



THE PIEBALD HORSE

By E. C. TUBB

If you've ever spent a night worrying about something that you know isn't going to be helped a bit by thinking . . . consider the problem of a man who mustn't think of something where telepaths can "hear" . . .



THEIR scent betrayed them. It was minor, a combination of food and body odors unnoticeable to a normal man, but Brady had been equipped for the job and had the olfactory sensitivity of a dog. He crouched in the darkness of the alley, nostrils flaring as he snuffed the air. Three of them, and close, and there would be more within call.

Cautiously he slid back along the wall, two steps taking him to the door he had just left. Softly he knocked, his knuckle tapping out the signal, every sense at the alert. He was lucky. The door opened behind

him and he stepped into deeper darkness. Something living moved beside him.

"Brady," he said quickly. "Lock the door."

"Something wrong?" The contact was a native, his scent acrid in Brady's nostrils. He led the way into an inner room where a dull lamp glowed on a pedestal. His crest-color, like his scent, signified fear.

"Guards outside." Grady jerked his head back the way he had come. The oddly shaped weapon in his hand centered itself on the native's waist. "Would you know anything about it?"

"No! No, I swear it!"

He was, thought Brady, telling the truth. There was no sense or logic in the contact having sold him out and then sitting as bait in the trap. If the information he had passed over was false, then it would be to the benefit of the Ligurian Intelligence to allow him to escape with it. And there was no mistaking the native's genuine terror.

"We've got to get away from here," he babbled. "If they catch us—" His crest reflected his terror. Brady could sympathize with it. If they were caught, their end would be very long and very painful. Ligurian Intelligence were noted for the manner in which they punished any who violated their security.

"Keep calm," said Brady, he was thinking. The information he had bought was safely memorized and the papers burned. Theoretically he was inviolate once he left this area, devoid of any proof that he was other than what he seemed. And yet the rendezvous was trapped which meant that, in some way, the L.I., had been warned. Brady was certain that he had done nothing to arouse suspicion. The fault, obviously, must rest with the contact.

Logically he should kill the native, fire the house and escape in the confusion.

If the native guessed what was in his mind he gave no sign. The contact, thin, crested, wearing only an ornamented loin cloth and open tunic, moved softly about the room. It was typical of all Ligurian dwellings; cushions on the floor, ceremonial

brazier burning before the shattered birth-egg, a tinkle bell hanging from the ceiling. The modern television set in one corner and the shower-spray, half-hidden behind a curtain, told of the ubiquitous impact of Terran civilization.

Brady watched him, realizing that he had underestimated the native. He had passed the apex of terror and had reverted to his normal self and, Brady remembered, anyone who could have stolen vital information from guarded files and got away with it must be above normal. Certainly far above the common herd of Ligurians, conditioned as they were to blind obedience to the dictates of a despotic government.

"We must get away from here," said Brady. "Is there another way?"

"Naturally." The native carefully wrapped the shards of his birth-egg in a cloth and then made sure his money, a great wad of local currency, was safe in a pocket of his tunic. The gesture was only too familiar. Humanity, or humanoids, thought Brady wryly, were the same the universe over. It was only the common denominator of bribery which made espionage possible between alien worlds.

"Hurry." Brady was impatient. "They won't wait out there forever."

The native grunted, rolled back a thin mat and lifted a trap set in the floor. It revealed a dark well full of noisome odors. Something small darted from the shadows, the local equivalent, Brady guessed, of a rat.

"Follow me," said the native, and

dropped through the hole, Brady at his heels.

It was a nightmare journey of twisting turns and endless crawling. They were, Brady guessed, in an old sewer of some kind, at least it smelt like it. After what seemed a long time the native stopped. Brady bumped in to him, cursed softly at the pain of the blow, then realized the other was speaking to him.

"We part here, Earthman. I go to the left, you to the right. You will come to a wall set with rungs. Climb them and lift the trap. It opens on a small yard from which you can reach the street."

"Thanks." Brady waited for the native to move. "Anything else?"

