

by **ROBERT BLOCH**
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Every time there is a lull in the news, the newspapers begin highlighting the reports of strange objects and "flying saucers" Seen in the skies, and embellish their stories with wild conjectures as to the existence of these objects, their possible origin and their purpose. A most popular theory suggests that they are extraterrestrial observers. Actually, a really intelligent nonhuman race might have means of getting their information a lot closer to the source and with great authenticity. Consider Mr. Bloch's views on the possibility.

Robert Bloch is perhaps best noted for the touch of humor to be found in many of his stories. Despite this, he has done some of his best work in a serious vein. His novel, *The Scarf*, has obtained considerable popularity, and his short story collection, *The Opener of the Way*, has won favor.

THE TALL YOUNG MAN stalked through the hotel lobby and headed for a door marked **MEN**.

Once inside the washroom he stood indecisively for a moment, then went over to a cubicle and deposited a nickel. The door swung open.

He entered, shut the door, listened to the click. The click echoed a different click . . . click ... click ...

The tall young man reached up, removed his wig, and opened the top of his head.

He stood there, concealed in the cubicle, and his long slim fingers worked with the precision of delicate instruments. They made certain adjustments inside his skull, testing and setting and manipulating.

Sonic a little off, he registered. *Visio good but sonic reception poor*. The street-noises tended to knock out the adjustment, sometimes. *Change blueprints on next model*, he registered. *Allow wider range of compensation*.

Vibratory reception worked perfectly, though. The orders from the control vessel came through constantly and with no interference. He knew what he had done, what he was doing, what he must do at all times.

His instrument-fingers completed their work inside his cranium. For the final check, he pressed the voice-box and uttered a few experimental sounds. A cough, a sigh. The noises echoed in the hollow washroom. Perfect.

Satisfied, he closed the slot in his head and carefully adjusted the wig once more. It was a handsome wig—real human hair, blond and wavy. He didn't know where the Hostiles had acquired it; probably from the raiding expedition last month when they came down to the desert and picked up those three men. What were they called?

Prospectors. The message came through vibratory reception immediately. That reassured him. His guardians were with him every minute, watching him and guiding him. They knew men, studied men, and would supply him with whatever information and instructions he needed under any circumstances. They were exactly aware of what they were doing at all times.

Although the Alien roboters were in the ship, a hundred miles up, they would always be with him through the medium of the vibratory receptor built into his body.

The young man smiled. Rubberized, synthetic epidermal tissue, carefully coated with plastic, responded instantly. The pseudo-lips parted, disclosing the gleaming perfection of false teeth. A soundless mechanism simulated muscular action. The smile, like everything else about the young man,

was perfect.

A great surge of confidence came to him through the receptor. The Hostiles were proud of him, proud

of their work. And well they might be. Wasn't he entirely their creation? Hadn't they studied human anatomy, duplicated it perfectly and with utmost cunning? He could go anywhere, do anything, and never be suspected.

Never be suspected. That was the big thing. *A spy must be careful.*

That was part of the receptor's work, of course. To be careful for him. He was a mere machine. His consciousness was itself an illusion; actually he was only a highly evolved and complicated sending-receiving-registering mechanism. The combination gave him, in the aggregate, a sort of individuality, but it was neither necessary nor important.

Like the consciousness of men. That wasn't important, either. Stupid, imperfect men—how simple it was to deceive them! His creators, up there in the ship, knew just how to do that. Men are easy to fool. You can do anything you please on this planet if you know how.

Last night, when he was dropped, for example—dropped in an adaptation of mankind's own "parachute." He was given no conditioning or instructions; all he had to do was follow the orders and impulses coming through the receptor.

He'd landed in a condition described as—?

Naked. The word was supplied to him immediately (they knew everything, everything).

He landed naked. That is to say, without the customary body-covering. According to the rules of mankind, this was wrong. He'd be noticed. So the receptors sent him into the city under the cover of darkness. Told him how to skulk, to hide, to creep ever so cautiously up to the window of the clothing store on the dark, deserted street. And the receptors guided him so that he used his brand-new body to smash the window, smash the sign reading, MONEY TO LOAN-WE BUY AND SELL. And he found the clothing, put it on. Mechanical fingers mastered the new intricacies of dressing, of putting on shoes and tying a tie.

