dear departed, Peter Rambaugh.

Rambaugh's place was uptown and the front door was protected by an eight tumbler cylinder job that would have taxed the best of esper lockpicks. But there was a service entrance in back that was not locked and I took it. The elevator was a self-service job, and Rambaugh's back door was locked on a snaplatch that a playful kitten could have opened. I dug the place for a few minutes and found it clean, so I went in and took a more careful look.

The desk was not particularly interesting. Just papers and letters and unpaid bills. The dresser in the bedroom was the same, excepting for the bottom drawer. That was filled with a fine collection of needle-rays and stunguns[pg 056] and one big force blaster that could blow a hole in a brick wall. None of them had their serial numbers intact.

But behind a reproduction of a Gainsborough painting was a wall safe that must have been built before Rhine Institute discovered the key to man's latent abilities. Inside of this tin can was a collection of photographs that must have brought Rambaugh a nice sum in the months when the murder business went slack. I couldn't quite dig them clear because I didn't know any of the people involved, and I didn't try too hard because there were some letters and notes that might lead me into the answer to why Rambaugh

was hotburning for me.

I fiddled with the dial for about fifteen minutes, watching the tumblers and the little wheels go around. Then it went click and I turned the handle and opened the door. I was standing there with both hands deep in Rambaugh's safe when I heard a noise behind me.

I whirled and slid aside all in one motion and my hand streaked for my armpit and came out with the forty five. It was a woman and she was carrying nothing more lethal than the fountain pen in her purse. She blanched when she saw my forty-five swinging towards her middle, but she took a deep breath when I halted it in midair.

"I didn't mean to startle you," she apologized.

"Startle, hell!" I blurted. "You scared me out of my shoes."

I dug her purse. Beside the usual female junk she had a wallet containing a couple of charge-account plates, a driver's license, and a hospital card, all made out to Miss Martha Franklin. Miss Franklin was about twenty-four, and she was a strawberry blonde with the pale skin and blue eyes that goes with the hair. I gathered that she didn't belong there any more than I did.

"I don't, Mr. Hammond," she said.

So Martha Franklin was a mental sensitive.

"I am," she told me. "That's how I came to be here."

"I'm esper. You'll have to explain in words of one syllable because I can't read you."

"I was not far away when you cut loose with that field-piece of yours," she said flatly. "So I read your intention to come here. I've been following you at mental range ever since."

"Why?"

"Because there is something in that safe I want very much."

I looked at her again. She did not look the type to get into awkward[pg 057] situations. She colored slightly and said, "One indiscretion doesn't make a tramp, Mr. Hammond."

I nodded. "Want it intact or burned?" I asked.

"Burned, please," she said, smiling weakly at me for my intention. I smiled back.

On my way to Rambaugh's bedroom I dug the rest of the thug's safe but there wasn't anything there that would give me an inkling of why he was gunning for me. I came back with one of his needle-rays and burned the contents of the safe to a black char. I stirred up the ashes with the nose of the needier and

then left it in the safe after wiping it clean on my handkerchief.

"Thank you, Mr. Hammond," she said quietly. "Maybe I can answer your question. Rambaugh was probably after you because of me."

"Huh?"

"I've been paying Rambaugh blackmail for about four years. This morning I decided to stop it, and looked your name up in the telephone book. Rambaugh must have read me do it."

"Ever think of the police?" I suggested.

"Of course. But that is just as bad as not paying off. You end up all over the front pages anyway. You know that."

"There's a lot of argument on both sides," I supposed. "But let's finish this one over a bar. We're crowding our luck here. In the eyes of the law we're just a couple of nasty break-ins."

"Yes," she said simply.

We left Rambaugh's apartment together and I handed Martha into my car and took off.

It struck me as we were driving that mental sensitivity was a good thing in spite of its limitations. A woman without mental training might have every right to object to visiting a bachelor apartment at two o'clock in the morning. But I had no firm plans for playing up to Martha Franklin; I really wanted to talk this mess out and get it squared away. This she could read, so I was saved the almost-impossible task of trying to convince an attractive woman that I really had no designs upon her beautiful white body. I was not at all cold to the idea, but Martha did not seem to be the pushover type.

"Thank you, Steve," she said.

"Thanks for nothing," I told her with a short laugh. "Them's my sentiments."