"A small thing. I have been thinking—we should not have been discovered. I took every precaution." The native hesitated. "Perhaps I should warn you. There is a rumor, I gave it no credence, that a new form of life has been recruited by our government."

"So?" Brady wasn't surprised. The galaxy was big and there were more plants uncontacted than known. It was inevitable that new races should be discovered. "What kind?"

"I do not know, not for certain, but rumor has it that they can read minds." The native moved forward. "Good-by, Earthman. Fortune go with you."

The instructions had been correct. Brady eased himself through the trap, lowered the lid and took a hasty look round. The yard was deserted though

he could hear footsteps in the street. He concentrated on brushing down his clothes, fortunately the sewer had been dry and the dirt fell from the repellent plastic; a shower and they would be as good as new.

He smelt the air then, satisfied, took the weapon from his pocket. A twist and the thing fell apart; a cigarette lighter, a battery-powered pocket radio, other assorted junk, all local imports and all, if you knew just how to fix them, uniting to make an effective, short-range beamer. Disarmed, innocuous, his papers in order, he strolled from the yard and into the street. The blandness of his features belied his thoughts.

It was, as the contact had pointed out, only a rumor but Brady could not afford to ignore rumors. The galaxy was littered with odd races and the fact that, as yet, Earth had contacted no natural telepaths didn't mean there weren't any. Their value, to a security-minded planet, would be incalculable. And the rumor could be true; there was something odd about the trapping of the rendezvous, could one of the telepaths, perhaps, have caught a vagrant thought?

A shape loomed in the shadows of the street and a flashlight beam stabbed at his eyes. "What—?"

"Routine check, sir." The guard wasn't a native but a mercenary imported from a high-gravity planet. Brady would have been like a doll in his grasp. "Your papers, sir."

Brady passed them over, submitted to a thorough search, readied himself for the expected questioning.

"Rather late for a business man to be wandering the streets?" The guard was polite but Brady wasn't fooled. "May I ask your business, sir?"

"None." Brady made a vague gesture. "Truth is that I was just walking and lost my way." He knew it wasn't enough. "I'm a little worried," he lied. "My wife, you know, she's expecting."

"Expecting?" The Guard looked blank. Even Interglacial has its translation difficulties especially to races born in a variety of ways.

"A baby." Brady detailed the reproduction cycle of the human race. "Our first, you know how it is."

The Guard didn't know and would have said more but something changed his mind. Brady's acute hearing caught the tiny buzz of the ear-radio but missed the following instructions. The Guard became brusque.

"Return to your hotel," he ordered. "Immediately."

"Sure," said Brady. He kept in character. Terrans were noted for their curiosity. "Something wrong?"

"There is a criminal at large in this area. He is known to be dangerous. It is for your own safety that you return to your hotel."

"Of course." Brady did not make the obvious mistake. "I'd be there now if I knew where it was. Can you direct me please?"

The guard directed him. Brady walked on, acutely conscious of a region in the small of his back. He had never felt quite so helpless and alone in all his life.

The Transient Hotel was, as its name implied, the natural temporary home of all off-worlders visiting Liguria. It was also, thought Brady, the logical place for any mind reader to be stationed. There and the spaceport, of course, but he would cross that bridge when he came to it. For the moment he had to concentrate on the hotel.

It rose before him, an almost new edifice of plastic and stone, the usual clutter of porters and carts outside the doors, a couple of guards glowering at them with conscious superiority. Brady took a fold of flesh between his teeth, bit down hard and, eyes watering with the pain of his self-inflicted wound, hurried through the doors and into the bar. It was, as he had hoped, fairly well crowded with an assortment of alien races. He thrust himself among a group of fellow Earthmen and ordered a drink. Sipping it he pondered his next move.

He was, he realized, in a hell of a position.

