

Mr. and Mr Saturday Night

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

We doubt if the real television people will ever go as far as the fictional ones in this story. But if they do—Wow!

The Altar

GARY watched the telem-pathy tech make the final adjustments on the portable transmitter. The steel-encased machine, with its crystalline absorber hovering over it like a disembodied eye, made the room seem cramped, and Gary couldn't help wondering how the small apartment could possibly accommodate all the guests who would be coming to visit the following night, even though he knew that the guests wouldn't be there physically—that the apartment, in a telepathic sense, was large enough to accommodate the whole world.

Judy was watching the tech, too. Her hazel eyes were still wide from the shock of learning, that the TE Programs De-partment had named her and Gary as the next "Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night." It was hard to believe, Gary conceded, especially when you considered the increasing number of newly married couples daily matriculating from the adolescence academies and the corresponding increase in the eligibility list.

The tech was tall and capable, and his neat gray tech-suit emphasized both qualities. His long, aristocratic fingers played adroitly over the intricate mass of tubes and wires, adjusting here, tightening there, chording a complex melody that only he could hear.

Gary cleared his throat. "Just what will we have to do?" he asked.

"Mr. Llewelyn will be around to brief you this evening," the tech said.

"I know, but you must have some idea."

"Well, as nearly as I understand it, all you're supposed to do is what you'd ordinarily do on any other Saturday night. Just be yourselves. That's what it amounts to."

Judy laughed nervously. "Sounds easy enough," she said. "But think of all those people tuning in!"

"Yes, just think of them!" said Gary.

"You're not supposed to think of them." The tech inserted a long screwdriver into the bowels of the transmitter, pried it deftly. "That's why we install our equipment a day ahead of time—to give you a chance to accustom yourselves to it . . . Say, from the way you two talk, you'd think you didn't *want* to be hosts!"

"Oh, we *want* to be, all right," Judy said quickly. "We—we just haven't got used to the idea yet."

"About Paradise Isle—" Gary said, "—is it really as lovely as they say it is?"

The tech gave the screw-driver a final turn, withdrew it and slipped it into the inside pocket of his coat. He fitted the cover of the transmitter into place and locked it, then he riled and regarded Gary obliquely. "You'd be surprised at the number of things they don't tell a t-tech—and Paradise Isle is number one on the list . . . Why don't you drop me a line after you get there and tell *me* whether it's lovely or not?"

"All right," Gary said. "We will."

"I'll bet you will!" The tech closed his calfskin toolbag. "You'll forget me and all the rest of the world, just like all the others. Too good for us." He picked up the toolbag and started for the door.

"Don't be bitter," Judy said. "Maybe someday *you'll* be chosen."

The tech paused in the door-way, shook his head. "Not much chance of that. My wife and I are both close to the in-eligibility age. First thing you know, we'll be old enough to buy a TE set and become participants ourselves. In a way, though, I'm more glad than bitter. I've always wondered what

participation would be like—and why the partici-pants keep it such a deep, dark secret."

"I've always wondered what being 'Mr. Saturday Night' would be like," Gary said.

"Or 'Mrs. Saturday Night'," said Judy.

"Looks like both of you are going to find out," the tech said . . . "Happy hosting!"

The High Priests

"I don't care what you say," Penstetter said, finishing his *aperitif* and setting the empty glass down on the damask tablecloth. "I still wish I was engaged in a different pro-fession."

Holden cut small square of tenderloin, rare, and raised it to his mouth. He chewed reflectively. Presently: "You're too nostalgic, Ben. Next thing you know, you'll be telling me that people should raise their own children, instead of con-signing them to puberty and adolescence institutions — or that wives should stay home, instead of working . . . What better, what higher, profession is there than the art of entertaining the masses? And our case, with the govern-ment sponsoring our program, what more lucrative—or se-cure—profession is there?"

"How'd you like it if *you* and *your* wife were chosen?"

"My wife and I can't be chosen, any more than you and yours can. It's been a long time since any of us has seen 25. You took your chances and so did I—though perhaps we weren't aware of it at the time. But the odds have always been good, and today they're better yet. You can't deny that the lottery system is fair—though why I'm try-ing to convince you of all this is beyond me. You can quit any time you like."

"After a thorough brain-wash. No thanks."

"Listen," Holden said, breaking his hardroll and but-tering it evenly, "you're new in this business, and I'm going to tell you something. We're living in a Utopia right now, only diehards like yourself are too obtuse to realize it—or too stubborn to admit it. When was the last marital murder committed in this country. Why, you can't even remem-ber, it was so long ago! And what happened to the over-whelming divorce rate of the mid-twentieth century? How many divorces have we had during the last hundred years? How many annul-ments? Hell, you can count them on the fingers of one hand!"

"You make me sick," Pen-stetter said.