"I like your sentiments. That's why I'm here, and maybe we can get our heads together and figure something out."

I nodded and went back to my driving, feeling pretty good now.

[pg 058]

A man does not dig his own apartment. He expects to find it the way he left it. He digs in the mailbox on his way towards it, and he may dig in his refrigerator to see whether he should stop for beer or whatever else, because these things save steps. But nobody really expects to find trouble in his own home, especially when he is coming in at three o'clock in the morning with a good looking woman.

They were smart enough to come with nothing deadly in their hands. So I had no warning until they

stepped out from either side of my front door and lifted me into my living room by the elbows. They hurled me into an easy chair with a crash. When I stopped bouncing, one of the gorillas was standing in front of me, about as tall as Washington Monument as seen from the sidewalk in front. He was looking at my forty-five with careful curiosity.

"What gives?" I demanded.

The crumb in front of me leaned down and gave me a back-and-forth that yanked my head around. I didn't say anything, but I thought how I'd like to meet the buzzard in a dark alley with my gun in my fist.

Martha said, "They're friends of Rambaugh, Steve. And they're a little afraid of that prehistoric cannon you carry."

The bird in front of Martha gave her a one-two across the face. That was enough for me. I came up out of my chair, lifting my fist from the floor and putting my back and thigh muscles behind it. It should have taken his head off, but all he did was grunt, stagger back, dig his heels in, and then come back at me with his head down. I chopped at the bridge of his nose but missed and almost broke my hand on his hard skull. Then the other guy came charging in and I flung out a side-chop with my other hand and caught him on the wrist.

But Rhine training can't do away with the old fact that two big tough men can wipe the floor with one big tough man. I didn't even take long enough to muss up my furniture.

I had the satisfaction of mashing a nose and cracking my hand against a skull again before the lights went out. When I came back from Mars, I was sitting on a kitchen chair facing a corner. My wrists and ankles were taped to the arms and legs of the chair.

I dug around. They had Martha taped to another chair in the opposite corner, and the two gorillas were standing in the middle of the room, obviously trying to think.

So was I. There was something[pg 059] that smelled about this mess. Peter Rambaugh was a mental, and he should have been sensitive enough to keep his take low enough so that it wouldn't drive Martha into thinking up ways and means of getting rid of him. Even so, he shouldn't have been gunning for me, unless there was a lot more to this than I could dig.

"What gives?" I asked sourly.

There was no answer. The thug with my forty-five took out the clip and removed a couple of slugs.

He went into the kitchen and found my pliers and came back teasing one of the slugs out of its casing. The other bird lit a cigarette.

The bird with the cartridge poured the powder from the shell into the palm of my hand. I knew what was coming but I couldn't wiggle my fingers much, let alone turn my hand over to dump out the stuff. The other guy planted the end of the cigarette between my middle fingers and I had to squeeze hard to keep the hot end up. My fingers began to ache almost immediately, and I was beginning to imagine the flash of

flame and the fierce wave of pain that would strike when my tired hand lost its pep and let the cigarette fall into that little mound of powder.

"Stop it," said Martha. "Stop it!"

"What do they want?" I gritted.

"They won't think it," she cried.

The bright red on the end of the cigarette grayed with ash and I began to wonder how long it would be before a fleck of hot ash would fall. How long it would take for the ash to grow long and top-heavy and then to fall into the powder. And whether or not the ash would be hot enough to touch it off. I struggled to keep my hands steady, but they were trembling. I felt the cigarette slip a bit and clamped down tight again with my aching fingers.

Martha pleaded again: "Stop it! Let us know what you want and we'll do it."

"Anything," I promised rashly.

Even if I managed to hold that deadly fuse tight, it would eventually burn down to the bitter end. Then there would be a flash, and I'd probably never hold my hand around a gun butt again. I'd have to go looking for this pair of lice with my gun in my left. If they didn't try the same trick on my other hand. I tried to shut my mind on that notion but it was no use. It slipped. But the chances were that this pair of close-mouthed[pg 060] hotboys had considered that idea before.

"Can you dig 'em Martha?"

"Yes, but not deep enough. They're both concentrating on that cigarette and making mental bets when it will--"

Her voice trailed off. A wisp of ash had dropped and my mental howl must have been loud enough to scorch their minds. It was enough to stop Martha, at any rate. But the wisp of ash was cold and nothing happened except my spine got coldly wet and sweat ran down my face and into my mouth. The palm of my hand was sweating too, but not enough to wet the little pile of powder.

