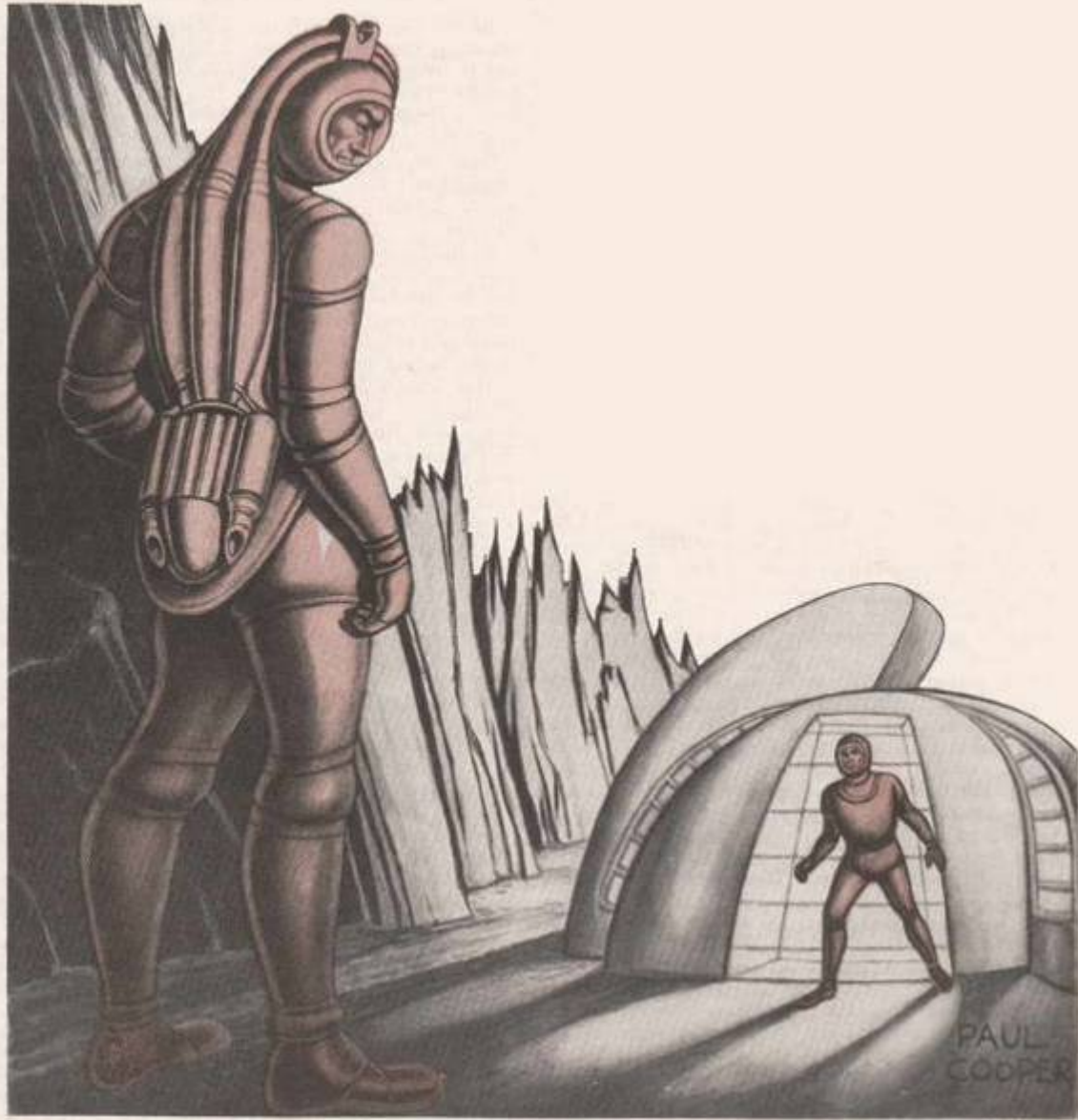


# Hands across space

by CHAD OLIVER



"The two men from different star systems stared at each other."

