

CONTACT BETWEEN EQUALS

Algis Budrys

ALICIA CAME OVER to my daybed with a rustle of cotton and a whisper of silk, and bent over me with a breath of perfume. "Will? It's time. Are you awake, Will?"

Awake? Because I'd been lying there motionless, it hadn't occurred to her that I might be counting the chimes from the clock in its hand-rubbed wooden case on the mantel.

"Dr. Champley's here, Will."

"I know. I heard him drive up." I opened my eyes with a brush of lashes against the loosely-wound gauze that swathed my head, and let in the light.

The light was white. Alicia'd taught me during the past week--she'd played colored lights on the gauze, and taught me the names of the colors. We had also talked about perspective, and about the perception of shape and texture from a distance; I'm sure Dr. Champley had outlined a program of education, to get me a little re-oriented ahead of time.

Alicia had been surprised how easily it had gone. She ought not to have been. I'd listened to talking books all my life, and there was radio, of course. And forty years of hearing people in conversation around me. I was a graduate of Harvard Business School. I was a millionaire--five and six times the millionaire my father had been. That did not happen by accident. It could not have happened to a man who did not think intelligently, analytically, and systematically. I had an exact picture of the world, in one-to-one correspondence with the world perceived by the sighted. My reorientation would consist of no more than simple transposition from one system to the other.

Champley had gotten out of his car, parked on the gravel road fronting the cottage. He came up the flagstone steps to the porch, opened the screen door, crossed the porch, knocked briefly, opened the front door, and stepped briskly into the room. The screen door of the porch sighed shut on its air spring, and latched.

"Hello, Doctor," Alicia said.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Schaeffer. Is Mr. Schaeffer awake?"

It was a long speech for him. I put it away in my mind, to flesh out what little I knew about him.

Up to now, he'd been little more than someone Alicia'd talked about a great deal; the famous, brilliant young surgeon who'd become interested in William Schaeffer's case, and who thought he could do something about it. I'd taken considerable thought on all the factors involved. But Champley had been all business during the brief examination in his office--a few gentle touches around the face, a lifting of my lids, a click of the unseen flashlight, a thoughtful grunt or two, and one muttered word: "Maybe."

No buttering up, no bedside manner. I'd liked that. All the other verdicts had come from men who went through elaborate lectures to hide their inability. And it was always definite: "Yes,"

or "No." The second had at least been right. The first had been humbug.

Well, Champley'd brought it off, as far as we could tell at the moment. Alicia said it had only taken an hour's operating time. I'd come out of anesthesia in the ambulance, leaving Champley's clinic, and the most difficult part of the whole business had been remembering not to move my eyes at all for thirty-six hours. The ambulance had brought Alicia and me to this lake cottage of Champley's, because it was nearer his clinic than any of my lodges. Alicia and I had spent the week here alone, without distractions, working toward this time.

Well, I thought, I'm here, and he's here, and I'm getting impatient. "Doctor?"

"Yes, Mr. Schaeffer. Right here." He came across the raffia rug in crepe-soled shoes. He was wearing a tweed suit--a nubby tweed, that rubbed as he moved his arms and legs--and he smelled of aftershave lotion.

"You smelled like iodoform in your office." And he had not met me at his clinic. An anesthetist had put me under. I knew damnably little about him. Except, of course, for what Alicia had told me.

"Yes," he said. "Well, now, let's see what I look like." Bandage shears clicked in his hand. Alicia put her cool fingers on my shoulder.

There was a cold, greasy feeling of metal sliding along my cheek. The gauze pulled slightly. Then it lay limp across the bridge of my nose.

"Try to keep your eyes closed, Mr. Schaeffer. Just for the moment. Let the light come through the lids before you open them."

"All right." He lifted the gauze, and the light was pink. I lay quietly, gathering myself. I did not feel grossly excited. But all week I had been extremely restless and ill-at-ease. Perhaps I would not let myself feel excitement. Perhaps *this* was excitement. Now, of course, the feeling was strongest of all, with things approaching their climaxes.