With Earth expanding among other races some resentment was inevitable. Earth was strong and had allies but Earth was also rich and bubbling with liberal ideals. Planets such as Liguria wanted the riches without running the risk of their own peoples becoming infected with Terrestrial concepts of freedom and, the obvious way to gain one without the other was by means of armed conquest. In order to survive Earth had to use every trick in the book including espionage. Unfortunately for Brady Ligurian Intelligence had taken quite

effective steps to prevent that very thing.

Everyone was stripped to the buff and thoroughly examined before being permitted to leave the planet, and no individual was permitted to import or export any item of any nature whatsoever. The ban included personal clothing.

All radio-wave bands were garbled by a round-the-clock interference from orbiting stations; only local radio and television line-of-sight broadcasts being possible at ground level.

A continuous watch by fast and vicious patrol craft made unauthorized landings and take-offs an impossibility.

There were other safeguards, all ingenious and all effective. Information, the Ligurians admitted, could possibly be stolen. But information is valueless unless it can be passed to the other side.

Brady had thought that he had found a way to break the system, now he wasn't so sure. An eidetic memory, on the face of it, a foolproof method—but not if the Ligurians had managed to recruit telepaths to brain-check everyone leaving the planet.

And he dared assume nothing else; the risks were too great for him to discount the rumor.

He sighed and finished his drink, the alcohol stinging his bitten cheek. He was, he thought, safe enough for the moment. It was doubtful if any telepath could isolate a thought from among this crowd and, even if they could it would be impossible to isolate the thinker. Safety, for the mo-

ment, lay in numbers, it might be his last chance to fully concentrate on the major problem.

How?

How to get off this planet and carry the memorized information to where it would do the most good? How, in other words, to beat the telepaths?

He was, Brady thought, like the man in the story who was assured that, if he saw a piebald horse, he would receive a pot of gold—if he didn't think of the horse's tail. The man, of course, didn't stand a chance. He would remember what he mustn't think about and that would make him think about it.

But, thought Brady grimly, the legendary man only stood to lose something he hadn't got while he stood to lose his life and Earth a lot more. The incentives weren't quite the same.

Solemnly he called for another drink, raised his glass and drank a silent toast to the piebald horse.

He had, Brady found, discovered a new form of torture. Last night he had hugged the safety of the bar drinking until the memorized information was lost in a soggy pool of random thoughts. The morning was different.

He had been chosen for this assignment mainly because of his retentive memory. He woke with every detail of the stolen information fresh and vivid in his conscious mind. Hastily he jumped out of bed and concentrated on washing and shaving

half-expecting the arrival of the guards.

None came. Either he had been lucky or no telepath was on duty. He recognized the danger of the thought and desperately concentrated on the delicate filigree of the internal decorations. Nice, clean, expert carving, he thought. You didn't see much of that on Earth what with automation making the individual craftsman a thing of the past. He must find out about costs with a view to export.

The filigree occupied him the time it took to dress. His business, genuine enough which was his cover, provided something to think about on the way to breakfast. A group of Terrestrials, including a few obvious tourists, were a boon in more ways than one. He approached them, made himself pleasant, and joined them for the meal.

"Name's Meson." A portly man waved a greeting with his fork before using it to spear a portion of fish from his plate. "Industrial Advisor. Been here long?"

"Not very." Brady studied the menu, made his choice and helped himself to coffee as the native waiter moved away. "Did I see you last night?"

"I saw you." A crew-cut youngster, an engineer by the look of him, gave a broad wink. "Man, were you riding high!"

"You should have joined me."

"No thanks!" The youngster shook his head. "I'm working on atomics and for that you keep your head clear, or you don't keep it for long." He

drew a finger across his throat. "Get me?"

Brady nodded. The engineer was a contract-man which meant that he could return to Earth in a few years relatively wealthy—or, if he broke his contract, could land in a Ligurian jail. Knowing the Ligurian-style contract Brady didn't envy him. Neither, apparently, did a thin-faced, scholastic looking man seated at the end of the table.

"I'm Joe Hendricks," he said. "Music is my business and fame is my aim." He grinned. "Sorry, guess alliterative lyrics are in my blood by now." He gulped at his coffee and raised his eyebrows.