That would have looked odd to men, if there were one around to see. A life-size mechanical doll, dressing itself in a pawnshop ... grotesque—frightening.

The receptor interrupted, now. *You mustn't frighten them, it communicated. Not unless ordered. You are to be quiet. Do nothing to attract attention. Your job is to observe, react, record. That is all. And remember the dangers.*

Remember the dangers?

It was hard for his mechanism to translate "remember" into a process and "dangers" into a realized phenomenon. He stood there in the dark cubicle and waited for awareness to come. It came.

Hastily, he backed away from the bowl. That was one of the dangers. Water. Water and oil and any liquid. His eyes, his nostrils, his mouth, the aperture under the wig must be protected from moisture. Even dampness would destroy the delicate balance that enabled him to function.

There would be no rain for forty-eight hours. That was known. No danger there. But he must *avoid moisture.*

He looked down at the water in the bowl. It looked so harmless, but it was dangerous. Dangerous to him. Not to the Hostiles. They had no such makeups to have to protect. For *them*, this planet was quite suitable. They had waited and watched and experimented and spied for a long, long time now, until certain that everything would be ideal here.

All that remained was to assess and analyze the present occupants—mankind. Mankind was many, and the Hostiles were few. The single ship possessed potential power and they could do almost anything, but the sheer weight of numbers promised victory to mankind, provided that mankind was ready to exist.

That was his job, now. To react and record. To move among men and assess them, analyze their—*psychology*, the word came from the receptor, together with a complete file of meaning.

He would spy on men. He would determine, or rather, the Hostiles would determine through him, whether mankind would resist a sudden surprise attack. Were men aggressive enough to put up

determined resistance—or, as they presently surmised, would mankind flee from unknown terrors in blind panic?

It would not take long to find out, now. The ship was up there, ready. They were ready. And he was ready. Ready to go out, to react and record.

HE LEFT THE cubicle. There was water in the outer washroom, but he avoided it. He avoided strong lights, too, as directed; he had to avoid places and situations where he'd be expected to—what was it?—eat and *sleep*. Yes, and he must not *touch* anyone or be touched. He knew these things, and many more.

The receptor guided and directed him. It did not furnish explanations until necessary. Then explanations and proper reaction-patterns were instantly available.

Right now, for example, in the pocket of his *suit-coat* was a silver object. He had been directed to put it there last night when he broke into the pawnshop. He didn't comprehend why. He had been given no further instructions or orders. Those would conic when needed.

He walked across the deserted washroom.

Then the door opened. Two men came in. A fat old man and a thin young man. (*Old and young*; he knew about that, how to recognize and distinguish all physical types.) They looked at him with the blank impersonality, almost as if they knew that he was a machine, and continued their conversation.

The communication came to him.

Walk over to them.

He walked, heels clicking hollowly on the washroom floor.

Put your right hand in your pocket.

The hand moved on its errand.

Pull out the object and display it.

The hand came out.

Speak as directed, soft voice.

He said, "Put up your hands!"

They looked at him, eyes goggling in sudden shock. The older man said, "Look, he's got a gun!" They raised their hands.

Get their money.

The communicator told him what *money* was, its appearance and purpose as a medium of exchange; in a single instant, all of the data on currency was transmitted to him.

And at the same time, the communicator directed him to get the money; told him how to search their pockets, how to find wallets and loose change.

He got the money quickly, visio functioning and sonic on, in case of interruptions. But there were no interruptions. The two men stood there, breathing heavily, eyes fixed on the gun in his right hand as his left hand moved inside their pockets.

For one paradoxical moment, the two humans were standing like machines while he was animate, purposeful, alive. Their roles were reversed.

Something made a calculation, observed their reactions and estimated. The message came. *They are afraid of you. This is fear. This is what to look for in men. Find fear.* And when he came into their aura, when his pneumatic fingers touched them, instantly another mechanism located where a stomach would normally be, caught and recorded their respiration-rate, their pulse-rate, the delicate glandular reactions. This was fear. He would recognize it in the future.

Commands came to him and he carried out orders. He told the men to remove their trousers. He deposited another nickel, herded them into a cubicle and slammed it shut. He opened the washroom window and dropped the trousers into the outer, empty courtyard.