(Illustration by Paul Cooper)

*Within the last few hundred years, unknown communities, semi-civilized tribes that for ages have lived out their lives alone, have been uncovered. In most cases, they are scientifically and culturally behind the rest of the civilized world, and if they do not actually welcome the intrusion, they do not have the force to resist it. But the time must come when a race as advanced as ourselves will appear from out of space. Then the problem of making first contact and establishing relationship will call for a careful, infallible scientific approach on the part of both sides.*

*The first step in the scientific method involves the observation of facts and the formulation of THE PROBLEM...*

THE MAN NAMED Copa Paco did not, of course, think of himself as an alien. On the contrary, there was no doubt in *his* mind that he was a human being, and shared species relationship with all others on Capella IV. The only aliens involved in the affair were from Earth.

Naturally enough, considering the circumstances, Copa Paco was nobody's fool. He was quite well aware of such factors as ethnocentrism, to say nothing of egotism. He knew that what you chose to define as "alien" depended pretty much on where you happened to be sitting at the time.

That didn't make his problem any easier, however.

He cursed his pipe audibly; the damned thing went out at regularly predictable intervals no matter how carefully he smoked it. He knocked out the ashes and a soggy lump of unburned tobacco into a desk vaporizer, refilled the pipe, and lit it again with a fatalistic acceptance of the facts of life. He blew out a small cloud of blue smoke, aimed in the general direction of the air purifier, and felt a little better.

He walked over to the viewscreen and looked into it. The stars looked back at him, and the system of Sol was very close. He began to feel worse again. The palms of his hands started to sweat.

"I wish the whole planet would drop dead," Copa Paco said.

"You'd better take it easy, guy," advised Dota Tado, the semantics expert. "If you blow your top, we're through. Anyway, you're mixing your metaphors, or something."

"I wish you'd drop dead also," communicated Copa Paco, puffing harshly on his pipe.

"Civil war," said Dota Tado. "A great beginning. You're supposed to be a co-ordinator, remember? Don't you read your own propaganda? You're a disgrace to the force. I'd have you shot at sunrise, except that there isn't any sunrise."

"Oh, go to hell," responded Copa Paco, but he smiled in spite of himself. Dota was a good man; he knew his business. "I'm okay, really," he said. "Just spouting off steam. It's just that every once in a while you get to thinking about it, and how close it is, and how much depends on it—you know."

"Yes, I know. I know, too, that you'll come through with flying colors; stop worrying about it."

"Good advice," admitted Copa Paco. "Try to take it."

The ship throbbed around them with the surging power of the overdrive, and both men fell silent. Copa Paco smoked his pipe carefully, nursing it along.

He felt the cold sweat in his hands and wiped them on his handkerchief.

It *was* a nasty problem—nasty because it had never been faced before.

Nasty because there was no known solution. He went over it again, step by step.

The world of Capella IV—his world—was quite similar to Earth. It was, in fact, almost identical. This was largely a coincidence, since the Aurigae system, of which Capella was a part, happened to be a binary, with Capella being a good sixteen times as large as Sol, though of the same general type.

It was a coincidence that had consequences, however.

Life had evolved on Capella IV in exactly the same manner that it had on Earth. All of the details were not *precisely* the same, of course, but there was a part-for-part correspondence of generalized stages. Capella IV had its aquatic forms, its amphibians, its reptiles, its mammals. It had its own counterpart of the *Dryopithecus-Meganthropus-Pithecanthropus chain*, culminating finally in *Homo sapiens*—an erect biped, pleased with his brain, handy with his hands, variable in his color.

The biped had dreamed of the stars, and his dreams had come true.

"Unfortunately," Copa Paco said aloud.

Dreams were different when they came true. For one thing, the people involved were no longer dreaming. When they woke up, the monster with ten legs and fetid breath didn't disappear. He was still there.

The people of Capella IV had gone out into space, trying to find out what sort of a universe they lived in, trying to find out whether or not they had neighbors.

They had.

The galaxy teemed with life.

But not with "neighbors," unless mere physical proximity was the only criterion of neighborliness. They found that life took many forms. They found out how *different* life could be. There was absolutely

no basis for getting together; nothing in common whatsoever. It wasn't that the life-forms were *hostile*; hardly. They didn't even have a *concept* of hostility, or of friendliness. They were *different*.

Alien.

Isolated.

Twenty-five years ago, they had contacted the Earth. They had found a life-form physically indistinguishable from themselves, with a fairly similar civilization and a crude form of interplanetary—not interstellar—travel based on thrust-jet principles. The ships of Capella IV were powered by fields of negative electricity.

The people of Earth had hydrogen bombs.

The people of Capella IV had force fields and overdrive.