"Look," I said in a voice that sounded like a nutmeg grater, "Rambaugh was a louse and he tried to kill me first. If it's revenge you want--why not let's talk it over?"

"They don't care what you did to Rambaugh," said Martha.

"They didn't come here to practice torture," I snapped. "They want something big. And the only guy I know mixed up with Peter Rambaugh is Scarmann, himself."

"Scarmann?" blurted Martha.

Scarmann was a big shot who lived in a palace about as lush as the Taj Mahal, in the middle of a fenced-in property big enough to keep him out of the mental range of most peepers. Scarmann was about as big a louse as they came but nobody could put a finger on him because he managed to keep himself as clean as a raygunned needle. I was expecting a clip on the skull for thinking the things I was thinking about Scarmann, but it did not come. These guys were used to having people think violence at their boss. I thought a little harder. Maybe if I made 'em mad enough one of them would belt me on the noggin and put me out, and then I'd be cold when that cigarette fell into the gunpowder and ruined my hand.

I made myself a firm, solid promise that if, as, and when I got out of this fix I would find Scarmann, shove the nose of my automatic down his throat through his front teeth and empty the clip out through the top of his head.

Then the hotboy behind me lifted the cigarette from my fingers very gently and squibbed it out in the ashtray, and I got the pitch.

This is the way it is done in these enlightened days. Rhine Institute and the special talents that Rhine developed should and could have made the world a better, brighter place to live in. But I've heard it said and had it proved that the minute someone[pg 061] comes up with something good, there are a lot of buzzards who turn it bad and make it a foul, rotten medium for their lousy way of life.

No, in these days of mental telepathy and extra sensory perception, crumbs do not erase other crumbs. They just grab some citizen and put him in a box until he is ready to do their dirty work for them.

Guilt? That would be mine. A crime is a crime and the guy who does it is a criminal, no matter how he justifies his act of violence.

The truth? Any court mentalist who waded through that pair of unwashed minds would find no evidence of any open deal with Steve Hammond. Sure, he would find violence there, but the Court is more than well aware of the fact that thinking of an act of violence is not illegal. This Rhine training has been too recent to get the human race trained into the niceties of polite mental behavior. Sure, they'd get a few months or maybe a few years for breaking and entering as well as assault, but after all, they were friends of Rambaugh and this might well be a matter of retaliation, even though they thought Rambaugh was an incompetent bungler.

So if Steve Hammond believed that he could go free with a whole hand by planning to rub out a man named Scarmann, that would be Steve Hammond's crime, not theirs.

They didn't take any chances, even though I knew that they could read my mind well enough to know that I would go through with their nasty little scheme. They hustled Martha into the kitchen, chair and all, and one of them stood there with my paring knife touching her soft throat enough to indent the skin but not enough to draw blood. The other rat untaped me and stood me on my feet.

I hurt all over from the pasting I'd taken, so I took a boiling shower and dressed leisurely. The guy handed me my forty-five, all loaded, as I came out of the bathroom. The other bird hadn't moved a muscle out in the kitchen. His knife was still pressing against Martha's throat. He was still standing pat when I passed out of esper range on the street below.

In pre-Rhine days, a citizen in my pinch would holler for the cops because he couldn't be sure that the crooks would keep their end of the bargain. But Rhine training has produced a real "Honor Among Thieves" so that organized crime can run as fast as organized justice. If I kept my end and they didn't keep theirs,[pg 062] the word would get around from their own dirty minds that they couldn't keep a bargain. Well, I was going to keep mine for the same reason, even though I am not a thief.

That's the way it's done these days. You get a good esper like me to knock off a sharp mental operator like Scarmann.

The trouble was that I didn't really want Scarmann, I wanted that pair of mental sadists up in my apartment who were holding a knife against Martha's throat. I wanted them, and I wanted Martha Franklin's skin to be happily whole. And if I crossed them now, the only guys that wouldn't play ball with me in the future would be the crooks. Them I could do without.

So if they figured that an esper could take a mental like Scarmann, why couldn't an esper take the pair of them?

