

PEEPING TOM

YOU TAKE a boy like Tommy Bender—a nice American boy, well brought-up in a nice, average, middle-class family; chock-full of vitamins, manners and baseball statistics; clean-shaven, soft-spoken, and respectful to women and his elders. You take a boy like that, fit him out with a uniform, teach him to operate the most modern means of manslaughter, reward him with a bright gold bar, and send him out to an exotic eastern land to prove his manhood and his patriotism.

You take a kid like that. Send him into combat in a steaming jungle inferno; teach him to sweat and swear with conviction; then wait till he makes just one wrong move, pick him out of the pool of drying blood, beat off the flies, and settle him safely on a hospital cot in an ill-equipped base behind the lines, cut off from everyone and everywhere, except the little native village nearby. Let him rest and rot there for a while. Then bring him home, and pin a medal on him, and give him his civvies and a pension to go with his limp. You take a boy like Tommy Bender, and do all that to him, you won't expect him to be quite the same nice, apple-cheeked youngster afterwards.

He wasn't.

When Tommy Bender came home, he was firmly disillusioned and grimly determined. He knew what he wanted out of life, had practically no hope of getting it, and didn't much care how he went about getting the next best things. And in a remarkably short time, he made it clear to his erstwhile friends and neighbors that he was almost certain to get anything he went after. He made money; he made love; he made enemies. Eventually, he made enough of a success so that the enemies could be as thoroughly ignored as yesterday's woman. The money, and the things it bought for him, he took good care of.

For almost five years after he came home, Tommy Bender continued to build a career and ruin reputations. People tried to understand what had happened to him; but they didn't really.

Then, abruptly, something happened to change Tommy. His business associates noticed it first; his family afterwards. The girls he was seeing at the time were the last to know, because he'd always been undependable with them, and not hearing from him for two or three weeks wasn't unusual.

What happened was a girl. Her name was Candace, and when she was married to Tommy, seven weeks after her arrival, the papers carried the whole romantic story. It was she who had nursed him back to health in that remote village on the edge of the jungle years ago. He'd been in love with her then, but she'd turned him down.

That last part wasn't in the news story of course, but it got around town just as fast as the paper did. Tommy's bitterness, it seemed, was due to his long-frustrated love. And anyone could see how he'd changed since Candace came back to him. His employees, his debtors, his old friends and discarded women, his nervous mother and his angry brother all sighed with relief and decided everything was going to be all right now. At last they really understood.

But they didn't. They didn't, for instance, understand what happened to Tommy Bender in that God-forsaken little town where he'd spent two months on crutches, waiting for his leg to heal enough to travel home.

It was hot and sticky in the shack. The mattress was lumpy. His leg itched to the very fringes of madness, and the man on his right had an erratically syncopated snore that took him past the raveled edge straight to insanity. All he needed to make the torture complete was the guy on his left—and the nurse.

The nurse was young and round and lithe, and she wore battle fatigues: slacks, and a khaki shirt that was always draped against her high, full breasts in the damp heat. Her hair, dark blonde or light brown, was just long enough to be pinned back in a tiny bun, and just short enough so wisps of it were always escaping to curl around her ears or over her forehead.

When she bent over him to do any of the small humiliating services he needed done for him, he could see tiny beads of sweat on her upper lip, and that somehow was always the one little touch too much.

So that after she moved on to the next bed, and beyond it, it would be torture to have Dake, the guy

on the left, turn toward him and start describing, graphically, what he would do if he could just get his remaining arm out of the cast for fifteen minutes some day.

You see Tommy Bender was still a nice young man then—after the combat, and the wound, and the flies, and the rough hospitalization.

Dake was nothing of the sort. He'd been around, and he knew exactly what value he placed on a woman. And he enjoyed talking about it.

Tommy listened because there was no way not to, and he wriggled and sweated and suffered, and the itch in his leg got worse, and the stench from the garbage pile outside became unbearable. It went on that way, hour after hour and day after day, punctuated only by the morning visit from the medic, who would stop and look him over, and shake a weary, discouraged head, and then go on to the next man.

The leg was a long time healing. It was better after Dake left, and was replaced with a quietly dying man who'd got it in the belly. After him, there was a nice young Negro soldier, somewhat embarrassed about being in sick bay with nothing more dramatic than appendicitis. But at least, now, Tommy could keep his thoughts and dreams about Candace to himself, untarnished.

Then one day, when it had begun to seem as if nothing would ever change again in his life, except the occupants of the beds on either side of him, something happened to break the monotony of discomfort and despair. The medic stopped a little longer than usual in front of Tommy's cot, studied the neat chart Candy was always filling in, and furrowed his brow with concern. Then he muttered something to Candace, and she looked worried too. After that, they both turned and looked at Tommy as if they were seeing him for the first time, and Candy smiled, and the doctor frowned a little deeper.

"Well, young man," he said, "We're going to let you get up."

"Thanks, doc," Tommy said, talking like a GI was supposed to. "What should I do with the leg? Leave it in bed?"