I did not open my eyes until Champley asked me to. I opened them slowly, and all I saw at first were blurred colors. That was all right. All that was familiar. But there was the new business of focusing to be done, and that took some time. Binocular vision was something I understood in theory--though I had some rather distorted images of what: a lens might be--but I had to teach myself control of the necessary muscles.

After that, I had to make for myself all the discoveries a baby makes--what human beings looked like, where my hands and feet were; all the momentous things. I made them. I made them slowly and carefully. Alicia and Champley were patient. Finally I felt sure of myself.

Alicia, it seemed, had yellow hair, and was wearing a green dress. Champley was rather taller than she. He had black hair, and his suit was brown. It was all rather strange, seeing things which had previously only occupied relative positions. But we got through it all, and easily enough.

I went outside with them, finally, wearing smoked glasses I stood like a child with an open primer. "Mountains. Forest. Sky. Clouds. Lake. Cottage. Cliff."

The cottage was built out from the side of the steep slope, with only the front porch touching earth at the edge of the narrow road that led down to the lake. The remainder was supported

on pilings. I was made uneasy by all these things, but I shuffled my feet on the gravel of the road and turned my head so the breeze crossed my cheek, and then I was comfortable.

We went back into the cottage, and I sat down on the edge of the daybed. I suppose I was feeling a certain bravado at my new skill. I searched over the room. Daybed here. Fireplace there, with clock. Chairs, table, another small table with a slick-faced box on it. "That would be a television set, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, but that's for another day," Champley said quickly. "We don't want too much strain." He opened a fresh package of gauze, and brought out two eyepads. Alicia stood in the center of the room, her legs bathed by a bar of sunlight exactly as I had heard a similar scene described in a book. The impression generated by the author had been one of youth and warmth. Alicia...Well, Alicia.

"Wait," I said. "I want to talk to you both."

"Of course," Champley said. "But you can do that just as well with your eyes bandaged."

"No. I want to watch your faces move. Sit down together in front of me."

Alicia raised her eyebrows toward Champley. Champley did not change expression in response. He made a faint wet sound when he moved his tongue away from the roof of his mouth. He moved to one of the two chairs in front of the fireplace and swung it around. He moved the other for Alicia, and both of them sat down.

I looked from one to the other, and fastened my glance on Champley.

"Well, you delivered," I said. "That excuses a great deal. But I won't give you Alicia and a fee in addition. You'll have to be satisfied with just her."

I had, for the first time, the opportunity to see that situation in which a writer inevitably says: "A look of consternation passed between them, and they burst into furious bickering. They began denying their guilt vehemently, and, in the end, fell to blaming each other for having been careless."

Alicia disappointed me. She merely turned to Champley and said: "I told you he was smarter than either one of us." Champley shrugged as though it hardly mattered, though it took me a moment's thought to understand what it was he had done with his shoulders. He said nothing, and continued to watch me with his face in repose. I took that for a sign of confidence, and did not like it.

"Very well," I said, "we understand each other. I'm grateful for your skill, Champley. I trust your other patients will enable you to support Alicia. But I can't understand why you and she went to all this trouble. Or where it all profits her. Does she think a sighted man will live to a riper old age than a blind one? And if so--I repeat--where has all this profited her?"

I did not like their reaction pattern. Not at all. I stood up and began prowling about the room.

"Sit down, Will!" Alicia said nervously.

That was more like it. But, why now? "Why?"

"You're making me nervous."

"Why now? Why must I sit still? Why must my eyes be bandaged immediately? What will I see? Why does this cottage seem a great deal bigger from the outside than the living room, bedroom, bath and kitchen I know?"

A look passed between them. It might have been consternation. Apparently, it had paid me to watch my feet as I walked and so learn the visual length of my average stride. "What's behind the kitchen?" I walked toward it, and Champley was up facing me, his schooled control deteriorating far enough to let me see it was a panic move.