Brady introduced himself. "Export and Import," he explained. "Stopping here a few days on business."

"If your business is like my business, then you ain't got any business." Hendricks bit his lip. "Damn it! You must think I'm crazy!"

Brady gave a noncommittal smile.

"Sometimes I think I must be," continued Hendricks. "Planet hopping in search of new tonal effects and native melodies most of which are just a pain is a stupid way to earn a living." He brightened. "Still, there are worse ways, like our young friend there. He doesn't know it but he's just a price-tagged slave."

"Aren't most of us?" Brady wasn't really interested in the discussion but it filled a gap. "You know, work today in order to eat tomorrow. Didn't someone call it the acme of futility?"

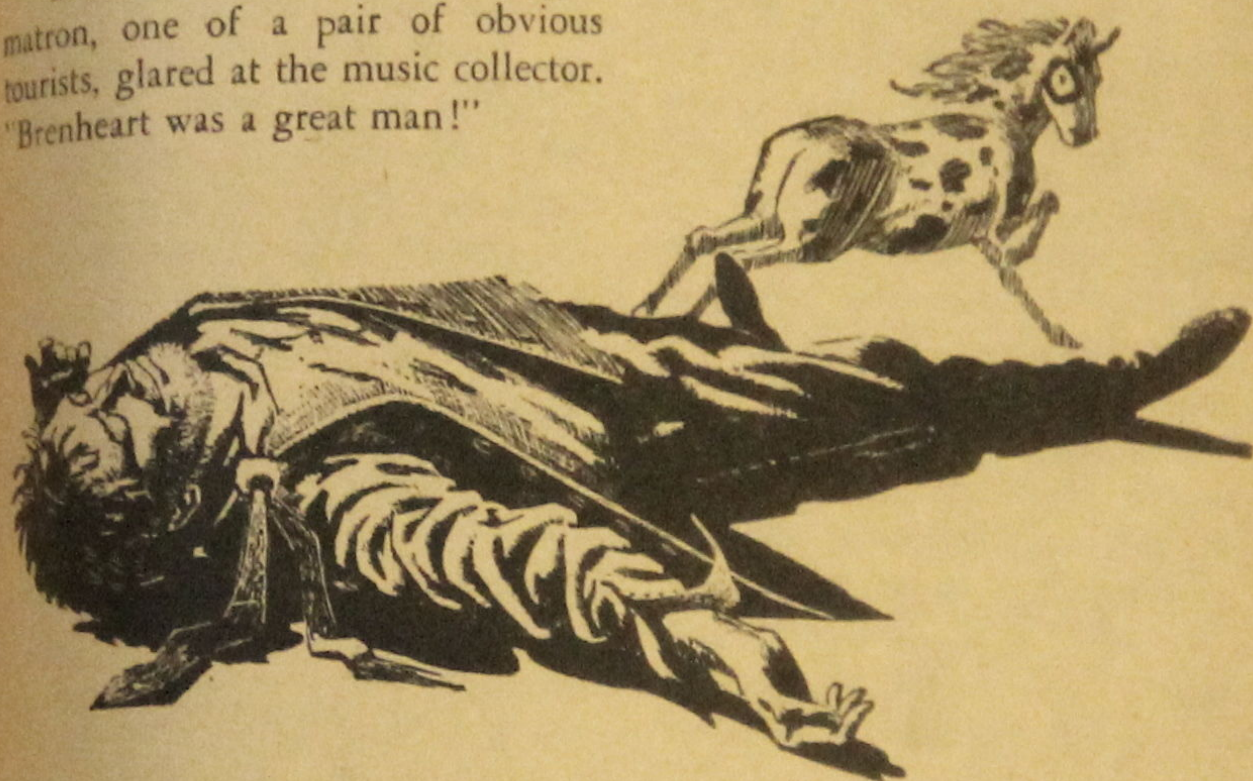
"Brenheart, but that guy was soured from the cradle." Hendricks shrug-

ged. "Anyway, he was a phony. He preached cynicism, 'true evaluation' he called it and died in a penthouse."