"Ha, ha," the doctor laughed. Just like that. "Good to see you haven't lost your spirit." Then he moved on to the next bed, and Tommy lay there wondering. What would he do with the leg?

That afternoon, they came for him with a stretcher, and took him to the surgery shack, and cut off the cast. They all stood around, five or six of them, looking at it and shaking their heads and agreeing it was pretty bad. Then they put a new cast on, a little less bulky than the first one, and handed him a pair of crutches, and said: "Okay, boy, you're on your own."

An orderly showed him how to use them, and helped him get back to his own bed. The next day he practiced up a little, and by the day after that, he could really get around.

It made a difference.

Tommy Bender was a nice normal American boy, with all the usual impulses. He had been weeks on end in the jungle, and further weeks on his back in the cot. It was not strange that he should show a distinct tendency to follow Candy about from place to place, now he was on his feet again.

The pursuit was not so much hopeful as it was instinctive. He never, quite, made any direct advance to her. He ran little errands, and helped in every way he could, as soon as he was sufficiently adept in the handling of his crutches. She was certainly not ill-pleased by his devotion, but neither, he knew, was she inclined to any sort of romantic attachment to him.

Once or twice, acting on private advice from the more experienced ambulant patients, he made tentative approaches to some of the other nurses, but met always the same kindly advice that they felt chasing nurses would not be good for his leg. He accepted his rebuffs in good part, as a nice boy will, and continued to trail around after Candy.

It was she, quite inadvertently, who led him to a piece of good fortune. He saw her leave the base one early evening, laden with packages, and traveling on foot. Alone. For a GI, these phenomena might not have been unusual. For a nurse to depart in this manner was extraordinary, and Candace slipped out so quietly that Tommy felt certain no one but himself was aware of it.

He hesitated about following at first; then he started worrying about her, threw social caution to the winds, and went swinging down the narrow road behind her, till she heard him coming and turned to look, then to wait.

She was irritated at first; then, abruptly, she seemed to change her mind.

"All right, come along," she said. "It's just a visit I'm going to pay. You can't come in with me, but you can wait if you want to, and walk me back again."

He couldn't have been more pleased. Or curious.

Their walk took them directly into the native village, where Candace seemed to become confused. She led Tommy and his crutches up and down a number of dirty streets and evil-looking alleys before she located the small earthen hut she was looking for, with a wide stripe of blue clay over its door.

While they searched for the place, she explained nervously to Tommy that she was fulfilling a mission for a dead soldier, who had, in a period of false recovery just before the end, made friends with an old man of this village. The dying GI had entrusted her with messages and gifts for his friend—most notably a sealed envelope and his last month's cigarette ration. That had been three weeks ago, and she'd spent the time since working up her courage to make the trip. Now, she confessed, she was more than glad Tommy had come along.

When they found the hut at last, they found a comparatively clean old man sitting cross-legged by the doorway, completely enveloped in a long gray robe with a hood thrown back off his shaven head. There was a begging bowl at his side, and Tommy suggested that Candace might do best just to leave her offerings in the bowl. But when she bent down to do so, the old man raised his head and smiled at her.

"You are a friend of my friend, Karl?" he asked in astonishingly good English.

"Why . . . yes," she fumbled. "Yes. Karl Larsen. He said to bring you these. . . ."

"I thank you. You were most kind to come so soon." He stood up, and added, just to her, ignoring Tommy. "Will you come inside and drink tea with me, and speak with me of his death?"

"Why, I—" Suddenly she too smiled, apparently quite at ease once more. "Yes, I'd be glad to. Thank you. Tommy," she added, "would you mind waiting for me? I . . . I'd appreciate having someone to walk back with. It won't be long. Maybe—" she looked at the old man who was smiling, waiting—"maybe half an hour," she finished.

"A little more or less perhaps," he said, in his startlingly clear American diction. "Perhaps your friend would enjoy looking about our small village meanwhile, and you two can meet again here in front of my door?"

"Why, sure," Tommy said, but he wasn't sure at all. Because as he started to say it, he had no intention of moving away from that door at all while Candy was inside. He'd stay right there, within earshot. But by the time the second word was forming in his mouth, he had a sudden clear image of what he'd be doing during that time.

And he was right.

No sooner had Candy passed under the blue-topped doorway than a small boy appeared at Tommy's other elbow. The youngster's English was in no way comparable to that of the old man. He knew just two words, but they were sufficient. The first was: "Youguhcgigarreh?" The second: "Iguhsisseh."

Tommy dug in his pockets, came out with a half-full pack, registered the boy's look of approval, and swung his crutches into action. He followed his young friend up and down several of the twisty village alleys, and out along a footpath into the forest. Just about the time he was beginning to get worried, they came out into a small clearing, and a moment later "Sisseh" emerged from behind a tree at the far edge.

She was disconcertingly young, but also unexpectedly attractive: smooth-skinned, graceful, and roundly shaped. . . .

