



The Mightiest Man
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They caught up with him in Belgrade.

The aliens had gone by then, only a few shining metal huts in the Siberian tundra giving mute evidence that they had been anything other than a nightmare.

It had seemed exactly like that. A nightmare in which all of Earth stood helpless, unable to resist or flee, while the obscene shapes slithered and flopped over all her green fields and fair cities. And the awakening had not brought the reassurance that it had all been a bad dream. That if it had happened in reality, the people of Earth would have been capable of dealing with the terrible menace. It had been real. And they had been no more capable of resisting the giant intelligences than a child of killing the ogre in his favorite fairy story.

It was an ironic parallel, because that was what finally saved Earth for its own people. A fairy story.

The old fable of the lion and the mouse. When the lion had exhausted his atomic armor and proud science against the invincible and immortal invaders of Earth—for they could not be killed by any means—the mouse attacked and vanquished them.

The mouse, the lowest form of life: the fungoids, the air of Earth swarming with millions of their spores, attacked the monstrous bodies, grew and entwined within the gray convolutions that were their brain centers. And as the tiny thread-roots probed and tightened, the aliens screamed soundlessly. The intelligences toppled and fell, and at last that few among them who retained sanity gathered their lunatic brethren and fled as they had come.

If he had known the effect the fungoids would have on them, he would have told them that too. He had told them everything else, when he had been snatched from a busy city street, a random specimen of humanity to be probed and investigated.

They had chosen well. For the payment they offered him he was willing to barter the whole human race. As far as it lay in his power he did just that.

He was not an educated man, though he was intelligent. It was child's play to them to strip his mind bare; but they had to know the intangibles too, the determined will of humanity to survive, the probabilities of the pattern of human behavior in a situation which humanity had never before faced. He told them all he could, gladly and willingly. He would

have descended to any treachery for the vast glittering reward they tempted him with.

It wasn't easy for the Yugoslavs to guard him and, anyway, their hearts weren't in the task. His treachery, the ultimate treason, the betrayal of the whole human race, was commonly known.

Inevitably the mob got him and killed three policemen in the process. When they had sated their anger a little and the traitor had lost most of his clothes and the thumb of his right hand, they dragged him to the junction where the Danube meets the Sava and held him under the gray waters with long poles, as if he was some poisonous reptile.

He lay supinely on the bed of the river and smiled evilly while a hundred thousand people writhed in neural agony.

Twenty-four hours later the neural plague had spread to Zagreb and into Albania as far as Tirana. When it crossed to Leghorn in Italy the Balkans held twenty million lunatics and the Danube was an artificial lake a hundred miles wide.

They had used a "clean" bomb. So they were able to bring a loudspeaker van to its edge and boom at him to come out. He allowed them to do that for some inscrutable reason; perhaps to demonstrate that his powers were selective. Then it seemed he got tired of the farce, and cruel fingers twined themselves into the nerve centers of the President of Italy and the Prime Minister of the government of United Europe. He made them dance a horribly twisted *pas de deux* on the banks of the Danube for his perverted amusement.

Then he released them, and released the millions of gibbering, twitching idiots that inhabited Southern Europe, and he came out of the river bed in which he had lain for forty-eight hours.

He walked alone through the deserted streets of Belgrade until he came to the United Nations building. There he told a very brave lieutenant that he was willing to stand trial any place in the world they wished.

For three days nobody came to arrest him. He sat alone with the lieutenant in the peopleless city of Belgrade and waited for his captors. They came then, timidly reassured by his non-violence. While he talked to them pleasantly the citizens of London and Paris suddenly began to dance jerky and grotesque jigs on the pavements of their cities. In the same moment the Chief Justice of the Court of the Nations, at a cocktail

party in Washington, writhed in the exquisite pain of total muscle cramp, his august features twisted into a mask of abject fear.

The trial itself was a legal farce. The prisoner promptly pleaded guilty to the charge of betraying mankind to an alien race, but he didn't allow them to question him. When one lawyer persisted in face of his pleasant refusals, he died suddenly in a cramped ball of screaming agony.

