

THE DREAMSMAN

by Gordon R. Dickson

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Every profession has its fringe benefits, and Gordy Dickson is one of science fiction's. A big rangy ex-Canadian from the tall beer country of Minnesota, he turns up, not quite often enough, at conventions and conferences with his guitar over one shoulder and a sort of shining shield of great good humor over the other. One of these days a bright song publisher will introduce nonconvention-goers to the Dickson-Cogswell-Anderson science-fantasy ballads and blues. Mean-time, novels like his explosive *Dorsai!* in *ASF* last year, and short stories like this one fill the gap moderately well.

Mr. Wilier is shaving. He uses an old-fashioned straight-edged razor and the mirror above his bathroom washbasin reflects a morning face that not even the fluffy icing of the lather can make very palatable. Above the lather his skin is dark and wrinkled. His eyes are somewhat yellow where they ought to show white and his sloping forehead is embarrassingly short of hair. No matter. Mr. Wilier poises the razor for its first stroke—and instantly freezes in position. For a second he stands immobile. Then his false teeth clack once and he starts to pivot slowly toward the north-west, razor still in hand, quivering like a directional antenna seeking its exact target. This is as it should be. Mr. Wilier, wrinkles, false teeth and all, is a directional antenna. Mr. Wilier turns back to the mirror and goes ahead with his shaving. He shaves skilfully and rapidly, beaming up at a sign over the mirror which proclaims that a stitch in time saves nine. Four minutes later, stitchless and in need of none, he moves out of the bathroom, into his bedroom. Here he dresses rapidly and efficiently, at the last adjusting his four-in-hand before a dresser mirror which has inlaid about its frame the message *Handsome is as handsome does*. Fully dressed, Mr. Wilier selects a shiny malacca cane from the collection in his hall closet and goes out behind his little house to the garage.

His car, a 1937 model sedan painted a sensible gray, is waiting for him. Mr. Wilier gets in, starts the motor and carefully warms it up for two minutes. He then backs out into the May sunshine. He points the hood ornament of the sedan toward Buena Vista and drives off.

Two hours later he can be seen approaching a small yellow-and-white rambler in Buena Vista's new development section, at a considerate speed two miles under the local limit. It is 10:30 in the morning. He pulls up in front of the house, sets the handbrake, locks his car and goes up to ring the doorbell beside the yellow front door.

The door opens and a face looks out. It is a very pretty face with blue eyes and marigold-yellow hair above a blue apron not quite the same shade as the eyes. The young lady to which it belongs cannot be much more than in her very early twenties.

"Yes?" says the young lady.

"Mr. Wilier, Mrs. Conalt," says Mr. Wilier, raising his hat and producing a card. "The Liberty Mutual Insurance agent, to see your husband."

"Oh!" says the pretty face, somewhat flustered, opening the door and stepping back. "Please come in." Mr. Wilier enters. Still holding the card, Mrs. Conalt turns and calls across the untenanted small living room toward the bed-room section at the rear of the house, "Hank!"

"Coming!" replies a young baritone. Seconds later a tall, quite thin man about the same age as his wife, with a cheerfully unhandsome face, emerges rapidly into the living room.

"The insurance man, honey," says the young lady, who has whisked off her apron while Mr. Wilier was turned to face the entrance through which the young man has come. She hands her husband the card.

"Insurance?" says young Mr. Conalt frowning, reading the card. "What insurance? Liberty Mutual? But I don't—we don't have any policies with Liberty Mutual. If you're selling—"

"Not at the moment," says Mr. Wilier, beaming at them as well as the looseness of his false teeth will permit. "I actually *am* an insurance agent, but that hasn't anything to do with this. I only wanted to see you first."

"First before what?" demands Mr. Conalt, staring hard at him.

"Before revealing myself," says Mr. Wilier. "You are the two young people who have been broadcasting a call to any other psi-sensitives within range, aren't you?"

"Oh, Hank!" gasps Mrs. Conalt; but Conalt does not un-bend.

"What are you talking about?" he demands.

"Come, come," replies Mr. Wilier deprecatingly.

"But, Hank—" begins Mrs. Conalt.

"Hush, Edie. I think this guy—"

"*Oh, wad the power the Giftie gie us, to see oorselves as ithers see us*—more or less, if you young people will pardon the accent."

"What's that? That's Robert Burns, isn't it," says Hank. "It goes—*it would frae mony an error free us*." He hesi-tates.

"*And foolish notion*. Yes," says Mr. Wilier. "And now that the sign and counter-sign have been given, let us get down to facts. You were broadcasting, both of you, were you not?"

"Were you receiving?" demands Hank.

"Of course," says Mr. Wilier unperturbed. "How else would I know what quotation to use for a password?" He beams at them again. "May I sit down?"

"Oh, of course!" says Edie hastily. They all sit down. Edie bounces up again. "Would you like some coffee, Mr. —er—" she glances over at the card, still in Hank's hands —"Wilier?"