Somewhat later when he found his way back to the blue-topped door in the village, Candy was already waiting for him, looking thoughtful and a little sad. She seemed to be no more in the mood for conversation than was Tommy himself, and they walked back to the base in almost complete silence. Though he noted once or twice that her quiet mood was dictated by less happy considerations than his own, Tommy's ease of mind and body was too great at that moment to encourage much concern for even so desirable a symbol of American womanhood as the beautiful nurse, Candace.

Not that his devotion to her lessened. He dreamed of her still, but the dreams were more pleasantly romantic, and less distressingly carnal. And on those occasions when he found his thoughts of her verging once more toward the improper, he would wander off to the little village and regain what he felt was a

more natural and suitable attitude toward life and love in general.

Then, inevitably, there came one such day when his young procurer was nowhere to be found. Tommy went out to the clearing where Sisseh usually met them, but it was quiet, empty and deserted. Back in the village again, he wandered aimlessly up and down narrow twisting streets, till he found himself passing the blue-topped doorway of the old man whose friendship with a dead GI had started the whole chain of events in motion.

"Good morning, sir," the old man said, and Tommy stopped politely to return the greeting.

"You are looking for your young friend?"

Tommy nodded, and hoped the warmth he could feel on his face didn't show. Small-town gossip, apparently, was much the same in one part of the world as in another.

"I think he will be busy for some time yet," the old man volunteered. "Perhaps another hour . . . his mother required his services for an errand to another village."

"Well, thanks," Tommy said. "Guess I'll come back this afternoon or something. Thanks a lot."

"You may wait here with me if you like. You are most welcome," the old man said hastily. "Perhaps you would care to come into my home and drink tea with me?"

Tommy's manners were good. He had been taught to be respectful to his elders, even to the old colored man who came to clip the hedges. And he knew that an invitation to tea can never be refused without excellent good reason. He had no such reason, and he did have a warm interest in seeing his dusky beauty just as soon as possible. He therefore overcame a natural reluctance to become a visitor in one of the (doubtless) vermin-infested native huts, thanked the old man politely, and accepted the invitation.

Those few steps, passing under the blue-topped doorway for the first time, into the earthen shack, were beyond doubt the most momentous of his young life. When he came out again, a full two hours later, there was nothing on the surface to show what had happened to him . . . except perhaps a more-than-usually thoughtful look on his face. But when Sisseh's little brother pursued him down the village street, Tommy only shook his head. And when the boy persisted, the soldier said briefly: "No got cigarettes."

The statement did not in any way express the empty-handed regret one might have expected. It was rather an impatient dismissal by a man too deeply immersed in weighty affairs to regard either the cigarettes or their value in trade as having much importance.

Not that Tommy had lost any of his vigorous interest in the pleasures of the flesh. He had simply acquired a more far-sighted point of view. He had plans for the future now, and they did not concern a native girl whose affection was exchangeable for half a pack of Camels.

Swinging along the jungle path on his crutches, Tommy was approaching a dazzling new vista of hope and ambition. The goals he had once considered quite out of reach now seemed to be just barely beyond his grasp, and he had already embarked on a course of action calculated to remedy that situation. Tommy was apprenticed to telepath.

The way it happened, the whole incredible notion seemed like a perfectly natural idea. Inside the one-room hut, the old man had introduced himself as Armod Something-or-other. (The last name was a confusion of clashing consonants and strangely inflected vowels that Tommy never quite got straight.) He then invited his young guest to make himself comfortable, and began the preparation of the tea by pouring water from a swan-necked glass bottle into a burnished copper kettle suspended by graceful chains from a wrought-iron tripod over a standard-brand hardware-store Sterno stove.

The arrangement was typical of everything in the room. East met West at every point with a surprising minimum of friction, once the first impact was absorbed and the psychological dislocation adjusted.

Tommy settled down at first on a low couch, really no more than a native mat covering some woven webbing, stretched across a frame that stood a few inches off the floor on carved ivory claws. But he discovered quickly enough that it did not provide much in the way of comfort for a long-legged young man equipped with a bulky cast. An awful lot of him seemed to be stretched out over the red-and-white tile pattern linoleum that covered the center of the dirt floor . . . and he noticed, too, that his crutches had

left a trail of round dust-prints on the otherwise spotless surface.

He wiped off the padded bottoms of the crutches with his clean handkerchief, and struggled rather painfully back to his feet.

The whole place was astonishingly clean. Tommy wandered around, considerably relieved at the absence of any very noticeable insect life, examining the curious contents of the room, and politely refraining from asking the many questions that came to mind.

The furnishing consisted primarily of low stools and tables, with a few shelves somehow set into the clay wall. There was one large, magnificently carved mahogany chest, which might have contained Ali Baba's fortune; and on a teakwood table in the corner, with a pad on the floor for a seat, stood a large and shiny late-model American standard typewriter.