"So?"

"So he lied right along the line. He didn't evaluate himself; if he had he'd have died in the gutter where he belonged."

"That isn't true!" A middle-aged matron, one of a pair of obvious tourists, glared at the music collector. "Brenheart was a great man!"



"Sure." Hendricks waved a pacifying hand. "Anything you like, just don't let's argue about it." He looked whimsically at Brady. Brady smiled and concentrated on the tourists.

Their names, he found, were Lucy and Mary Piggot. They were sisters spending a small legacy on a selected tour of the more respectable planets.

"For culture, you know," explained Lucy. "I've always said that travel broadens the mind."

"Of course," said Brady smoothly. "I think you are both very wise."

Privately he thought the two women would have been far wiser to find

out a little more about their own planet before reaching out for "culture." Being cooped up in starships with stopovers at hotels which, aside from their location, were almost all alike, was hardly the best way to broaden minds. Still, he supposed, it would be something to talk about. And, for him, they could be useful.

"Why thank you!" Lucy was flustered. This chance meeting with the taut-faced stranger would add spice to an, as yet, eventless tour. "We'd love to come. Is it far?"

"Quite near to the spaceport."

Brady signaled to the waiter and paid both bills. He waved aside their objections. "Please, it's a pleasure. It isn't often I get the chance of fresh news from home." He smiled winningly at them. "Nor the chance of such charming company."

"But—"

"We can take a cart." He overrode their mild protestations. My business shouldn't take long and then we can tour the real, native quarter." He rose. "Shall we go?"

The area outside the doors was cluttered with the usual mass of carts plying for hire. He chose a modern one constructed of light alloy, fitted with air-suspension and balloon wheels. It was drawn by a couple of low-caste porters, naked but for their loin-cloths. Settling back in the wide seat he explained the anomaly.

"It would be simple to fit an engine but, if they did, the porters would be thrown out of employment."

"I think it's cute." Mary patted her hair and Brady was conscious of the competition between the sisters for his attention. "What brought you to Liguria, Mr. Brady?"

"Let's not talk about business," he said hastily. He did not want to be reminded of the true reason for his visit. Certain words and phrases, he had discovered, forced him to think of the one thing he was desperately trying to push back to the far regions of his subconscious.

They did not talk about business. Instead they chose to talk about something almost as bad.

"You know, I think it dreadful all this talk of trouble between the planets," babbled Lucy. She was determined to hold the conversation. "Why, there was a man on the spaceship, you didn't meet him Mary, who said there was a possibility of actual war. Do you think it possible, Mr. Brady?"

He gave her a noncommittal smile.

"You can see that Mr. Brady knows more than he cares to tell." Mary was being arch. "For all we know he could be a spy—or is it an agent?" She giggled. "You know, Lucy, this is so exciting!"

"Exciting?" Brady raised his eyebrows.

"All the spying and espionage. Why, it seems that everyone is suspect. They even searched our room last night at dinner."

"That is nonsense, Mary." Lucy was firm. "They wouldn't dare do such a thing. Why, if they did, I'd complain to our ambassador!" Her hand gripped his arm. "Mary is so foolish," she exclaimed. "I'm sure that she is entirely wrong. Perhaps you could convince her, Mr. Brady."

Brady gritted his teeth and then, by an effort of will, managed to turn the conversation into more harmless channels. But his mind, once aroused, stubbornly refused to stop thinking about his immediate problem. Grimly he stared ahead, concentrating on the smooth, seemingly effortless rhythm of the porters.

Neat how they managed to keep in such perfect step; training, naturally, but it must have taken years. He sup-

posed they were brought up to it from early youth, given small carts to practice with, something like that.

He was earnestly wondering what their diet consisted of and how one partner would manage should his running-mate fall sick or die when they arrived at their destination.

The break was a relief. The native factor was shrewd and knew all about striking a hard bargain. Brady lost his worries in mental juggling of freight rates, import duties, taxes, margins of profit and discounts. Finally, the contract signed and the business over, came the ritual gossip.