All I had to do was to think of something else until I could get my hands on their throats. Sure, they'd follow my mind as soon as they felt my mental waves within range, but if I could really find something interesting enough to occupy my attention--and maybe theirs as well--they could not identify me.

So I went back into the lobby of my apartment and dug into the mailbox of another party, thus identifying myself as the man in three eight four. Then I punched the elevator button for the Fourth and leaned back against the elevator and let my mind wander up through the apartments above.

I violated all the laws against Esping Toms as the elevator oozed upwards. Eventually my sense of perception wandered through my own apartment and I located her lying on the bed, fully dressed. She'd probably been freed lest some esper cop get to wondering why there was a woman taped to a chair in a bachelor's kitchen. I shut my mind like a clam, but I couldn't withdraw my perception too fast. I let it ooze back there like the eyes of a lecherous old man at a burleycue.

I left the elevator at the Fourth and walked up the stairs by reflex, while my mind was positively radiating waves of vulgarity.

My mind managed to identify her as "The girl on the bed" without thinking any name. She was a good looking strawberry blonde with a slender waist and a high bosom and long, slender legs. She was wearing a pair of Dornier shoes with three inch heels that did things to her ankles. Her nylons were size eight and one half, medium length, in that dark shade that[pg 063] always gives me ideas. Her dress was a simple thing that did not have a store label on it, and so I dug the stitches for a bit and decided that it had been hand made. Someone was a fine dress-maker because it fitted her slender body perfectly. Her petticoat was store type. It was simple and fitted, too, but it had a label from Forresters in the hem. Her bra was a Graceform, size thirty two, medium cup, but the girl on the bed did not have much need for molding, shaping, uplifting, padding or pretense. She was all her and she filled it right to the brim. I let my perception dawdle on the slender ankles, the lissome waist, and the rounded hips.

My door key came out by habit-reflex and entered the keyhole while my sense of perception let them

have one last vicarious thrill. The girl on the bed was an honest allover strawberry blonde. She....

Then the door swung open and hell went out for breakfast.

My forty-five bellowed at the light as I slid in and sloped to one side. The room went dark as I dropped to the floor in front of my bookcase. From across the room a hitburner seared the door and slashed sidewise, cutting a smoking swathe across my encyclopedia from A-AUD to CAN-DAN and then came down as I squirmed aside. It took King Lear right out of Shakespeare before the beam winked out. It went off just in time to keep me from sporting a cooked stripe down my face.

I triggered the automatic again to make a flash in their faces while I dug the room to locate them in the dark. The needle beam flared out again and drilled a hole in the bookcase behind me. The other guy made a slashing motion with his beam to pin me down, but he made a mistake by standing up to do it.

I put a slug in his middle that slammed him back against the wall. He hung there for a moment before he fell to the floor with a dull, limp sound. His needle beam slashed upward and burned the ceiling before his hand went limp and let the weapon drop.

I whirled to dig the other guy in the room just as the throb of a stun-gun beam moaned over my head. I wondered where they'd got the arsenal, dug the serial number, and realized that it was mine. It gave me a chuckle. I'm a pistol man, so the stun-gun that old gorilla-man was toting couldn't have had more than one more charge. I tried to dig it but couldn't. Even a Doctor Of Perception can't really dig the number of kilo-watt-seconds[pg 064] in a meson chamber.

My accurate esping must have made the other guy desperate, because he made a dive and let his needle ray burn out a slashing beam that zipped across over my head. My forty-five blazed twice. He missed but I didn't, just as the throb of the stun-gun rang the air again. I whirled to face my stun-gun coming out of the bedroom door in front of Martha Franklin.

The slug intended for Martha's body never came out of my gun because her stun-gun got to me first. It froze me like a hunk of Greek statuary and I went forward and toppled over until I came on a three-point landing of elbow, the opposite knee, and the side of my face.

I was as good as dead.

My brain was still functioning but nothing else was. I was completely paralyzed. My heart had stopped breathing and my lungs had stopped breathing, and I've been told that a healthy man can retain consciousness for maybe a minute or so without a fresh supply of blood to the brain. Then things get muddy black and you've had it for good. My esp was still functioning, but that would black out with the rest of Steve Hammond.

There was no physical pain. They could have drilled me with a blunt two-by-four and I'd not have felt it.