A bookshelf near the table caught Tommy's eye, and the old man, without turning around, invited his guest to inspect it. Here again was the curious mixture of East and West: new books on philosophy, psychology, semantics, cybernetics published in England and America. Several others, though fewer, on spiritualism, psychic phenomena, and radio-esthesia. And mixed in with them, apparently at random, short squat volumes and long thin ones, lettered in unfamiliar scripts and ideographs.

On the wall over the bookshelf hung two strips of parchment, such as may be seen in many eastern homes, covered with ideograph characters brilliantly illuminated. Between them was a glass-faced black frame containing the certification of Armod's license to practice medicine in the state of Idaho, U.S.A.

It did not seem in any way unnatural that Armod should come over and answer explicitly the obvious questions that this collection of anomalies brought to mind. In fact, it took half an hour or more of conversation before Tommy began to realize that his host was consistently replying to his thoughts rather than to his words. It took even longer for him to agree to the simple experiment that started him on his course of study.

But not much longer. An hour after he first entered the hut, Tommy Bender sat staring at eight slips of white paper on which were written, one word to each, the names of eight different objects in the room. The handwriting was careful, precise and clear. Not so the thoughts in Tommy's mind. He had "guessed," accurately, five of the eight objects, holding the faded piece of paper in his hand. He tried to tell himself it was coincidence; that some form of trickery might be involved. The hand is quicker than the eye. . . . But it was his own hand that held the paper; he himself unfolded it after making his guess. And Armod's calm certainty was no help in the direction of skepticism.

"Well," Tommy asked uncertainly, "what made you think I could do it?"

"Anyone can do it," Armod said quietly. "For some it is easier than for others. To bring it under control, to learn to do it accurately, every time, is another matter altogether. But the sense is there, in all of us."

Tommy was a bit crestfallen; whether he believed in it or not, he preferred to think there was something a bit special about it.

Armod smiled, and answered his disappointment. "For you, it is easier I think than for many others. You are—ah, I despise your psychiatric jargon, but there is no other way to say it so you will understand—you are at ease with yourself. Relaxed. You have few basic conflicts in your personality, so you can reach more easily into the —no it is not the 'subconscious.' It is a part of your mind you have simply not used before. You can use it. You can train it. You need only the awareness of it, and—practice."

Tommy thought that over, slowly, and one by one the implications of it dawned on him.

"You mean I can be a mind reader? Like the acts they do on the stage? I could do it professionally?"

"If you wished to. Few of those who pretend to read minds for the entertainment of others can really do so. Few who have the ability and training would use it in that way. You—ah, you are beginning to grasp some of the possibilities," the old man said, smiling.

"Go on," Tommy grinned. "Tell me what I'm thinking now."

"It would be most . . . indelicate. And . . . I will tell you; I do not believe you will have much chance of success, with her. She is an unusual young woman. Others . . . you will be startled, I think, to find how often a forbidding young lady is more hopeful even than willing."

"You're on," Tommy told him. "When do the lessons start, and how much?"

The price was easy; the practice was harder. Tommy gave up smoking entirely, suffered a bit, got over it, and turned his full attention to the procedures involved in gaining "awareness." He lay for hours on his cot, or sat by himself on a lonely hillside in the afternoon sun, learning to sense the presence of every part of himself as fully as that of the world around him.

He learned a dozen different ways of breathing, and discovered how each of them changed, to some slight degree, the way the rest of his body "felt" about things. He found out how to be completely receptive to impressions and sensations from outside himself; and after that, how to exclude them and be aware only of his own functioning organism. He discovered he could feel his heart beating and his food digesting, and later imagined he could feel the wound in his leg healing, and thought he was actually helping it along.

This last piece of news he took excitedly to Armod along with his full ration of cigarettes—and was disappointed to have his mentor receive his excited outpourings with indifference.

"If you waste your substance on such side issues," Armod finally answered his insistence with downright disapproval, "you will be much longer in coming to the true understanding."

Tommy thought that over, swinging back along the jungle path on his crutches, and came to the conclusion that he could do without telepathy a little longer, if tic could just walk on his own two feet again. Not that

really believed the progress was anything but illusory—until he heard the medics' exclamations of surprise the next time they changed the cast.

After that, he was convinced. The whole rigamorole was producing some kind of result; maybe it would even, incredibly, do what Armod said it would.

Two weeks later, Tommy got his first flash of certainty. He was, by then, readily proficient in picking thoughts out of Armod's mind; but he knew, too, that the old man was "helping" him . . . maintaining no barriers at all against invasion. Other people had habitual defenses that they didn't even know how to let down. Getting through the walls of verbalization, habitual reaction, hurt, fear and anger, to find out what was really happening inside the mind of a telepathically "inert" person took skill and determination.

That first flash could not in any way be described as "mind reading." Tommy did not hear or read or see any words or images. All he got was a wave of feeling; he was sure it was not his own feeling only because he was just then on his way back from a solitary hillside session in which he had, with considerable thoroughness, identified all the sensations his body then contained.