The gray-faced Chief Justice inquired whether he wished to be sentenced and he answered yes, but not to death. They couldn't kill him, he explained. That was part of the reward the aliens had given him. The other part was that *he* could kill or immobilize anybody in the world—or everybody—from any distance. He sat back and smiled at the stricken courtroom. Then he lost his composure and his mouth twitched. He laughed uproariously and slapped his knees in ecstasy.

It was plain that he was fond of a joke.

An anonymous lawyer stood up and waited patiently for his merriment to subside.

If this was true, he asked, why had not the aliens used this power? Why had they not simply killed off the inhabitants and taken over the vacant planet? The traitor gazed kindly at him; and a court stenographer who had cautiously picked up a pencil returned agonizingly to her foetal position and, that way, died.

The traitor looked at his fingers and shrugged. The thumb that had been snapped off in the mob's frenzy was more than half grown again.

"They needed slaves," he said simply.

"And at the end, while some of them were still sane?"

The traitor raised his eyebrows, giving him his full courteous attention. The lawyer sat down abruptly, his question unfinished. The creature who had betrayed his own race smiled at him and permitted him to live.

He even completed his question for him, and answered it. "Why did they not kill then? They had something else on their minds—fungoids!" He laughed uproariously at his macabre joke. "And in their minds too!"

The lawyer's blue eyes gazed at him steadily and he stopped laughing. In the bated hush of the courtroom he said softly, "What a pity I'm not an alien too. You could have the fungoids destroy me!"

He laughed again helplessly, the tears running down his cheeks.

The Chief Justice adjourned the Court then and the prisoner sauntered to his comfortable quarters in front of his frightened guards.

That night, in his own living room, the Chief Justice danced an agonized fandango in front of his horror-stricken wife and the anonymous lawyer sat in his apartment, staring at the blank wall. He was glad the aliens had not made the traitor telepathic too.

He had found the chink in his armor.

The neural paralysis, the murders by remote control, were acts of a conscious will. He had himself admitted that if his mind was destroyed his powers would be destroyed with it. The aliens had not sought revenge because their minds were totally occupied with saving themselves. The stricken ones had simply lost the power.

The knowledge was useless to him. There was no way they could attack his mind without his knowing it.

Possibly they could steal away his consciousness by drugging or bludgeoning, but it would be racial suicide to attempt it. In the split moment of realization he would kill every human being on Earth. There would be nobody left to operate on his brain, to make him a mindless, powerless idiot for the rest of time. For any period of time, he corrected himself. His brain would heal again.

It was useless to think about it. There was nothing they could use against his invincibility. The only hope was to attack him unawares ... and if that hope was a fraction less than a certainty it could only mean final and absolute catastrophe.

The lawyer looked at his watch. It was four in the morning.

He went into the kitchenette and then shrugged himself into his coat. He walked through the silent streets, past the city hospital where the Chief Justice lay in agony while the motor impulses from his nerve centers wrenched and twisted his body. He entered the foyer of the luxury hotel where the race betrayer was held prisoner and took the elevator to the sixth floor.

Two sleepy guards jerked erect outside the unlocked door. He put his finger to his lips, enjoining them to silence. Then he entered the room and stood for a moment over the man who was invincible and immortal—and human. Human, and subject to the involuntary unconsciousness which nature demands from all men. He slept.

The eyelids fluttered. The lawyer took the steel meat skewer from his pocket. He thrust it through a half-opened eye and rotated it, methodically reducing the soft brain to formless mush.

After that the trial proceeded normally.

The prisoner stared vacantly in front of him and all his movements had to be directed. But he was alive and his thumb was full grown again.

It was the lawyer that noticed this and pointed out the implications. The thumb had grown to full size in less than six weeks. They must regard that as their maximum period of immunity.

They ruminated over it for another four days. The question was a tricky one, for malignant immortality was beyond human solution. It was not just a matter of dealing out punishment. The problem now was the protection of the race from sudden annihilation. An insolvable problem, but one that must be solved. They could only do their best.

He was sentenced to life imprisonment, with a special feature.

It was decided he should be guillotined once a month as long as he lived.

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