Then because I couldn't stare Death in the face, I shut my mind on the fact and esped my late girl friend. She was standing there with my stun-gun in her hand with a smile on her beautiful puss and that vibrant

body swaying gently. I wanted to vomit and I would have if I'd not been frozen solid. That beautiful body presided over by that vicious brain made me sick.

Her smile faded as I began to realize the truth. Her story was thin. Rambaugh, a mental, would have been able to play his blackmail game to the fine degree; he would have known when Martha's patience was about to grow short--if Martha's story were true. No blackmailer pushed his victim to the breaking point. And Rambaugh wouldn't have gone for me if this had just been a plain case of blackmail.

No, by thinking deeply, Martha Franklin had engineered the death of Rambaugh and she'd almost engineered the rubbing-out of Scarmann. A mental, Martha Franklin. A high-grade mental, capable of controlling her thoughts so that her cohorts could be led by the mind into doing her dirty work.

My mind chuckled. I'd be gone[pg 065] before they caught up with Martha, but they'd catch up all right. She'd leave the apartment positively radiating her act of violence and then the cops would have a catch. And you should see how a set of Court Mentalists go to work on a guilty party these days. Once they get the guy that pulled the trigger on the witness stand, in front of a jury consisting of mixed mentals and espers, with no holds barred, the court record gets a full load of the killer's life, adventures, habits, and attitude; just before the guilty party heads for the readjustment chamber.

Things were growing blacker. Waves of darkness clouded my mind and I found it hard to think straight. My esper sense faded first and as it faded I let it run once more over Martha's attractiveness and found my darkening mind wishing that she were the girl I'd believed her to be instead of the female louse she was. It could have been fun.

But now I was about to black out from stun-gun paralysis, and Martha was headed for the readjustment chamber where they'd reduce her mental activity to the level of a menial, sterilize her, and put her to work in an occupation that no man or woman with a spark of intelligence, ambition, or good sense would take.

She would live and die a half-robot, alone and ignored, her attractiveness lost because of her own lack-luster mind.

And I'd been willing to go out and plug Scarmann for her.

Hah!

And then she was at my side. I perceived her dimly, inconstantly, through the waves of blackness and unreality that were like the half-dreams that we have when lying a-doze. She levered my frozen body over on its hard back and went to work on my chest. Her arms went around me and she squeezed. Air whooshed into my dead lungs, and then she was beating my breastbone black and blue with her small fists. Beat. Beat-beat. Beat. I couldn't feel a thing but I could dig the fact that she was hurting her hands as she beat on my chest in a rhythm that matched the beat of her own heart.

I dug her own heartbeat for her, and she read my mind and matched the beat perfectly.

Then I felt a thump inside of me and dug my own heart. It throbbed once, sluggishly. It struggled, slowly. Then it throbbed to the beat of her hands and the blackening waves went away. My frozen body relaxed

and I came down to rest on the floor like a melting lump of sugar.

Martha dropped on top of my[pg 066] body and pressed me down. Her arms were around my chest as she forced air into my lungs. She beat my ribs sore when my heart faltered, and squeezed me when my breathing slowed. I felt the life coming back into me; it came in like the tide, with a fringe of needles-and-pins that flowed inward from fingers and toes and scalp.

Martha pressed me down on the carpet and kissed me, full, open mouthed, passionate. It stirred my blood and my mind and I took a deep, shuddering breath.

I looked up into her soft blue eyes and said, "Thanks--slut!"

She kissed me again, pressing me down and writhing against me and obviously getting a kick out of my reaction.

Then I came alive and threw her off with no warning. I sat up, and swung a roundhouse right that clipped her on the jaw and sent her rolling over and over. Her eyes glazed for a moment but she came out of it and looked pained and miserable.

"You promised," she said huskily.

"Promised?"

"To kill Scarmann."

"Yeah?"

"You thought how you'd kill Scarmann for me, Steve."

"Someday," I said flatly, "I may kill Scarmann, but it won't be for you!"

She tried to claw me but I clipped her again and this time I made it stick. She went out cold and she was still out like a frozen herring by the time Lieutenant Williamson arrived with his jetcopter squad to take her away.

The last time I saw Martha Franklin, she was still trying to convince twelve Rhine Scholars and True that any woman with a body as beautiful as hers couldn't possibly have committed any crime. She was good at it, but not that good.

Funny. Mental sensitives always think they're so damn superior to anyone else.

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