He was crossing what was laughably referred to as the "lawn"—an area of barren ground decorated with unrootable clumps of tropical weeds, extending from the mess hall to the surgery shack and surrounded by the barracks buildings—when the overwhelming wave of emotion hit him.

It contained elements of affection, interest, and—he checked again to be certain—desire. Desire for a man. He was quite sure now that the feeling was not his, but somebody else's.

He looked about, with sudden dismay, aware for the first time of a difficulty he had not anticipated. That he was "receiving" someone else's emotions he was certain; whose, he did not know.

In front of the surgery shack, a group of nurses stood together, talking. No one else was in sight. Tommy realized, unhappily, that the lady who was currently feeling amorous did not necessarily have to be in his line of vision. He had learned enough about the nature of telepathy by then to understand that it could penetrate physical barriers with relative ease. But he had a hunch. . . .

He had learned enough, too, to understand some part of the meaning of that word, "hunch." He deliberately stopped thinking, insofar as he could, and followed his hunch across the lawn to the group of nurses. As he approached them, he let instinct take over entirely. Instead of speaking to them, he made as if to walk by, into the shack.

"Hey there, Lieutenant," one of them called out, and Tommy strained his muscles not to smile with delight. He turned around, innocently, inquiring.

"Surgery's closed now," the little red-headed one said sharply. That wasn't the one who'd called to him. It was the big blonde; he was almost sure.

"Oh?" he said. "I was out back of the base, on the hill there, and some damn bug bit me. Thought I

ought to get some junk put on it. You never know what's hit you with the kind of skeeters they grow out here." He addressed the remark to the group in general, and threw in a grin that he had been told made him look most appealing like a little boy, meanwhile pulling up the trouser on his good leg to show a fortuitously placed two-day-old swelling. "One leg out of commission is enough for me," he added. "Thought maybe I ought to kind of keep a special eye on the one that still works." He looked up, and smiled straight at the big blonde.

She regarded the area of exposed skin with apparent lack of interest, hesitated, jangled a key in her pocket, and said abruptly, "All right, big boy."

Inside the shack, she locked the door behind them, without appearing to do anything the least bit unusual. Then she got a tube of something out of a cabinet on the wall, and told him to put his leg up on the table.

Right then, Tommy began to understand the real value of what he'd learned, and how to use it. There was nothing in her words or her brisk movements to show him how she felt. While she was smoothing the gooey disinfectant paste on his bite, and covering it with a bandage, she kept up a stream of light talk and banter that gave no clue at all to the way she was appraising him covertly. Tommy had nothing to do but make the proper responses—two sets of them.

Out loud, he described with appropriate humor the monstrous size and appearance of the bug that they both knew hadn't bitten him. But all the time he kept talking and kidding just as if he was still a nice American boy, he could feel her wanting him, until he began to get confused between what she wanted and what he did; and his eyes kept meeting hers, unrelated to the words either of them were saying, to let her know he knew.

Each time her hand touched his leg, it was a little more difficult to banter. When it got too difficult, he didn't.

Later, stretched out on his cot in the barracks, he reviewed the entire incident with approval, and made a mental note of one important item. The only overt act the girl made—locking the door—had been accompanied by a strong isolated thought surge of "Don't touch me!" Conversely, the more eager she felt, the more professional she acted. Without the aid of his special one-way window into her mind, he knew he would have made his play at precisely the wrong moment—assuming he'd had the courage to make it at all. As it was, he'd waited till there was no longer any reason for her to believe that he'd even noticed the locking of the door.

That was Lesson Number One about women: Wait! Wait till you're sure she's sure. Tommy repeated it happily to himself as he fell asleep that night; and only one small regret marred his contentment. It wasn't Candace. . . .

Lesson Number Two came more slowly, but Tommy was an apt pupil, and he learned it equally well: Don't wait too long! The same simple forthright maneuver, he found, that would sweep a normally co-operative young lady literally off her feet if the timing was right would, ten minutes later, earn him nothing more than an indignant slap in the face. By that time, the girl had already decided either that he wasn't interested (insulted); or that he wasn't experienced enough to do anything about it (contemptuous); or that he was entirely lacking in sensitivity, and couldn't possibly understand her at all (both).

These two lessons Tommy studied assiduously. Between them, they defined the limits of that most remarkable point in time, the Precise Moment. And the greatest practical value of his new skill, so far as Tommy could see, was in being able to locate that point with increasing accuracy. The most noticeable property of the human mind is its constant activity; it is a rare man—and notoriously an even rarer woman—who has only one point of view on a given subject, and can stick to it. Tommy discovered soon enough that whatever he was after, whether it was five bucks to get into a poker game, or a date with one of the nurses, the best way to get it was to wait for that particular moment when the other person really wanted to give it to him.

It should be noted that Tommy Bender retained some ethics during this period. After the first two games, he stopped playing poker. Possibly, he was affected by the fact that suspicious rumors about his "luck" were circulating too freely; but it is more likely that the game had lost its punch. He didn't really need the money out there anyhow. And the process of his embitterment was really just beginning.