Then he left the washroom. The money jingled in his pocket, and the bills rustled against his chest. He walked quickly out of the hotel.

It was getting dark (a lengthy astronomical explanation was flashed to him so that he'd understand) and he had duties to perform.

He made a handsome figure as he strode down the street, tall, blond, youthfully erect, walking stiffly and confidently. Men stepped aside as he marched forward, and women turned their heads. A girl remarked to her friend—"I sure would like to know where they make guys like that."

But there was no room for humor, or irony, or any temperament whatsoever. He had duties to perform. They were to *react and record*.

Up above, in the ship, a complicated apparatus traced his progress through the streets. A disc recorded the sound which his sonic detected. A screen flashed the sight encompassed by his visio. What he heard, the Hostiles heard. What he saw, they also saw. They guided him now.

Something in his chest, where a heart would normally be, pulsed a warning of *Danger*.

They noted it, up in the ship, watching the street before him. He got orders. *Off the street. Dampness. Humidity count rising. Hurry.*

Yes. The legs moved slowly, and visio blurred a bit. And now he was nearing the place he was directed to find.

A large, brilliantly-lighted building. Signs out in front. He recorded, rather than read. FIGHTS TONIGHT.

Crowds, milling and pushing.

Don't touch anyone. Don't let them touch you.

He was to buy a *ticket*. Automatically, he knew what buying was, what tickets were, the entire procedure.

The voice came from inside, and he said, "One, please" and pushed the money forward.

The girl in the box-office (that was hard to comprehend, *box-office*: no data available on the term, but no matter) gave him a smile, a ticker, and some change. It tinkled out of a slot and he stood there, waiting, until the communicator directed him to pick it up.

Then he went into the arena. Carefully, he avoided physical contact with the crowd. Somebody took his ticket, tore it in half, gave him a stub. Somebody else guided him to a seat.

Sit down. People were sitting down. That was a curious concept, although he understood. People had to *eat* and *drink* and *eliminate* and *sleep* and *rest*. Their bodies demanded constant care and accommodation. They sat down, they relaxed, they turned off part of their functions and turned on another.

That's what was wrong with people. They were imperfect. Not permanently functional. People became *sick* and had *accidents*, while he on the other hand operated perfectly. Eventually, all people *died*. But he wouldn't let anyone turn him off!

Yes, they were weak and imperfect and that is why people would be easy to overcome. The Hostiles knew. And his job was to corroborate by watching.

So he sat there and watched. The lights blazed in the ring, and the announcer bawled and the referee climbed through the ropes. And then two men, naked except for trunks, appeared in corners. (*Corners* in a ring—mathematical concept awry: no data. Just observe.)

He observed. He registered the howling of the humans around him. He registered shrieks and yells, and deep inside he registered the mass aura of the crowd.

The two men in the ring began to hit at one another with gloved hands. One of them started to bleed at the nose. *Blood* meant *injury*. And the crowd, with one great voice, yelled "Kill him!"

He knew what *kill* meant. It meant what the Hostiles would do when they took over. And here humanity paid money (which was valued) to watch two people attempt to kill each other.

He reacted and recorded as the fight went on. Up in the ship, they computed. And their computations reached him.

These were average specimens of mature humankind. Old, young, male, female, rich, poor. And they were animals, suddenly swayed by fear, hate. Mass impulses gripped them completely. Mass reactions were easily registered. It would not be difficult to instill mass panic into such as these. So far the findings were favorable.

The fight was only in the second round (*round*—no data, apparently an arbitrary time-interval for this activity) when the signal came for him to leave.

He stood up and made his way out. It was hard to avoid contact with human knees and feet. Eyes stared at him curiously for a moment, then returned to the spectacle in the ring. From over the arena came the registered intensity of mass excitement, of hysteria, of illogical emotional reaction. It pleased them in the ship. But they were careful. They were going to check further. He had other duties to perform.

IT WAS STILL EARLY in the evening when the tall, blond young man came out on the street once more. The humidity count was not dangerous to the mechanisms operating inside the slotted skull. The mouth was closed, the nostril-openings protected, the artificial irises contracted. And the synthetic body moved perfectly.