**FOR** twenty-five years, the two peoples had surveyed each other, discussed each other, sparred with each other. They had exchanged radio telephotographs and information. They had probed and speculated. They had wondered and guessed. For twenty-five years.

Of course, they were afraid of each other. The people from Capella IV were afraid of the bomb, which they didn't have. The people from Earth were afraid of the overdrive, which they didn't have, and which meant that the Capella ships could attack the Earth, and then retreat to the stars where they could not be followed.

Both were afraid of each other, because they weren't *sure* they understood each other.

Espionage through scientific means had given each world much information about the other.

They had never met, face to face. Until now.

*Chad Oliver*

Twenty-five-year-old Chad Oliver has sold to almost every science-fiction magazine in the field. He is now working for his Ph.D. at University of California at Los Angeles. He has hopes of being a professional anthropologist. Writing is a hobby and he has had one book published. His short story, "The Boy Next Door," received honorable mention in Martha Foley's famous annual, **BEST SHORT STORIES OF 1952**.



COPA PACO stared glumly at his cold pipe, which had gone out again. He tapped the refuse into the vaporizer and put the pipe away. He stared into the viewscreen, hypnotically.

He could see Earth now, far away.

They had finally decided to take a chance, these two peoples separated by forty-two light-years and an ocean of emptiness. They had agreed to meet—one man from each planet, unarmed.

It had to be in the system of Sol, of course, because there was no way for the people of Earth to get to Capella. They had picked a very small, specially constructed chamber on the planet called Mars for the meeting. Each group had built half of it, and each had inspected it a thousand times. They had taken turns every 100 Mars days to make certain that no workers of the opposite races ever saw each other or met on Mars in person.

Ten years had been required for that compromise.

One man from each group, meeting in a tiny room on a neutral planet, a planet without life of its own. Each man representing cultures separated by a universe and millions of years of independent evolution. Each man carrying a responsibility almost too fantastic to be real.

If the meeting were a success, there might be a future with boundless possibilities.

If it were a failure, if there were trickery, if they had made a mistake—

It might depend on a little thing, a nothing-thing. How could you tell? "John Smith" was a common name on Earth; to a man from Capella IV it was excruciatingly funny, as well as illogical. The people of Capella IV had systematic names, names that placed each person as to status and role by the pattern of alternating morphemes—Copa Paco, Lota Talo, Dota Tado. *This* seemed funny to the men of Earth,

who, in turn, when a baby was born named it practically anything that suited their fancy.

The little things were different, and that could be very dangerous, even assuming good intentions on both sides.

If you had to pick one individual to represent your entire species, one upon whom your very existence might well depend, whom would you pick?

Whom *could* you pick?

The man named Copa Paco looked into the view-screen, staring at the stars and the planets and the darkness.

That was his problem—and he knew, too, that this same problem had to be faced by a man on Earth, a man like himself. A man who even now must be wondering, trying to decide

Whom would *he* pick?

***After the formulation of the problem, the next step, in strict chronology, involves the working out of the hypothesis, or trial solution. Passing this by for the moment, however, we turn to what is actually the third step, the testing of the hypothesis in experience, or THE EXPERIMENT...***

JOHN GRAVES walked steadily through the sand canyon and listened to his breathing in his oxygen mask. It was slow and even, neither excited nor lethargic, and he smiled with satisfaction. He had been a little worried before, but now he knew that he was not going to be afraid.

He was ready.

The cold wind hissed and whispered through the tunnels and twisted valleys, and then whined eerily out upon the cold desert beyond, losing itself in fine clouds of driven sand. It wrapped its icy fingers around John Graves as he walked, and it spoke of many things . . .

Mars.

It had never known life of its own; its only significance had been given to it by the thoughts and fears and dreams of a people over forty-eight million miles away.

John Graves felt a warm pride at the thought. *His* people.

First, perhaps, it had been a campfire in the sky, a cold fire that gave no warmth, to be looked at and puzzled over by the first man huddled around their own fire, listening to the night sounds around them.

Then it had become a god. Mars, god of war ...

Finally, it had become a planet, one of several, orbited about the sun. The planet, with time, had become a symbol, a lure, an invitation across the empty miles. It had called out to the men of Earth, and they had come.

And this was the reality, at least for now. A cold desert of shifting sands and sculptured canyons, silent except for the sigh of the winds.

Neutral ground.

A meeting-place.