"Thank you, no," replies Mr. Wilier, clacking his teeth. "I have one cup of coffee a day, after dinner. I believe in moderation of diet. But to the point. You are the people I heard."

"Say we were," says Hank finally. "You claim to be psi-sensitive yourself, huh?"

"Claim? No doubt about it, my boy. Ash tray?" He lifts his hand. An ash tray on an end table across the room comes sailing on the air like a miniature ceramic UFO to light gently upon his upturned palm. Mr. Wilier sets it down and closes his eyes.

"You have seven dollars in your wallet, Hank. One five-dollar bill and two singles. At this moment you are in-terrupting your main line of thought to wonder worriedly what happened to the third one-dollar bill, as you had eight dollars in the wallet earlier this morning. Rest easy. You were stopped by the newspaper delivery boy shortly after ten this morning while you were mowing the lawn and paid him eighty cents.

The two dimes change are in your right-hand pants pocket."

He opens his eyes. "Well?"

"All right," says Hank with a heavy sigh. "You sold me. We can't do anything like that, Edie and I. We can just read each other's minds—and other people's if they're thinking straight at us." He stares a little at Mr. Wilier. "You're pretty good."

"Tut," says Mr. Wilier. "Experience, nothing else. I will be a hundred and eighty-four next July 12th. One learns things."

"A hundred and eighty-four!" gasps Edie.

"And some months, ma'am," says Mr. Wilier, giving her a little half-bow from his chair. "Sensible living, no ex-travagances and peace of mind—the three keys to lon-gevity. But to return to the subject, what caused you young people to send out a call?"

"Well, we—" began Edie.

"What we thought," says Hank, "is that if there were any more like us, we ought to get together and decide what to do about it. Edie and I talked it all over. Until we met each other we never thought there could be anybody else like ourselves in the world. But if there were two of us, then it stood to reason there must be more. And then Edie pointed out that maybe if a bunch of us could get together we could do a lot for people. It was sort of a duty, to see what we could do for the rest of the world."

"Very commendable," says Mr. Wilier.

"I mean, we could read the minds of kids that fall in a well and get trapped—and send emergency messages maybe. All sorts of things. There must be a lot more we haven't thought of."

"No doubt there are," says Mr. Wilier.

"Then you're with us?" says Hank. "Together, I'll bet we can darn near start a new era in the world."

"Well, yes," replies Mr. Wilier. "And no. A hundred and eighty-four years have taught me caution. Moreover, there is more to the story than you young people think." He clacks his teeth. "Did you think you were the first?"

"The first?" echoes Hank.

"The first to discover you possess unusual abilities. I see by the expression on your faces you have taken just that for granted. I must, I'm afraid, correct that notion. You are not the first any more than I was. There have been many."

"Many?" asked Edie faintly.

"A great number within my experience," says Mr. Wilier, rubbing his leathery old hands together.

"But what happened to them?" asked Edie.

"Many things," replies Mr. Wilier. "Some were burned as witches, some were put in insane asylums. Fifteen years ago one was lynched in a small town called Pashville. Yes, indeed. Many things happen."

The two others stare at him.

"Yeah?" says Hank. "How come you're in such good shape, then?"

"Ah, that's the thing. Look before you leap. I always have. It pays."

"What—what do you mean?" asks Edie.

"I mean it's fortunate I was around to hear you when you broadcast." Mr. Wilier turns to her. "Lucky for you I reached you before you went ahead trying to put this help-the-world plan of yours into effect."

"I still think it's a good notion!" says Hank almost fiercely.

"Because you're young," replies Mr. Wilier with a slight quaver in his voice. "And idealistic. You wouldn't want to expose your wife to the sort of thing I've mentioned, eh?"

"Anything Hank decides!" says Edie stoutly.

"Well, well," says Mr. Wilier, shaking his head. "Well, well, well!"

"Look here!" says Hank. "You can't tell me there's no way of putting what we've got to good use."

"Well..." says Mr. Wilier.

"Look. If you want out," says Hank, "you just get in your car—"

Mr. Wilier shakes his head.

"No," he says. And suddenly his face lights up with a smile. He beams at them. "You'd really let me go?"

"Shove off," says Hank.

"Good!" cried Mr. Wilier. He does not move. "Congratulations, both of you. Forgive me for putting you both to the test this way but for the sake of everybody else in the Colony, I had to make sure you were ready to go through with it before I told you anything."

"Colony?" says Edie.

"Anything?" says Hank.

Nine hours later, just at dusk, a small, gray 1937 sedan in good repair is to be seen approaching the gate of a certain military installation in New Mexico. It stops at the wide gate and two MPs in white helmets approach it. There is a short conversation between them and the driver, and then they march rather stiffly and woodenly back to their small, glassed-in gatehouse. The sedan proceeds on into the interior of the installation.

A little under an hour later, after several more like conversations, the sedan parks. Its three occupants leave it for another gate, another guard, another compound within another area, and finally find themselves standing at the foot of an enormous tall, tapering metallic creation.