"There's nothing back there," he said.

And that, of course, was patently ridiculous. I pushed by him and strode into the kitchen. There was a clear space along the wall, between a white box that was the refrigerator and the sink with its dripping faucet. There were arcing scuff marks on the floor. There was a door there, without a handle, hidden in the butted planks of the paneling. I ran my hands over it. I found no way of opening it. Something on the other side, quite large, and breathing, rolled up and nudged against it. The planking creaked.

I turned quickly and went back into the living room. Alicia was tugging at the baseboard plug of the television set.

"Now, why," I said, "would that be the most important action you could take to keep me in ignorance?"

"It was *loose*, Will! I was pushing it back *in!*" she cried. She was practically out of control.

I shook my head. "Alicia."

Champley tried to stop me from going to the television set. He was impelled by urgency, but I was William Schaeffer. I brushed him aside and clicked the left-hand switch. Alicia stepped back.

The screen blazed up. It was flat, uncolored, and I could not adjust to that immediately. I scarcely heard what noise the set might be making. There was something pictured on it that I had never seen before, naturally enough, moving something like a mouth. Once I had absorbed that, I could listen. "...going to get you," it--or, rather, another component of the set said. The delivery was calm, without much intonation.

Alicia turned the set off sharply. "That's enough, Will. You'll--you'll hurt your eyes."

I almost laughed. But I was also curious. "What was that thing, anyway?"

"A children's program," Champley said.

"Well, all right, but what, specifically, was that thing?"

"A monster," Alice said irritably. "Please let Dr. Champley bandage your eyes now."

"A monster, eh?" An entire body of literature had suddenly come clear to me. "Fascinating." I turned the set on again.

"Champley," the monster promised in its unhurried tone, "I'm going to get you soon." Then

the screen went blank.

I turned the set off and turned around.

"What a fantastic coincidence!" Champley said.

"Oh, it *couldn't* have said 'Champley'" Alicia exclaimed. "It must have been another name like it."

"It said 'Champley'" I told her. I went back to the daybed and sat down. "All this is very interesting."

"Oh, Will!" Alicia snapped. "Don't be ridiculous! It was some kind of a coincidence. You happened to tune in some children's program at just the right instant."

"And the monster was pronouncing just the right name? Odd. How many Champleys do you suppose there are?" I was not feeling much elation. Cats may enjoy cat-and-mouse. I am not a cat. What I wanted was information.

Champley said nothing. Alicia continued to pay out her pathetic rope:

"This whole thing is...insane! You know very well there aren't any real monsters, and, if there were, what would they be doing on television?"

"Communicating," I said. "Now. Doctor Champley. Why would a monster want to get you?"

"Nothing's going to get me," Champley said.

"No doubt you think so," I said. "But you have already been proven a less effective human being than myself. I have no doubt there are other things in the Universe, as well, that could best you. The question is, where do I fit into your escape plan?"

And where did he meet this monster, and what had he done to incur its enmity? And so forth. But, first of all, why did he need me, why did he need me completely functional, and what did it profit Alicia?

I went quickly into the bedroom, and located the bureau by touch, with my eyes shut. I had no time to waste. With my hands, I found her purse. I opened my eyes, and opened the purse. It was full of gimcracks and written information in the form of a stuffed wallet. All I learned was that she carried a great deal of money, but it was her reaction to my search that I wanted most.

"He's in my wallet!" she cried in the living room. She was at the bedroom door immediately. "Stay out of my personal possessions!" she blazed.

I nodded gratefully. "Thank you very much, dear. You've been an unflinching help. Now--what's in your wallet that could give you away?" I thumbed through the leaves of a ring-bound insert. "Ah. These would be photographs." Like the television picture, they were flat and colorless under their protective celluloid.

She tried to snatch them, and I slapped her hand. Carefully I studied the pictures.

Alicia and Champley on the steps of an elaborate home. Alicia and Champley in a car, she

at the wheel. Nothing else of interest, unless one counted a dozen poses of Alicia in her beauty-contest winning days.