"But not half as sick as you'd be without 'Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night' coming your way every weekend. The trouble with you, Ben, is that you won't face a simple truth. It's an essential truth which our society evaded for centuries. It took a new medium like telempathy to snap us back to reality, and a program like 'Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night' to supply the means. Do you know what that truth is, Ben?"

"I don't want to know."

"It lies behind every piece of fiction ever written," Hol-den said; "every play ever produced, every movie ever made, every telempathic drama ever telempathed. It originates in the simple fact that the average individual living in a complex society is dissatisfied both with himself and with his existence, and needs periodically to escape from the boredom of being himself and the boredom of living his humdrum life—by *becoming someone else*. If he can do so often enough, the psychoses that afflict all mech-anistic civilizations will dis-appear.

"Neither the written nor the spoken word was strong enough to create a satisfactory illusion. Visual images helped, but they too failed, because they had to be distilled through the intellect. Identi-fication was always spotty—till telempathy came along. During telempathic identifica-tion you don't *read* about someone else, you don't *see* someone else; you *become* someone else. And thanks to 'Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night', once each week every married couple in the country, past the eligibility age, can go into another married couple's home, share their thoughts, see through their eyes, feel with them, suffer with them, be happy, sad, elated with them. What more can you ask of a program, Ben?"

"Mercy," Penstetter said.

Holden's knife slipped from his fingers, clattered against his plate. But he retrieved it casually, did not even raise his voice when he spoke his next words: "And mercy is pre-cisely what we dispense, Ben. Mercy to the many. And the many are what count, in any civilization."

"The many are the mass," Penstetter said, "and the mass is a monster—an entity with an atomic pile

for a god and an electrical circuit for a soul. God bless our Heinous Home . . . Let's have another drink. I've lost my appetite."

The Lambs

"Well," Mr. Llewelyn said, taking off his hat and stepping into the apartment, "how does it feel to be the new 'Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night'?"

"We're still a little nerv-ous," Gary said.

"Now there isn't a thing to be nervous about." Mr. Llew-elyn was a small, sixtyish man with peaked features and faded blond hair. "All you have to do is act yourselves. What do you usually do on Saturday night?"

"Oh, we read a little some-' times," Judy said. "Make pop-corn. Talk."

"Fine! Everybody'll love that. A nice homey evening by the fireside, so to speak. All of the wives will identify with you, Judy, and Gary, of course, will be host for the husbands."

"Then that's all we have to do?" Gary asked. "Read, make popcorn, and talk?"

"That's the ticket," Mr. Llewelyn said. "Just be your-selves. Act natural. Think whatever comes into your mind . . . Oh yes—" He reached into the inside pocket of his coat and withdrew a folded sheet of paper. "—this is your contract. Just sign your names where I've put the little x's." He indicated the two blank lines at the bottom of the page and handed Gary a fountain pen.

"I—I never figured on a contract," Gary said.

"Why certainly there's a contract. Who ever heard of anybody appearing on TE without signing a contract!"

"But this is for only one night. We're not really TE stars."

"As 'Mr. and Mrs. Satur-day Night' you'll be the big-gest TE stars in the country!" Despite his bantering tone of voice, Mr. Liewelyn betrayed symptoms of impatience. His right eyelid kept twitching every now and then, and he kept wiping his mouth — as though his words didn't taste just right. "All it says," he went on, "is that we — the owners of the program—agree to transport both of you to Paradise Isle and to maintain you in luxury for the rest of your lives, in return for your appearing for one hour on our show; and that you, Judy, and you, Gary, agree to accept your life-long vacations on Paradise Isle as full payment for your services. Fair enough?"

"I guess so." Gary signed his name and handed the con-tract to Judy.

"What's Paradise Isle like?" Judy asked, affixing her signature and returning the contract to Mr. Liewelyn.

"Never having been there, I'm not qualified to tell you," Mr. Llewelyn said. "But you'll find out for yourselves soon enough—right after the program, in fact. Your escort will be waiting for you just out-side the door, and there'll be a chartered jet at the airport, ready to whisk you away to the land of dreams!" He wiped his mouth. "So you'd better get all your things packed—if you haven't already—and be all set to go!"

"We're all set now," Gary said.

"Fine!" Mr. Llewelyn went over to the transmitter, checked the lock on the cover, glanced cursorily at the crys-talline absorber. "Everything seems to be shipshape, so I guess I'll be getting back to the studio. Till 9:30 tomorrow night, then!"

"How—how will we know when we're on?" Judy asked.

"Oh, you'll just *know*," Mr. Llewelyn said, putting on his hat and opening the door. He wiped his mouth again, and his eyelid jitterbugged furi-ously. "Don't worry about *that*!"