Meanwhile, in the ship, his creators were calculating quickly and constantly upon the basis, of his observations. Mature adults, as they styled themselves, would not be a problem—if a fear-reaction could be properly provoked. There was one danger; an aggressive reaction might be aroused, and then there would be mass resistance. Plans were laid and co-ordinated accordingly. But mature adults constituted only a portion of humanity. There were many old people.

Old people

He was being directed, now. Directed to the park. Here in the warmth of an early spring evening, people were strolling. And here *was—Danger!*

Just in time, the Hostiles caught it and he caught it. He stepped back from the sidewalk, flattened against the doorway of a building as the huge machine lumbered down the street, spraying water against the curbing.

Water-sprinkler. Avoid. Danger.

He was safe, again. He continued, turned into the park path. Old people were here.

Old people; lame, halt, blind. Aged and infirm. They huddled on benches, they stood and sat and shuffled around in the world of nothing-to-do-but-wait-for-the-end.

And many of them were clustered around the soap-box speaker near the deserted handstand. He was pouring it on.

He stood close, but not too close. The phrases registered, although the meaning was not clear until the communicators sent along data. Something about "pension plan . . . can't earn a living . . . work hard all your life and die in poverty . . . wrong system . . . legislation . . . I'm old and you're old . . . what can we do?"

The speaker *was* old; old and ragged. He spoke with fervor, and the fervor was recorded. The crowd of elderly people reacted, and the reaction was recorded. The reaction was that of the two men in the washroom—it was *fear*.

That's what he was looking for—fear. And he felt it here. The old people, all of them, were afraid. Afraid of their future. Afraid of death. *Old people afraid* was duly registered.

And one hundred miles away, one hundred miles straight up, a sort of bodiless glee hummed inside the odd ship.

The Hostiles sent him walking on, then, down the street, into the bright lights. Then they put the most delicate of all devices into operation—selective recording apparatus that could beam in on individual passers-by.

It was a mechanical-chemical synthesis, it was telepathy and psychoanalysis combined, and raised to the highest power.

All kinds of people, thinking: *Wonder if I will get two weeks notice today for so much sick leave*

...

God, but I'm sick and tired of working. Work, work, work ...

Let's see, it's almost the first of the month. Time for the bills ...

What will Peter say when he sees my new hat. He'll murder me ...

Guess I'll stop in for a drink on the way home. I sure need one ...

All shades of feelings and emotions. Boredom, fatigue, complacency, hope, chagrin, despair, panic, hysteria. And keening through all of it, in wave after wave—fear. Partial awareness, partial functioning,

and all because of fear. Everywhere spread fear.

Up in the ship, they had data on fear, data gathered over many months, many years of observation. He wasn't the first spy. They were careful, because there would be only one chance to, use weapons, only one chance to strike. It must come, could come, at only the exactly proper moment. And the moment was—probably, almost certainly—now.

The data was reviewed, re-evaluated. Surprising data, some of it. Orson Welles . . . atomic bomb ... communism ... flying saucers ... inflation., depression . . . war . . . strikes . . . incidence of psychotic disorder . . . juvenile delinquency ...

The Hostiles checked that source now. Youth. He had another errand to perform. Plans were almost ready to go into operation, but there was this final survey to make. It would be made right now, tonight.

He clattered down the street. The neon lights reflected from his waxy, too-handsome face. His too-perfect features, his window-dummy smile seemed oddly artificial. But nobody noticed him. Humans took everything for granted; they were completely wrapped up in their own thoughts, their own fears.

Something began to hum, audibly, inside his chest, up near the shoulder-blades in the back.

The Hostiles caught it. He marched into an alley, groped into a dark, deserted areaway. A cat saw him and suddenly arched its back, snarled and spat.

Animals were aware. They knew what he was. But that didn't matter. Animals would be destroyed, along with the human animals, when the Hostiles came.

He didn't wonder about what would happen when they came. He knew. They might assume bodies like his, for a while—because those bodies could easily function in the present mechanical pattern of this planet. But once the buildings came down, once the crude human-built machines were replaced by their products of science, old bodies would be discarded in favor of improved ones. He would be discarded, too, of course.