John Graves came out of the sand canyon and into the desert, his feet slipping slightly on the uncertain floor of the planet. Ahead of him, squatting all alone in the middle of the great plain, was the tiny building that housed a room for two.

He looked at his watch, and it was time.

Coining out of the desert from the other side, half hidden by the drifting curtains of reddish sand, he could see a dark figure moving slowly toward the building.

The two men from different star-systems stood in the little room and stared at each other. They were almost close enough to touch, but they did not touch.

The room was antiseptically plain. It was absolutely without character. It had dull gray walls and a single overhead light in the ceiling. It had a small gray table in the exact center of the room, and two hard gray chairs, one at each end of the table. There was an air-conditioning unit in one corner, and no other machinery of any kind within a two-hundred mile radius.

No one was taking any chances.

John Graves kept a smile on his face—it having been first determined, of course, that smiles meant the same thing to both of the representatives. It wouldn't do at all to smile at a man from a culture in which a smile was the equivalent of saying, "I find you mentally repulsive and physically appealing, and so I will eat you for supper." His job was threefold: he had to make a good impression, he had to protect the secrets of his people, and he had to evaluate the other man in the room.

He examined the man from Capella IV courteously but intently. The man from Capella IV examined him the same way.

John Graves couldn't see very much. The other man was clad in what appeared to be a light spacesuit, complete with helmet. He seemed to be definitely humanoid in construction—he had two arms and two legs and one head. Behind the glass in his helmet, he could make out a pleasant face, rather brownish in color, with blue eyes and an open smile. The man seemed to be waiting for something.

There was a long, awkward silence.

Finally, John Graves reached up and took off his oxygen mask. He sniffed the air, and it was good.

No tricks so far, then. He noticed that the other man was smiling more broadly, but he made no attempt to remove his helmet. He simply stood there, waiting.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" asked John Graves, his voice cutting through the silence like a knife and sounding abnormally loud in his ears.

"Not at all," replied the other man instantly. His voice was low and well-modulated, crystal-clear through his helmet speaker.

John Graves fished out a cigarette and lit it. He inhaled a deep draught of smoke and blew it out through his nose, being careful to keep it away from the alien.

"My name is John Graves," he said.

"My name is Noco Cono," the other man said. Neither volunteered any more information. The silence thickened. Again, John Graves took the initiative, thinking: *Evidently he's just going to respond to my cues; it's up to me to direct the interview.* He sat down in one of the chairs. The other man did not hesitate but lowered himself into the other one, still not making any move toward removing either his helmet or his spacesuit. *Hardly the impulsive type,* thought John Graves.

They looked at each other across the table. "Well, where do we go from here, Mr. Cono?" asked John Graves, reflecting again that it was quite decent of the aliens to agree to speak English during the interview.

Noco Cono chuckled pleasantly. "An excellent question, John Graves," he said. "I really must apologize for my seeming reticence; you are of course aware of the circumstances under which we meet."

*Careful,* thought John Graves. *Could that be a psychological probe?* He said: "Not at all, my friend. It is as much my fault as it is yours. I hope I may express the wish that we can meet again one of these days, and speak as man to man."

"That is my wish, also," the spacesuited figure said. "This is, of course, a difficult situation for both of us. I feel as though I were under a microscope." "I too," agreed John Graves.

They indulged in some highly tentative exploratory conversation, they both chuckled many times over their mutual recognition of the awkwardness of the situation, and their talk was, if not friendly, at least cordial.

Then the silence came again. They sat across the table from each other in the little gray room, looking at each other.

What of the discussion of their closely related planets? Of the universe? Of philosophies, related or opposing? Here there seemed to be a block—an unexplainable block . . .

When the agreed-upon termination time had arrived, neither of them had said a great deal.

John Graves had done his best to give a good impression, but he was not sure whether or not he had succeeded. How could one tell? Everything had seemed pleasant enough, but the other man had never offered to remove his helmet or his spacesuit, and evidently wasn't going to do so. Why? Graves had never been able to get a good look at the man.

They both stood up, and there *was* tension in the room. It wasn't exactly fear, nor was it hope, but it

was compounded of both of these. So much depended on the outcome of this simple little visit, so much could be gained or lost. . . .

They both felt it.