I pursed my lips, and turned toward her. Something caught the corner of my eye. It was a glassy color picture, almost life-sized, of a dark, narrow-faced man. It hung from the back of the bedroom door, and moved.

"Who's that?" I asked sharply.

"That?" She laughed. "Why, that's a mirror. That's you, Will!"

"The Devil it is!" I snapped. Why do they think the blind don't know what they look like? Those pathetic scenes in the novels--the blinking eyes, fresh out from under the bandages; the upheld hand mirror; the wondering gasp: 'Is--is that *me*?' Claptrap. Move the muscles of a face for forty years--feel the flesh twist--shave it, touch it...what, in Heaven, name, do they think a blind man would have most immediately available for his study of the world, if not his own body? Color, no. Texture, shape, diagrammatic configuration, yes. At the very least, no one could ever foist a total stranger on...

I stopped dead still and touched my face. And it wasn't mine. I thought of the photographs. Alicia and *Champley*?

"*Champley!*" I flung the wallet into the living room. I thrust Alicia out of the way. Champley was standing just inside the living room, a hypodermic syringe waiting in his hand. I knocked it aside and closed my hands on his throat. "What did you do?" I asked calmly, calmly increasing the pressure. "How did we trade bodies?"

He could not answer, and pawed feebly at my arms. After a little while, I found myself able to let him go. I pushed him into a chair.

"Well," I said, "now I know what it profits Alicia." Alicia, dabbing at her eyes, slumped on the arm of his chair and stroked his neck.

I marched back and forth across the room, taking stock. "All right. The monster comes out from behind that secret door. He has no other escape, unless it's down a drop great enough to kill or seriously injure him. I say escape because he has an urgent desire but cannot as yet fulfill it. Q.E.D., you've got him caged in there. But he's working loose, and you don't dare go near him to secure him once more. All right. He comes out, he rolls into this room. What does he find? Does he find a blind stranger? No he finds Doctor Champley. He eats me, and you and Alicia live happily ever after. Good. So far, there's logic.

"More logic: you need a perfectly functioning Doctor Champley. You want Alicia. Both of you want my money. Ergo: You switch bodies with me, while ostensibly restoring my sight. You *do* restore my sight, because you're having no trouble seeing out of my eyes. Very good. Everybody's problem is solved. You perform these two complicated operations inside of an hour. Hold. Alicia says you do it inside an hour. No matter. You perform these complicated operations. That's marvelous enough, considering you had to be operating on yourself part of the time. How'd you do it--brain transplant? Good trick. Transmigration of souls? Just as good, but more complicated. Settle for brain transplant. Dandy trick. Impossible. How did you operate on yourself? You trusted another doctor? Faugh! You wouldn't trust your own mother.

"All right. You can do two impossible things before breakfast. I don't believe a word of it. No. You've got an automatic surgical machine, or machines. No such thing exists. No operative technique exists which would leave you and me walking around normally inside of a week, without a scar or a twinge. You're the one with the new eyes, and you're holding up perfectly. You've got hold of some fantastic medical techniques Johns Hopkins never heard of. Where'd you get 'em? What about you is different from every other living soul? *You've* met and offended a monster. Monster. Backtrack that. Alien. Alien being from some other world. Some other world with superior science. All right.

"All right, that's the source of your skill. Why does the monster hate you? Why did he give you *medical* skills? How did you get him caged in here?"

I stopped and drove my fist into my open palm. "Done!" I swung toward Champley and pointed my finger between his eyes. "The alien was sick. He probably crashed. He was injured, and told you how to help him. You agreed to patch him up, but you ran out on him instead, and started in on becoming a Park Avenue surgeon. Now you're fat and frightened. The monster's going to get you. What to do? You find a substitute for yourself--and I'm the patsy. Prove me wrong."

Champley's mouth opened. "I--"

"Prove me wrong!"

Champley shook his head. "No...." he said huskily. "Y'r right."