But it didn't matter. He felt no emotion concerning this, because they hadn't provided him with emotion. He could contemplate his own extinction with the same lack of reaction with which he contemplated, now, the extinction of two billion, four hundred and seventy-four million human beings and all their animals. Yes, animals, birds, reptiles and insects. (*Balance of Nature: data, an anthropomorphic myth. New pattern of survival already set up. Human and animal life unnecessary.*)

The cat howled and fled. He stood in the darkness and his hands opened the slot in his skull under the wig. A tiny wire had jarred loose. He adjusted it as directed. Everything was so delicate. The slightest jar, the slightest moisture might cause complete malfunction. Dangerous. But only one task more, now, and he could be safely discarded. The Hostiles would come. One task more.

The handsome young man walked out of the alley and headed for the Penny Arcade. It was out near the beach, on a pier.

It was noisy, very noisy. Inside the young man's head the machinery hummed, made minute, instantaneous adjustments in sonic reception.

The lights glared and dazzled. Visio accommodated to the glitter.

And he began to react and record.

This was the haunt of youth. The young people were all around; giggling, laughing, shouting, pushing, shoving. They draped across the counter of the soda-fountain. They put nickels into juke-boxes, dimes into automatic games, quarters into self-photographing booths. They riffled the pages of comic books and magazines.

He registered something on visio that caused the Hostiles to take heed. Some words about "science-fiction" and a colored picture of a vessel. It was crude, but there was a vague, recognizable similarity between the unknown artist's concept and the actual vessel that poised one hundred miles above.

React and record. There was no fear here. Receptor mechanisms searched for it, but could not find it. Even out here in the arcade on the end of the pier, near the water. The rear of the arcade had a rickety balcony, and the dark water of the lake swirled directly below it. But these young people were not afraid.

Of course not: they were human, and humans did not dread moisture. But what about the other fears? Illness, poverty, death? The receptors searched.

No. Youth was not afraid.

UP IN THE SHIP they calculated. So many millions and so many millions in this particular age-group. Physical characteristics thus and so. Enough of a menace to forestall attack? Perhaps, if they were not afraid. But they were human, and the human is susceptible to panic. Particularly when confronted with surprise elements, with the unknown. Fear of the unknown. That might be the key. Investigate.

They sent him closer to the group at the end of the pier, at the magazine-stand. He stood there quite silently and inconspicuously.

All around him was the noisy neon fantasy of humanity at play. Below the pier was an amusement park where roller-coasters swooped and soared and shuddered down; where *papier-miiche* monsters goggled in the glitter of torchlight; where fantastically-costumed clowns and freaks grimaced at the crowds. Weird architecture, crazy lighting, and exhortations of barkers blended into a complete illusion of unreality.

And here, too, in the Penny Arcade, where the machines clanged, the air of unreality persisted. Teenagers in their curious costumes, milled and thronged. Their speech-pattern was oddly filled with "cool" and "extremely George" and the later neologisms.

So that he, standing there in his conservative suit, appeared quite normal in contrast—he was, in appearance, utterly real. He was real and the softly sounding waters without were real. There was a definite dampness in the air, and his vision blurred momentarily. Then the Hostiles made some adjustments.

The tall young man walked over toward the group of youngsters near the magazine-stand. Their conversation flowed casually, loudly, erratically. Their statements were positive, eager, exaggerated.

No fear. But no menace here, either. They were only children in the bodies of near-adults. Bobby-socks and blue-jeans and leather jackets and beanies formed a pattern of immaturity, of over-emotional self-dramatization.

"Here's a new one." A skinny lad held up the magazine with the space-ship on its cover. "Lend me a quarter, Marty. I want to buy this."

Marty wore glasses. He was trying to grow a mustache; a brave effort begun too soon. "Haven't got it, Dave."

Dave turned to the two girls. "Come on, you two —fork over! You owe me two bits from the ferris wheel. Make with the moola, Bea."

The taller of the two girls giggled. "Cool your heels! Ask Pat." The skinny youth went up to the shorter girl and pretended to talk out of the side of his mouth. "Come on, sister—let's have it." He grasped her arm, and she pulled away. His hand went to his jacket pocket, emerged.

For a moment the observer flinched. The youth had a *gun*. Like his *gun*. But no—the communicator estimated—it was only a toy.