There are some half-dozen guards around this creation, but after a short conversation with the oldest of the party they have all stretched out beside their weapons and gone to sleep.

"Here we are," says the oldest of the party, who is, of course, Mr. Wilier.

The other two are speechless and stare at the enormous ship beside them. They seem rather impressed.

"Will it—" falters Edie, and then her voice fails her.

"Will it take the two of you to Venus? Absolutely," says Mr. Wilier, fondling the smooth head curve of his malacca walking stick. "I had a long talk with one of the chief men who designed it, just a week ago. You just follow these instructions—" He reaches for an inside pocket of his coat and withdraws a typewritten sheet of paper, which he hands to Hank- "Just run down the list on this, doing everything in order, and off you go."

Hank takes the paper rather gingerly. "Seems like steal-ing," he mumbles.

"Not when you stop to think," says Mr. Wilier. "It's for the Colony, for the ultimate good of humanity." He puts a wrinkled hand confidentially on Hank's arm. "My boy, this has come so suddenly to both of you as to be quite a severe shock, but you will adjust to it in time. Fate has selected you two young people to be of that dedicated band of psychical pioneers who will one day lift humanity from this slough of fear and pain and uncertainty in which it has wallowed ever since the first man lifted his face to the skies in wonder. Have faith in your own destiny."

"Yeah," says Hank, still doubtful. But Edie is gazing with shining eyes at Mr. Wilier.

"Oh!" she says. "Isn't it wonderful, Hank?"

"Yeah," says Hank.

"Well, then," says Mr. Wilier, patting them both on the arm and pushing them gently to the metal ladder of a framework tower that stretches up alongside the ship. "Up you go. Don't worry about the controls. This is built on a new, secret principle. It's as easy to drive as a car."

"Just a minute!" cries a sudden, ringing voice. They all hesitate and turn away from the ship. Approaching rapidly through the air from the northwest is something that can only be described as a scintillant cloud of glory. It swoops in for a landing before them and thins away to reveal a tall, handsome man in a tight sort of coverall of silver mesh.

"Up to your old tricks, again, Wilo, aren't you?", he barks at Mr. Wilier. "Can't keep your hands off? Want everything your own way, don't you?"

"Fools rush in," says Mr. Wilier, "where angels fear to tread."

"What?" demands Hank, looking from one to the other. "What's all this about? Who're you?"

"You wouldn't understand if I told you," says the tall man. "The point is, having psi-talents puts you under my protection. Half a dozen people a year I have to come chasing in and rescue. And all on account of him!" He glares at Mr. Wilier.

"I still don't—" Hank begins.

"Of course not. How could you? If Wilo here had started leaving things alone as little as a hundred years ago, you humans would have developed into probationary members of Galactic Society by this time. Natural evolution. More psi-talents in every generation. Recognition of such. Alter-ation of local society. But no, not Wilo. The minute he dis-covers anyone with psi-talent he points them toward de-struction. *I* have to save them. The only safe way to save them with Wilo around is to take them off the planet. Wilo knows this. So—no progress for humanity."

Hank blinks a couple of times.

"But how come?" he cries, staring at Mr. Wilier. "He's one himself! I mean, he can do all sorts of things Edie and I can't do—"

"Nonsense!" says the tall man. "He's just sensitive. An antenna, you might say. He can feel when real ones are sending."

"But—the ash tray..." falters Edie.

"There, there, I scan you perfectly," soothes the tall man. "Illusion. Nothing more. Even an *ordinary* intelligence can learn something in a hundred and eighty-four years and some months, after all. Wilo, Master Hypnotist. That's the way he used to bill himself back in his days on the stage. He hypnotized you, just as he hypnotized these soldiers."

"With a glance," mutters Mr. Wilier darkly.

"Unfortunately very true," says the tall man. He glares at Mr. Wilier again. "If it wasn't for the fact that we truly advanced civilization members can't harm anyone—!"

He turns back to Hank and Edie.

"Well," he sighs heavily, "come along. This world will have to stay stuck in its present stage of development un-til something happens to Wilo, or he changes his mind."

Edie stares at the old man.

"Oh, Mr. Wilier!" she says. "Why can't you let people just go ahead and develop like Hank and I did?"

"Bah!" says Wilier. "Humbug!"

"But the world would be a much better place!"

"Young lady!" snaps Mr. Wilier. "I like it the way it is!" He turns his back on them.

"Come on," says the tall man.

They take off. Mr. Wilier turns back to look at them as they ascend into the new rays of the just-risen moon and the New Mexico night sky, trailing clouds of glory as they go.

The clouds of glory light up the landscape.

"Bah!" says Mr. Wilier again. With a snap of his fingers he produces some flash paper which, at the touch of flame from a palmed match, flares brightly for a moment. It's one tiny recalcitrant beacon of stability and permanence in the whole of the madly whirling, wild and evolving uni-verse.