"I know that we're both thinking the same thing," John Graves said slowly. "I can't speak with much authority, but just as a man. I hope with all my heart that this a beginning, and not an ending." The spacesuited man nodded. "I feel the same way, my friend," he said. "This has been a tough job for both of us, and I hope that out of it great things will come. I hope that this is not goodbye. I hope that both of our peoples will be blessed with—understanding. *Understanding*. That is a good word. Next to a sense of humor, it is what one needs the most." They walked to the door together. John Graves stopped and put on his oxygen mask, and then they both walked back outside. They paused, and John Graves put out his hand. The other man took it, gently, in his spacesuit glove, and they shook hands, Earth fashion. Then the other man waved briefly and set out across the desert for the rendezvous with his ship.

John Graves watched him go for a moment, registering all the data, no matter how unimportant. Then he turned and walked through the shifting sands, back into the sand canyon, his hands in his pockets. He did not look back.

***As previously indicated, we have left out a step in our scientific method, a step between the problem and the experiment. The step did occur, of course, and we go back for it now. Between the problem and the experiment comes the trial solution, or THE HYPOTHESIS...***

COPA PACO was worried.

He puffed on his pipe and failed to get any smoke—the damnable thing had gone out again. Why was it, he wondered, that a culture that could devise an overdrive for interstellar flight could not invent a pipe that would stay lit? He toyed with the notion of dropping the whole pipe into the desk vaporizer, but rejected the idea. He understood that he was taking out his anxiety on his pipe and, primarily to prove a point to himself, he refilled the mutinous instrument with fresh tobacco and tried again.

He wiped his hands nervously on his handkerchief and looked at his watch. Four hours to zero. It was time for the final check.

He walked through the great ship, feeling the surge of power trembling along its beams, his stomach a cold knot within him. He could feel the star-flecked emptiness outside the ship, a poignant emptiness, waiting.

The question that he had lived with for years crawled endlessly through his brain: *Had he made the right decision?* Soon now, he would know.

The problem of picking a single man to represent your people and your culture in a truly crucial situation was virtually beyond solution, and Copa Paco knew it. He had wrestled with it so long that he knew every angle, every consideration, every argument. The only thing he didn't know with certainty was the answer.

He listened to his heels clicking down the corridor, and he thought: *It's too late to back down now, and that's something. We'll just have to go through with it.*

It was easy enough to think of someone who was especially gifted along a particular line, such as mathematics or sociology or art. It was even possible to find individuals who had talent and training in all three fields. Conceivably, some fantastic individual might exist, somewhere, who was expert in ten fields, or even twenty.

Unfortunately, that wasn't good enough.

There was, certainly, an excellent possibility that any good man could successfully represent his people in the coming encounter between two alien peoples—a diplomat, perhaps. But the catch was that an "excellent possibility" still wasn't good enough for *this* situation. There simply was too much dependent on the outcome.

You had to be *sure*.

Easy enough to state, but what was the answer? He had to find a representative who could respond to any imaginable combination of trickery or force. Unpleasant as it was, he had to plan on the possibility

that the people of Earth would not keep faith with them. His own people of Capella IV had only honorable intentions, of course, but that didn't mean that they were going to stick their collective head into the lion's mouth and rely on a smile to get them out again. The trick was to be prepared for the worst, but be capable of responding to the best.

The characteristics of the required representative could be listed briefly. One, he had to make a good impression. Two, he had to be ready for anything, insofar as possible, so that he could not be outwitted. Three, he had to be capable of making a complete and accurate report back to his superiors, no one man, naturally, could be entrusted with the power of decision in such a case. Fourth and last, he had to embody some sort of built-in defense mechanism, so that, in the event of his capture, he could not possibly be made to reveal classified information, no matter what pressures were brought to bear.

The characteristics could be listed, then. It wasn't even unduly difficult to do so. The difficulty lay in quite another direction: *no such human being existed.*

Nor ever had existed, nor ever would.

Once you accepted that fact, of course, there was only one thing to do.

Copa Paco passed through the security check and into the special control room, his pipe still going. Maybe, he thought, that was a good sign.

It had better be.

He nodded to his co-workers and looked around. The room appeared to be ready. There was a large, spherical screen that occupied the whole center of the room—blank now. Around the screen were fifty chairs, each with a small control panel on one arm. The future occupants of the chairs milled about the room in a fog of blue smoke and conversation—semantics experts, philosophers, chemists, anthropologists, psychologists, generals, writers, doctors, corporation managers, diplomats.