Only a toy. They were children. They knew no fear, but in turn there was no need to fear them. Overgrown children.

Up above, they were satisfied.

The four young people scuffled good-naturedly before the magazine rack. The skinny boy still wanted his magazine. The taller girl protested. "You and your science-fiction! All you guys are gone on that kick. You have enough magazines!"

"But it's a new book, I want to see who's in it!"

"I'm weepin' for ya!" The magazine went back on the rack.

"Come on, let's see it." Marty grabbed at Dave's beanie and was threatened with the toy gun.

The spy watched, waited for the command to come; waited to turn away, his mission completed.

Instead, the communicator ordered him, "*Pick up the magazine.*"

He walked over, reached between the scufflers, took the magazine from its place. The Hostiles were

curious. They wanted his visio to inspect the contents, see what puerile pseudo-science could possibly appeal to these immature minds.

"Hey, wait a minute, mister!" The taller girl, Bea, was protesting. "That's our magazine!"

"Yeah, it's ours. What's the score?" This from bespectacled Marty.

He did not find words, for words were not supplied. He reached in his pocket. *Pay for it. The cashier takes money, over there.*

He turned away without answering. He was quiet, his face was calm, there was no indication of concern.

The boy called Dave grabbed his arm. "Now, listen, Mister—give us back our magazine."

He was angry. All four of them were angry, and despite their previous scuffling, suddenly united. Something new was communicated to the receptors—determination.

A signal now came to the spy: *Don't answer. Go away. Quickly.*

But now Marty took hold of his arm. He had to get away, he had to move back. He stepped back cautiously, stopped as the four surrounded him. Dave was waving his little toy gun, and they were all yammering idiotically. Stupid human reactions, but he must be careful.

The message came. *Give them the magazine and get out.*

He raised his hand, extending the magazine. But Pat was excited, angry. She yelled, "Let him have it, Dave!"

And suddenly Dave leveled his ridiculous, childish weapon.

He pulled the trigger.

A stream of water shot out and hit the handsome young man in the face. It flooded his eyes, entered the opened mouth. He turned—everything was blurred—and as they laughed and shouted, another stream of water caught him squarely on the back of the neck. It saturated the wig, trickled through the slot.

Something flashed through the receptors but he lost contact. Moisture—dampness—wet—once you ceased to function it was forever! His damaged communicator sent out the same message he'd received from humans. He wasn't human, he was only a machine, but the message was plain.

Stark, utter fear.

A hundred miles away, the Hostiles saw and sensed. In a moment the computations were revised, conclusions drawn, a course of action chosen. They could attack, but youth would not fear them. And science or pseudo-science, somebody would discover the water weapon. No, this was not the time. Accept defeat and go. The curious vessel lifted suddenly, accelerated to incredible speed, was gone.

On the pier, the magazine slipped from a plastic-pneumatic grip. Instrument-hands rose to cover the dripping face.

The youngsters paid no attention. They bent and scrambled for the gaudy book, with no thought for the handsome young man. Their attention was easily diverted—humans were just like animals. Unconquerable animals.

He turned and staggered away. There was a peculiar lurch to his gait. He couldn't see. Drops of water were eating away inside his skull. Circuits disintegrated. Visio and sonic mingled in a roaring blur of vivid color and sound. Red noises and howling darkness.

If he could only wipe the droplets out of the slot, The Hostiles were gone. It was so hard to move! He tried. As he stumbled out of the Penny Arcade on to the railing walk of the pier's end, the youngsters caught one last glimpse of him; both hands raised and fumbling at the back of his head.

Then he was gone. They didn't *see* him hit the railing in his blindness, didn't hear the wood give way, didn't hear the splash as he—disordered, discarded machinery—tumbled into the obliterating waves below.

"What was the matter with him?" Dave asked. "I wouldn't of let him have it if I knew he'd take it so big."

"Aw, forget it!" Marty counseled. "So you made like Buck Rogers with a zap-gun and he got sore. Some people haven't got any sense of humor."

"Check," said Bea. "And people without a sense of humor aren't human!"

"Yeah," Pat sighed as they turned to open the magazine. "He looked like he was ready to blow his top!"