"And what are you going to do about it?" Alicia demanded triumphantly. "Are you going to force Louis to re-transplant?" She laughed. "You *can't* do it. You can kill him, you can beat him--nothing you can do to him can possibly be as bad as what a loathsome thing like that beast would do to him. You can't even *buy* your way out. You can't *think* your way out. No one but Louis can set up the surgical machine, and he would sooner die. But--kill him and what have you gained?"

"Kill him? Kill my own body? That wouldn't be my kind of thinking, Alicia. Let's try another tack."

"You can try all you want to. You're boxed in, Will."

"I doubt it. No part of this plan has gone right for you. I see no reason why the rest of it should."

"None of the other parts were important."

"I was referring to the general level of intelligence displayed."

"I hope you don't wonder why I'd be glad to get rid of you."

"In the most horrible way you could conjure up. Yes." I smiled. "I never wonder about anything, Alicia. I find out."

There was a perceptible creaking from the back of the cottage. Something quite large was pressing against the kitchen wall.

"What happens if I run for it?" I said thoughtfully. "No. That's no good. One, I'd be on foot and ignorant. You'd have a car to head me off. Two, it would take me some time to establish my identity, and some time longer before I dared tell anyone I had a monster locked up in a summer cottage. Three, Champley might be able to pass for me, with your coaching. Most important, that's a sloppy approach to the problem. The problem's here, and we're all here. Let's get at it."

"Never make it," Champley said, rubbing his throat. "You're good as dead. And you're welcome."

I sat down. "You two don't count. Only the situation gives you your power. All right, change the situation. Disarm you. Make friends with the alien."

"Wish you luck," Champley said. "He's been back there for eight years. He was in agony when he crawled in, and he's been in agony ever since. He hasn't eaten. He hasn't rested. He's been in there, while I waited for him to die, and I wouldn't be surprised if the only thing that keeps him alive is hate."

His voice went up in trembling hysteria, badly controlled. "He won't *die!* I waited. I waited, and he didn't die. He only grew more desperate. You can hear him. He doesn't care anymore how much he hurts himself. He won't die until he gets to me." Then he remembered what he'd done to me, and bared his teeth in joy. It must have been an especially virulent degree of fear that had been haunting him.

"Let's think about this monster," I said. "Monster's what you call him. Let's try calling him an alien. Stranger in a strange land. Hurt. Lost his transportation--his spaceship, his whatd'youcallit, whatever he uses--or he'd limp home. All right. He's trapped, and hurt. Eight years? He's tough. But he can't function well. Along comes a native. What were you, Champley--medical student? Mail-order college quack? Somebody who might help. He establishes communication.

"Ah. *How*, Champley? How did you talk to each other?"

"Why don't you try torturing me to find out?"

"Umn. Might. Later. Let's see if I can work around you...It wasn't television. That's one-way. Does he ordinarily talk in electromagnetic frequencies? When he's among his own kind? Interesting. All I need is a microphone and a transmitter, then. None available. Out. All right. How did *you* talk to him. What kind of wig-wag system'd you use? Telepathy? No. Or this plan of yours would have collapsed a-borning."

I looked up at Champley. "No--it *couldn't* be: plain English speech? This whole substitution would never stand up...or, wait, yes it would. Monster comes out, propelled by years of hatred. Sees Champley--sees me. Champley says: 'Wait! I'm really William Schaeffer.' Does the monster listen? Does it stop? Would I?"

"Plain English speech does it, Champley. All I have to do is go in the kitchen and talk to it while it's still trapped."

Champley reached into his pocket and brought out a flat, glittering blued thing. "All right, Schaeffer. That did it," he said. He pointed it at my knee, and I realized it was a gun. When he fired it, there was a loud noise, and my thigh wrenched as though a swinging girder had

jabbed it. I cupped it in my hands and stared at it, grinding my lips between my teeth.

"Does it hurt, Will?" Alicia murmured.