Three weeks after the incident in the surgery shack, Tommy got his orders for transfer to a stateside hospital. During that short time, though still impeded by cast and crutches, he acquired a quantity and quality of experience with women that more than equaled the total of his previous successes. And along with it, he suffered a few shocks.

That Tommy had both manners and ethics has already been established. He also had morals. He thought he ought to go to church more often than he did; he took it for granted that all unmarried women were virgins till proved otherwise; he never (or hardly ever) used foul language in mixed company. That kind of thing.

It was, actually, one of the smaller shocks, discovering the kind of language some of those girls knew. Most of them were nurses, after all, he reminded himself; they heard a lot of guys talking when they were delirious or in pain, but—but that didn't explain how clearly they seemed to understand the words. Or that the ones who talked the most refined were almost always the worst offenders in their minds.

The men's faults he could take in stride; it was the women who dismayed him. Not that he didn't find some "pure" girls; he did, to his horror. But the kind of feminine innocence he'd grown up believing in just didn't seem to exist. The few remaining virgins fell into two categories: those who were so convinced of their own unattractiveness that they didn't even know it when a pass was being made at them; and those who were completely preoccupied with a sick kind of fear-and-loathing that Tommy couldn't even stand to peep at for very long.

Generally speaking, the girls who weren't actually looking for men (which they did with a gratifying but immoral enthusiasm), were either filled with terror and disgust, or were calculating wenches who made their choice for or against the primrose path entirely in terms of the possible profit involved, be it in fast cash or future wedded bliss.

Tommy did find one exception to this generally unpleasant picture. To his determined dismay, and secret pleasure, he discovered that Candace really lived up to his ideal of the American girl. Her mind was a lovely, orderly place, full of softness and a sort of generalized liking for almost everybody. Her thoughts on the subject of most interest to him were also in order: She was apparently well-informed in an impersonal sort of way; ignorant of any personal experience and rather hazily, pleasurably, anticipating the acquisition of that experience in some dim future when she pictured herself as happily in love and married.

As soon as he was quite sure of this state of affairs, Tommy proposed. Candace as promptly declined, and that, for the time being, terminated their relationship. The nurse went about her duties, and whatever personal matters occupied her in her free time. The soldier returned to his pursuit of parapsychology, women and disillusion.

Tommy had no intention of taking these troubles to his teacher. But neither did Armod have to wait for the young man to speak before he knew. This time he was neither stern nor impatient. He spoke once again of the necessity for continuing study till one arrived at the "true understanding," but now he was alternately pleading and encouraging. At one point he was even apologetic.

"I did not know that you would learn so quickly," he said. "If I had foreseen this—doubtless I would have done precisely what I did. One cannot withhold knowledge, and . . ."

He paused, smiling gently and with great sadness. "And the truth of the matter is, you did not ask for knowledge. I offered it. I sold it! Because I could not deny myself the petty pleasure of your cigarettes!"

"Well," Tommy put in uncomfortably, "You made good on it, didn't you? Seems to me you did what you said you would."

"Yes—no," he corrected himself. "I did nothing but show the way. What has been done you did for yourself, as all men must. I cannot see or smell or taste for you; no more could I open the way into men's hearts for you. I gave you a key, let us say, and with it you unlocked the door. Now you look on the other side, but you do not, you can not, understand what you see. It is as though one were to show an infant, just learning to use his eyes, a vision of violent death and bloody birth. He sees, but he does not know. . . ."

Tommy stirred on the low couch, where he could now sit, as the old man did, cross-legged and at ease. But he was uneasy now. He picked up the cane that had replaced the crutches, toying with it,

thinking hopefully of departure. Armod understood, and said quickly, "Listen now: I am an old man, and weak in my way. But I have shown you that I have knowledge of a sort. There is much you have yet to learn. If you are to perceive so clearly the depths of the human soul, then it is essential that you learn also to understand. . . ."

The old man spoke on; the young one barely listened. He knew he was going home in another week. There was no sense talking about continuing his studies with Armod. And there was no need to continue; certainly no wish to. What he had already learned, Tommy felt, was very likely more than enough. He sat as quietly as he could, being patient till the old man was done talking. Then he stood up, and muttered something about getting back in time for lunch.

Armod shook his head and smiled, still sadly. "You will not hear me. Perhaps you are right. How can I speak to you of the true understanding, when I am still the willing victim of my own body's cravings? I am not fit. I am not fit. . . ."

Tommy Bender was a very disturbed young man. He was getting what he'd wanted, and he didn't like it. He was grateful to Armod, and also angry at him. His whole life seemed to be a string of contradictions.

He drifted along in this unsettled state for the remaining week of his foreign service. Then, in a sudden flurry of affection and making amends, the day he got his orders, he decided to see the old man just once more. Most of the morning he spent racing around the base rounding up all the cigarettes he could get with what cash he had on hand, plus a liberal use of the new skills Armod had taught him. Then he got his gear together quickly. He was due at the air strip at 1400 hours, and at 1130 he left the base for a last walk to the village, the cane in one hand, two full cartons of butts in the other.