Above the spherical screen, situated so that the observer could look down into it, was another chair, completely surrounded by integration controls that co-ordinated the information from below. Copa Paco looked at it, nervously. His chair.

He climbed up into it and settled himself. He clamped on his headphones and switched on the master control panel. He put down his pipe and picked up an auxiliary phone.

"Trial run," he said.

The others took their places, silent now, and cut in their sets. The spherical screen flashed white and came to life. It revealed four rather drab green walls, a ceiling, and a floor. A storeroom.

Copa Paco steadied his hands and played his fingers over the control panel. There wasn't a sound. Gradually, the scene in the spherical screen shifted, swaying very slightly, precisely as does a view scene through the two eyes of a walking man. There was a door, which opened and shut. Then a corridor, long and featureless. Another door—

There was a polite knock and the door of the special control room clicked softly open. The scene in the screen changed to the room in which they all sat—Copa Paco saw himself clearly, looking pale and nervous.

A spacesuited figure walked into the room, carefully. He had on a glass helmet, behind which could be made out rather pleasant features, blue eyes, and an open smile. He stopped respectfully.

"My name is Noco Cono," the spacesuited figure said in a soothing, well-modulated voice. He spoke in English. "I hope I may be of some assistance."

There was a buzz of approval from the assembled men, and Copa Paco felt himself relax a little. There was no denying it—the robot was well made. When the ship finally landed just outside the restricted area on Mars, and they started the space-suited assemblage of radio controls tri-di, and testing apparatus toward the tiny building in the desert where the meeting was to take place, Copa Paco began to worry again.

He sat tensely in his chair, following Noco Cono's every move in the spherical screen. The robot walked easily, gracefully, through the shifting sands. He *looked* convincing. He *acted* natural.

But he wasn't human, of course.

Copa Paco asked himself, as always: *Have I done the right thing? What if they find out? What if I've thrown away our only chance, just out of caution? It isn't really that I distrust Earth, of*

course—but what else can I do?

The problem was exactly analogous to hunting for a house in which to live. If you couldn't find precisely what you wanted, at the price you could afford to pay, there was only one course of action open to you. Build your own.

The robot they had called Noco Cono wasn't precisely a robot, of course—that is, he wasn't a mechanical man with a mind of his own. Rather, he was an integrated synthesis of fifty remote minds—fifty men, each with a control panel, each able to take over in any conceivable situation, each seeing out of his eyes through the spherical screen and hearing every word through radio transmission.

Noco Cono, whatever else he may have been, was no fool.

Copa Paco watched him, step by step—he was on automatic now. He watched him walk through the desert, and he saw the little building loom up before him.

Beyond the building, a dark figure.

The man from Earth.

Copa Paco wiped the sweat off his hands and felt the tension in the special control room. Every eye, every thought, was on the spherical screen, and oh the spacesuited figure that walked slowly on, closer and closer

First contact. Whom had *they* sent?

***The final step in the scientific method is known as the solution. From the solution, if all has gone well, may often be derived certain GENERAL PRINCIPLES...***

**RALPH HAWLEY** paced up and down the evaluation room, alternately staring at his watch and smoking cigarettes in short, jerky puffs. The others sat nervously in their chairs, watching him. "What's he doing?" he asked again. "Where in the hell can he *be*?"

Lee Gomez, by profession a philosopher and by temperament not prone to impatience or, indeed, haste in any form, said: "Sit down, Ralph. John isn't overdue yet, and he's no doubt doing exactly what he's supposed to be doing—contacting our non-Earthly friends."

"Ummm," said Ralph Hawley, hooking his thumbs in his suspenders. And, sensing the inadequacy of the phrase, he added: "Three cheers for John, he is true blue." Damn Gomez anyway—he was always right, and Hawley knew it, and it annoyed him.

"My professional opinion," stated Dr. Weinstein, "not that anyone is interested, is that we are all suffering from the scientific malady known by the technical term of *Gestalt Jitterus*. What we really need is a drink."

Ralph Hawley ran a hand through his graying hair. "Not yet," he said. "Not that I couldn't use one."

He continued his pacing, which was in itself unusual, for Ralph Hawley was not ordinarily a nervous man. He was tall, rather spare, with a pleasantly horse-like face. He was given to sloppy clothes, infrequent movements, and slow speech. By trade he was a social psychologist, and he was the last person in the world that he himself would have picked to head Project Contact.