The Entity

The Entity quivered into slow wakefulness. The million windows of its country-wide habitat turned gray, then pink, and presently the sun poured forth its brilliance over the land, and the Entity began arising from its million beds and stretching its million arms and yawning with its million mouths. It cooked and

consumed its million break-fasts and departed for its mil-lion occupations. It shuffled heaved wrote typed laughed cried lifted turned talked loved hated received gave won lost ate lunch and shuffled heaved wrote typed laughed cried lifted turned talked loved hated received gave won lost and returned to its million lairs and its million frustra-tions and ate its million din-ners of steak and roast beef and fish and shrimp and pork chops and sat down before its million TE sets to partake.

It was Saturday night.

The Sacrifice

"Feel anything yet?" Gary asked.

"Not a thing," Judy said. "Maybe we're not on yet."

"Oh, we're on all right." He glanced at his watch. "It's 9:35 . . . Say, I felt something then!"

"So did I."

"Like — like something crawling in my brain. Like—"

Judy got up from the couch. "I'll make some popcorn."

"Swell!"

He watched her walk through the archway into the kitchen, absently noting the turn of her calves, the rhythmic motion of her hips. The most natural thought in the world crossed his mind, only somehow it didn't seem nat-ural now, it seemed obscene. Abruptly he remembered the way older people had some-times eyed him on the street, the way they had sometimes eyed Judy . . . like someone sizing up a chuck roast or a melon or a basket of tomatoes, and on the heels of that mem-ory came another, older, memory, and he relived the time in puberty school when the Principal had called all the boys into the gymnasium and there had been this little doctor waiting there, looking ironically like a satyr with his iron-gray hair and his irongray goatee, who'd shouted sex at them for an hour, threatening them, reviling them, condemning them . . . and he had stood there, sick to his stomach, revolted by the obscene things the little goatman was saying, resolving never again to look at another girl—

He got up from the couch, choking back the memory. He could feel the Entity in his mind, and it was like a worm crawling through his secrets, digging into his past, feeding on his frustrations and his fears, probing for perversions, for infidelities, for food of any kind . . .

Judy's face was pale when he entered the kitchen. She had emptied a can of popcorn kernels into the electric popper and they were just beginning to sputter in the melted grease. He got a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator and opened it with trembling fingers. Con-centrate on what you're doing, he told himself. Concentrate on the present, concentrate on this very moment and forget there was ever any other. But it wasn't any good, and pres-ently another memory bubbled to the surface of his conscious-ness, and he climbed the tree that grew between the girls' and the boys' dormitories and looked, down from his leafy bower into the second floor room where the two girls were undressing, watching with fascination and with horror, all the while hearing the im-precations of the goat-man echoing in the back of his mind.

He looked at Judy again, and her face frightened him. She had forgotten to cover the popper and the popcorn was jumping out like grotesque flakes of snow and falling crazily all over the table and tumbling to the floor. She stood there like a frightened fairy princess, bereft of wand and magic . . . Abruptly he re-turned to the moment in the academy gym where the inter-institution dance had taken place and he waited again, just inside the entrance, thinking of all the other get-acquainted dances he'd attended, thinking of the two extra years he'd been forced to remain in the adolescence academy because he'd refused to take a wife ... and then seeing the girl walk-ing towards him across the floor, the gentle dream of a girl in a pink cloud of a dress, and knowing suddenly that with her it would be different, that with her it would be all right ... the girl, Judy, the same Judy standing beside him now, in the merciless brightness of the kitchen, in the merciless grip of the Entity—

"I feel naked, Gary. Help me, please!"

The transmitter, Gary thought. He got a hammer out of the utility closet and ran into the living room and began pounding on the crystalline absorber. But the absorber re-fused to shatter or fall, and finally he

hurled the hammer to the floor and began tugging on the lead-in cable, trying to pull it free from its fasten-ings. Judy joined him, and they pulled together; but the cable wouldn't budge, and when they tried to open the door, that wouldn't budge either; and then they heard the voices in the corridor, the voices of their escort, and they realized that even if the door did open, there was no escape for them, would be no escape till the blood of their intimacy had ceased to flow, till the last drops of their private moments and their cherished secrets had oozed from their minds, and their marriage lay dead at their feet.

Suddenly Gary became aware that he was staring at the bedroom door. Judy was staring at it, too. He tried to look away, but his eyes would not obey him. They weren't his eyes any more: they were the Entity's eyes now, just as his body and soul were the Entity's; just as Judy's eyes and Judy's body and soul were the Entity's—

And Paradise Isle had nothing to do with paradise: it was a euphemism for asylum—the asylum to which you were consigned after you had shared your wife—or your husband—with the world ...

They ran to each other like frightened children and held each other close ... and felt the first surge of vicarious desire within them—of lust and fear and frustration, of need and want and lechery—as the Entity closed in for the kill.

THE END