"Don't worry," Champley told her. "It hurts. Now--Schaeffer; are you going to sit still and do what I tell you, or are you going to try to talk to the monster? I can cripple your other leg. And then your arms. I can leave you helpless on that bed. I suppose I could even break your spine. All I have to do is bandage you up, put new clothes on you over the bandages, and I don't think the monster'll stop to inspect you too closely."

There was a wet look to his and Alicia's faces. That would be perspiration, I thought.

Champley said: "I don't *like* you, Schaeffer. You're too slippery. Too quick. I'm not as smart as you are. The only thing I can do is be completely ruthless."

"That's not reserved for the exclusive use of the stupid," I said.

He licked his lips. "I don't want to break you up, Schaeffer. If possible, I want you moving when the monster comes out." He looked at me with a narrow-eyed smile. "I'd think you'd prefer to have a chance to run for it."

"Hobble for it," Alicia said.

"Crawl for it. Yes," I said, "no doubt that would be the ordinary man's preference. Perhaps it's mine."

"Quit it!" Champley cried. "I'm the man with the gun. Quit trying to take the initiative away from me! Now--be reasonable, damn you! You sit quiet and stop trying to wiggle out of this, and maybe you'll be in shape to get away from it when it comes out."

"I will make no further moves toward contacting the alien," I said.

He relaxed. "Good. Now--roll up the leg of your pants. Alicia, get a compress out of my bag. We can't have him bleeding to death."

"He'll grab me if I go over to him!" Alicia cried.

"I'll have the gun on him!" Champley said angrily. "He won't try anything!"

"He'll try anything!" Alicia answered back.

"Maybe he will and maybe he won't," Champley cried. "Would you rather have the monster grab *me*? Now, *do what you're told!*"

"Don't shout at me!"

"All right," Champley said in a hard voice, seething with temper. "I'll just point the gun at you. That's better than shouting."

Something massive rolled against the kitchen wall, and the house trembled.

"Just you remember something!" Alicia shouted at Champley. "Just you remember this plan

of yours doesn't work out at all without me! Even if you get away from the monster, you're *nothing* without me!"

"By God, I might just try it and see if you're right about that or not!"

"Champley. Alicia," I said. I took my hands away from my thigh and watched the blood spurt. It was pumping out with considerable force. That would be an arterial flow, I thought, raising my eyes and looking at them calmly.

"My God!" Alicia whispered.

"*Get that compress,*" Champley said. "Get it quick! He's doing that *deliberately!*"

They hurried through the business of compressing my leg. It would have been absolutely stupid to take physical action against them. They weren't my antagonists.

The house shook again. Something broke in the kitchen wall with a loud crack.

Champley wiped his face. Alicia jumped up and stood erect. "I'm getting out of here. I'm going to wait out in the car."

"You stay here and finish tying up that compress! And when you're through with that, you're going to wipe up the rug and get new pants on Schaeffer."

"Shut up, the two of you," I said. I reached down and tied the bandage. Getting to my feet, I started across the room.

"Sit *down*, Schaeffer!" Champley shouted.

"I'm going into the bedroom to change my trousers. I'm not going to try to contact the alien. You and Alicia had better get busy at getting the blood off the floor." I made my clumsy way into the bedroom, hoping I had not overestimated the amount of blood I could spare and still continue to function normally. If they were going to keep on quarreling, I needed a quiet place to think. They were irritating me with their pettiness.

The monster had cut into the television circuits. He hadn't done it with apparatus. If he'd had any sort of machinery in there with him, he would long ago have converted it into a cutting tool. He would not be smashing himself bodily against that wall. Not in his condition. No matter how wrought-up he was. All right, he could use electromagnetics without apparatus. That was an extra-normal ability he had.

One. If it was his only one, why did he waste that one possible trump card on a melodramatic gesture? Was he a fool? If he was a fool, I could either handle him on the spur of the moment or else no logical plan would work against him. Stop planning?