He found Armod waiting for him in a state of some agitation, apparently expecting him. There ensued a brief formal presentation of Tommy's gift, and acceptance of it; then for the last time, the old man invited him to drink tea, and ceremoniously set the water to simmer in the copper pot.

They both made an effort, and managed to get through the tea-drinking with no more than light polite talk. But when Tommy stood up to leave, Armod broke down.

"Come back," he begged. "When you are free of your service, and have funds to travel, come back to study again."

"Why, sure, Armod," Tommy said. "Just as soon as I can manage it."

"Yes, I see. This is what they call a social lie. It is meant not to convince me, but to terminate the discussion. But listen, I beg you, one moment more. You can see and hear in the mind now; but you cannot talk, nor can you keep silence. Your own mind is open to all who come and know how to look—"

"Armod, please, I—"

"You can learn to project thought as I do. To build a barrier against intrusion. You can—"

"Listen, Armod," Tommy broke in determinedly again. "I don't have to know any of that stuff. In my home town, there isn't anybody else who can do this stuff. And there's no reason for me to ever come back here. Look, I'll tell you what I can do. When I get back home, I can send you all the cigarettes you want—"

"No!"

The old man jumped up from his mat on the floor, and took two rapid strides to the shelf where Tommy's present lay. He picked up the two cartons, and tossed them contemptuously across the room, to land on the couch next to the soldier.

"No!" he said again, just a little less shrilly. "I do not want your cigarettes! I want nothing, do you understand? Nothing for myself! Only to regain the peace of mind I have lost through my weakness! Go to another teacher, then," he was struggling for calm. "There are many others. In India. In China. Perhaps even in your own country. Go to one who is better fitted than I. But do not stop now! You can learn more, much more!"

He was trembling with emotion as he spoke, his skinny frame shaking, his black eyes popping as though they would burst out of his head. "As for your cigarettes," he concluded, "I want none of them. I vow now, until the day I die, I shall never again give way to this weakness!"

He was a silly, excitable old man, who was going to regret these words. Tommy stood up feeling the foolish apologetic grin on his face and unable to erase it. He did not pick up the cigarettes.

"Good-bye Armod," he said, and walked out for the last time through the blue-topped door.

But whatever either of them expected, and regardless of Tommy's own wishes, his education did not stop there. It had already gone too far to stop. The perception-awareness process seemed to be self-perpetuating, and though he practiced his exercises no more, his senses continued to become more acute—both the physical the psychological.

At the stateside hospital, where his leg rapidly improved, Tommy had some opportunity to get out and investigate the situation with the nice old-fashioned girls who'd stayed at home and didn't go to war. By that time, he could "see" and "hear" pretty clearly.

He didn't like what he found.

That did it, really. All along, out at the base hospital, he'd clung to the notion that the women at home would be different—that girls so far from civilization, were exposed to all sorts of indecencies a nice girl never had to face, and shouldn't have to. Small wonder they turned cynical and evil-minded.

The girls at home, he discovered, were less of the first, and far more of the second.

When Tommy Bender got home again, he was grimly determined and firmly disillusioned. He knew what he wanted out of life, saw no hope at all of ever getting it, and had very few scruples about the methods he used to get the next-best things.

In a remarkably short time, he made it clear to his erstwhile friends and neighbors that he was almost certain to get anything he went after. He made money; he made love; and of course he made enemies. All the while, his friends and neighbors tried to understand. Indeed, they thought they did. A lot of things can happen to a man when he's been through hell in combat, and then had to spend months rotting and recuperating in a lonely Far Eastern field hospital.

But of course they couldn't even begin to understand what had happened to Tommy. They didn't know what it was like to live on a steadily plunging spiral of anger and disillusionment, all the time liking people less, and always aware of how little they liked you.

To sign a contract with a man, knowing he would defraud you if he could; he couldn't, of course, because you got there first. But when you met him afterward, you rocked with the blast of hate and envy he threw at you.

To make love to a woman, and know she was the wrong woman for you or you the wrong man for her. And then to meet her afterward ...

Tommy had in the worst possible sense, got out of bed on the wrong side. When he first awoke to the knowledge of other people's minds, he had seen ugliness and fear wherever he looked, and that first impress of bitterness on his own mind had colored everything he had seen since.

For almost five years after he came home, Tommy Bender continued to build a career, and ruin reputations. People tried to understand what had happened to him . . . but how could they?

Then something happened. It started with an envelope in his morning mail. The envelope was marked "Personal," so it was unopened by his secretary, and left on the side of his desk along with three or four other thin, squarish, obviously non-business, envelopes. As a result, Tommy didn't read it till late that afternoon, when he was trying to decide which girl to see that night.

The return address said "C. Harper, Hotel Albemarle, Topeka, Kansas." He didn't know anyone in Topeka, but the name Harper was vaguely reminiscent. He was intrigued enough to open that one first, and the others never were opened at all.