"Where *is* he?" he asked again, lighting another cigarette.

A red light flashed.

A speaker said: "John Graves has entered the ship. He has not been harmed, and reports a nonantagonistic contact, with some complications. As instructed, we have sent him to the evaluation room. Situation green, shading yellow. Over."

There was a knock on the door. A pause. The door swung open and John Graves walked in. Every eye in the room stared at him. He took it very well, never losing his poise for an instant.

"I'm quite all right," he said calmly. "You can relax." No one relaxed.

John Graves walked up to Ralph Hawley and smiled. "It went off like clockwork, Ralph," he said. "Of course, I couldn't get a good look at the man, but it was a fascinating experience. I suppose you want a full report, from the beginning?"

"That won't be necessary, John," Ralph Hawley said.

"I beg your pardon? I was given to understand that—"



Ralph Hawley sighed. Then, quickly, he reached out and turned John Graves off.

John Graves stiffened instantly, and he left his eyes. He stood very still. He did not breathe. He was not "dead," of course, since, properly speaking, he had never been "alive."

Ralph Hawley stripped off John's shirt and opened a panel in his chest. He took out the cameras, the recorders, the testers, the analyzers, the dials, the data cards.

"Print these up and get an analysis," he told his specialists.

The object that was John Graves stood immobile in the center of the room, empty and alone. When the last film had been studied, the last card interpreted, the last sentence broken down and examined, there was a stunned silence in the evaluation room.

"Well, I'll be damned," Ralph Hawley said. There was a burst of comments in the room: "They didn't *trust* us!"

"They tried to *trick* us!"

"They sent a remote-controlled *robot*!"

"The clever *devils* . . ."

Ralph Hawley sat down in a chair. He stared blankly at nothing. He said: "Don't you see what this means?"

The others looked at him.

"They tried the identical trick on us that we tried on them," said a psychologist. "Or roughly identical, anyway."

"They worked out the same basic solution to the same problem," an anthropologist said.

"They're *our kind*," said Gomez, the philosopher. "Cautious, insecure, tricky, proud, capable, liars . . ." Ralph Hawley closed his eyes. There *was* only one solution to the basic problem, of course, if you assumed that the two cultures saw the problems in the same terms. No human being could be entrusted with such a mission; it was unthinkable. And so the aliens had sent a robot, and Earth had sent—

John Graves.

An artificial humanoid mechanism, twenty years in the making, designed to perform with inhuman skill in a contact situation. Designed to *believe* it was a human being, so that it did not have to play a part. Designed with built-in recording devices, and equipped with fantastically skilled behavior patterns—but lacking classified data.

A robot and a limited android two representatives of two cultures that were afraid to trust each other.

Two *very* similar cultures.

"Gentlemen," Ralph Hawley said quietly, "we are equals."

The red light flashed again.

The speaker said: "Commander Hawley, Co-ordinator Paco is calling from the alien ship. I have routed his call through to the evaluation room."

Ralph Hawley grinned. "The old buzzard!" he said. He walked over to the communicator.

Cona Paco looked at him and smiled.

Ralph Hawley smiled back.

"I see we didn't fool you," Copa Paco said.

"No. And I'm sure we didn't fool you."

"No," agreed Copa Paco. "Extremely clever, however."

"Thank you. Yours was pretty tricky too." A pause.

"Listen, Ralph," said Copa Paco finally, "this isn't getting us anywhere. Why not come on over yourself and let's have a talk—over drinks?"

Ralph Hawley hesitated only an instant. "It's a deal, my friend," he said. "I'll come."

Copa Paco smiled more broadly. "Now we're accomplishing something."

"See you in half an hour," Ralph Hawley said, and switched off the communicator.

He turned and looked at his specialists. They were laughing and clapping each other on the back. The tension was gone.

They had not failed.

Everything was going to be all right.

The others gathered in a knot around him as he stepped into the port of the space shuttle that was to carry him to the alien ship. Everyone was trying to shake his hand and wish him well. For almost the first time in his life, Ralph Hawley was completely happy, and proud of the human race.

Just before he left, an aide appeared with a case of Hawley's own liquor, which was loaded aboard the shuttle.

"I thought Paco invited *you* to drink," objected Lee Gomez. "Why take your own liquor?"

Ralph Hawley smiled. "A man can't be too careful," he said, and closed the port behind him.