No. Assume he knows what he's doing. Assume more than one difference between him and a human being. Keep planning.

What kind of difference? Where's a pipeline into his brain? What do I use to get a hold on him?

Why was he breaking out exactly now? His fury was reaching a climax, but how had he

known Champley was in the cottage at just this time?

Had he heard Champley's--my--voice?

I'd been in the cottage a week. Why was he moving now, and only now. I hadn't heard *him* before today. Were his ears sharper than mine?

Was my voice Champley's?

No. No, by God. My brain used vocal cords in a different way from Champley's. Champley and I were about of a size, and our voices roughly in the same range, but Champley's vocal cords couldn't possibly be identical in length and thickness with mine.

"Alicia!"

"What?" she asked shrilly from the other room.

"Nothing." I fastened the belt of the fresh pair of trousers. It was much more my voice than it was Champley's. It wasn't mine, but close enough to it to fool me through gauze wrapped carefully over my eyes and ears.

The alien couldn't have recognized it. He had some other way of knowing....

The cottage shook. I stepped quickly out into the living room.

The kitchen wall broke down. There was a lurch, a tearing of nails out of wood, and something remorseless came rolling into the living room.

Alicia screamed, and Champley cried: "There he is--over there--that's Champley."

The alien made straight for Champley, took him, reached out, and took Alicia. They hung in the air.

"I have a business proposition to make," I said to the alien.

From somewhere on itself, the alien said: "Let's hear it."

Alicia drove the car, with Champley lolling beside her, his mouth slack and wet. The alien sat on the back seat beside me, covered by a blanket like a bundle of old clothes. From time to time, the alien reached out with part of itself and stroked Champley's neck. Whenever he did, Champley burst into tears.

"Oh, God," Alicia mumbled to herself all the way into New York. "Oh, God, it's all edges and angles and thorns. All black and all slick and all rolling."

"We're agreed, then," I said to the alien. "As soon as Champley and I have re-exchanged bodies, I will use the machine to heal you. Then my subsidiary corporations will begin construction of a new interstellar vessel for you. In return, yo" "We're agreed, then," I said to the alien. "As soon as Champley and I have re-exchanged bodies, I will use the machine to heal you. Then my subsidiary corporations will begin construction of a new interstellar vessel for you. In return, you will pass to us as much scientific knowledge as we are capable of encompassing."

"Agreed," the alien said from under his covering. "You're much more satisfying to deal with than that other one."

"I should have known you'd recognize Champley no matter what disguise he was wearing."

"Recognize? Champley? I thought all you people were named Champley."

"No," I said slowly, "I, for instance, am William Schaeffer."

"Interesting," the alien said. "Well. Now I have to revise my warning. I like you, but that's beside the point. We're engaged in business. I have to say that if you betray me, I will get you, William Schaeffer. You understand that?"

"It's the best practical basis for doing business. Clear-cut."

"Yes. We're both practical men," the alien said. "I thought Champley was the best I could do, and took the chance. It's a shame I can't read minds, or I wouldn't have made the mistake. But I can literally see the presence of practicality, like a glow shining around a man's mind."

"You can," I said.

"Certainly," the alien told me. "I'm amazed at the difference in degree between you and Champley. It's the only worthwhile measure of intelligence. And as you said, practicality is the only worthwhile rule of conduct. In any environment, it's mandatory always to deal with the most practical creature and discard the others before they can muddle the picture. The ability to sense practicality directly is an invaluable survival trait. It has raised my people to the heights. It is what separates us from the animals. It is the test of humanity."

The alien touched me gently with part of himself. I felt nothing that would make me laugh or cry. It was simply a contact between two equals. He said, "That's why I took steps to remove Champley and that other person from any effective interference between us. I could instantly sense a brother in you."

And so we rode into New York City. So I became William Schaeffer, again. And now there is an alien race in the stars which is today a friend of Mankind.

Story copyright © 1958, Mercury Press, Inc.

TomorrowSF Vol. 13.5 March 4, 1999