"Dear Tommy," it read. "First of all, I hope you still remember me. It's been quite a long time, hasn't it? I just heard, from Lee Potter (the little, dark girl who came just before you left . . . remember her?)"—Tommy did, with some pleasure—"that you were living in Hartsdale, and had some real-estate connections there. Now I'd like to ask a favor. . . .

"I've just had word that I've been accepted as Assistant Superintendent of the Public Health Service therein Hartsdale—and I'm supposed to start work on the 22nd. The only thing is, I can't leave my job here till just the day before. So I wondered if you could help me find a place to stay beforehand? Sort of mail-order real estate service?

"I feel I'm being a little presumptuous, asking this, when perhaps you don't even remember me—but I do hope you won't mind. And please don't go to any special trouble. From what Lee said, I got the idea this might be right in your line of business. If it's not, don't worry. I'm sure I can find something when I get there.

"And thanks, ahead of time, for anything you can do.

"Cordially," it concluded, "Candace Harper."

Tommy answered the letter the same day, including a varied list of places and prices hurriedly worked up by his real-estate agent. That he owned real estate was true; that he dealt in it, not at all. His letter to Candy did not go into these details, just told her how vividly he remembered her, and how good it would be to see her again, with some questions about the kind of furnishings and decor she'd prefer. "If you're going to get in early enough on the 21st," he wound up, "how about having dinner with me? Let me know when you're coming, anyhow. I'd like to meet you, and help you get settled."

For the next eleven days, Tommy lived in an almost happy whirl of preparation, memory and anticipation. In all the years since he had proposed to Candace, he had never met another girl who filled so perfectly the mental image of the ideal woman with which he had first left home. He kept telling himself she wouldn't, couldn't, still be the same person. Even a non-telepath would get bitter and disillusioned in five years of the Wonderful Post-War World. She couldn't be the same. . . .

And she wasn't. She was older, more understanding, more tolerant, and if possible warmer and pleasanter than before. Tommy met her at the station, bought her some dinner, took her to the perfect small apartment where she was, unknown to herself, paying only half the rent. He stayed an hour, went down to run some errands for her, stayed another half-hour, and knew by then that in the most important respects she hadn't changed at all.

There wasn't going to be any "Precise Moment" with Candy; not that side of a wedding ceremony.

Tommy couldn't have been more pleased. Still, he was cautious. He didn't propose again till three weeks later, when he'd missed seeing her two days in a row due to business-social affairs. If they were married, he could have taken her along.

When he did propose, she lived up to all his qualifications again. She said she wanted to think it over. What she thought was: Oh, yes! Oh, yes, he's the one I want! But it's too quick! How do I know for sure? He never even thought of me all this time . . . all the time I was waiting and hoping to hear from him . . . how can he be sure so soon? He might be sorry. . . .

"Let me think about it a few days, will you, Tommy?" she said, and he was afraid to take her in his arms for fear he'd crush her with his hunger.

Four weeks later they were married. And when Candy told him her answer, she also confessed what he already knew: that she'd regretted turning him down ever since he left the field hospital; that she'd been thinking of him, loving him, all the long years in between.

Candy was a perfect wife, just as she had been a perfect nurse, and an all-too-perfect dream girl. The Benders' wedding was talked about for years afterwards; it was one of those rare occasions when everything turned out just right. And the bride was so beautiful . . .

The honeymoon was the same way. They took six weeks to complete a tour of the Caribbean, by plane, ship and car. They stayed where they liked as long as they liked, and did what they liked, all the time. And not once in those six weeks was there any serious difference in what they liked. Candy's greatest wish at every point was to please Tommy, and that made things very easy for both of them.

And all the while, Tommy was gently, ardently, instructing his lovely bride in the arts of matrimony. He was tender, patient and understanding, as he had known beforehand he would have to be. A girl who gets to the age of twenty-six with her innocence intact is bound to require a little time for readjustment.

Still, by the time they came back, Tommy was beginning to feel a sense of failure. He knew that Candace had yet to experience the fulfillment she had hoped for, and that he had planned to give her.

Watching her across the breakfast table on the dining terrace of their new home, he was enthralled as ever. She was lovely in negligee, her soft hair falling around her face, her eyes shining with true love as they met his.

It was a warm day, and he saw, as he watched her, the tiny beads of sweat form on her upper lip. It

took him back . . . way back . . . and from the vividness of the hospital scene, he skipped to an equally clear memory of that last visit to Armod, the teacher.

He smiled, and reached for his wife's hand, wondering if ever he would be able to tell her what had come of that walk they took to the village together. And he pressed her hand tighter, smiling again, as he realized that now, for the first time, he had a use for the further talents the old man had promised him.

That would be one way to show Candace the true pleasure she did not yet know. If he could project his own thoughts and emotions ...

He let go of her hand, and sat back, sipping his coffee, happy and content, with just the one small problem to think about. Maybe I should have gone back for a while, after all, he thought idly.

"Perhaps you should have, dear," said innocent Candace. "I did."