Brady listened patiently to the state of the weather, the health of the factor's family, the never-ending cycle of increased taxation and government supervision, the third-hand tattle common to Ligurian businessmen. In return he contributed a choice item about a Wentian who had managed to sneak past the Terran embarkation authorities and who had spored while in transit; added his own complaints about increased taxes and became doleful over the prospects of trade in general. He was feeling quite relaxed when his eye glanced at the front page of a local newspaper.

"Your pardon." He picked up the sheet without waiting for permission. The photograph on the cheap pulp was smudged but recognizable. It was the native from whom he had bought the information.

"Terrible, isn't it?" The factor made vague noises at the back of his throat. "It's getting so that a man

isn't safe on the streets now." He read the script beneath the photograph and shook his head. "Found dead in the gutter," he said. "The body was badly battered and bore injuries consistent with having fallen from a great height, probably the top of a nearby building." He shrugged. "Well, perhaps, but my guess is that a thug attacked him."

Brady knew better. It hadn't been suicide and it had been no thug. He hastily made his departure and rejoined the ladies in the cart. Lucy was annoyed, her tones sharp with impatience.

"Well," she said. "You certainly took your time!"

Mary was more sympathetic.

"Mr. Brady probably had a lot to talk about," she said. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I found it most interesting just sitting here watching the people go by. I do feel that, to get to know a planet, really know it I mean, you have to go among the people. Don't you agree, Mr. Brady?"

"Certainly." Brady looked about him. Aside from the two women there were no other Terrestrials about and he had a sudden, panicky feeling of naked helplessness. He could only guess at the effective range of a telepath but, if they had any range at all, he must be as obvious as a tree in a desert. He had to get back in the woods, and fast.

"Is something the matter?" Mary, still sympathetic, leaned towards him. Brady managed a brave smile, his hands pressing his stomach.

"I feel a little off-color," he ad-

dropped through the hole, Brady at his heels.

It was a nightmare journey of twisting turns and endless crawling. They were, Brady guessed, in an old sewer of some kind, at least it smelt like it. After what seemed a long time the native stopped. Brady bumped into him, cursed softly at the pain of the blow, then realized the other was speaking to him.

"We part here, Earthman. I go to the left, you to the right. You will come to a wall set with rungs. Climb them and lift the trap. It opens on a small yard from which you can reach the street."

"Thanks." Brady waited for the native to move. "Anything else?"

"A small thing. I have been thinking—we should not have been discovered. I took every precaution." The native hesitated. "Perhaps I should warn you. There is a rumor, I gave it no credence, that a new form of life has been recruited by our government."

"So?" Brady wasn't surprised. The galaxy was big and there were more plants uncontacted than known. It was inevitable that new races should be discovered. "What kind?"

"I do not know, not for certain, but rumor has it that they can read minds." The native moved forward. "Good-by, Earthman. Fortune go with you."

The instructions had been correct. Brady eased himself through the trap, lowered the lid and took a hasty look round. The yard was deserted though

he could hear footsteps in the street. He concentrated on brushing down his clothes, fortunately the sewer had been dry and the dirt fell from the repellent plastic; a shower and they would be as good as new.

He smelt the air then, satisfied, took the weapon from his pocket. A twist and the thing fell apart; a cigarette lighter, a battery-powered pocket radio, other assorted junk, all local imports and all, if you knew just how to fix them, uniting to make an effective, short-range beamer. Disarmed, innocuous, his papers in order, he strolled from the yard and into the street. The blandness of his features belied his thoughts.

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A shape loomed in the shadows of the street and a flashlight beam stabbed at his eyes. "What—?"

"Routine check, sir." The guard wasn't a native but a mercenary imported from a high-gravity planet. Brady would have been like a doll in his grasp. "Your papers, sir."

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mitted. "A touch of recurrent fever, something I picked up on Thurgid. Nothing contagious," he added hastily, "but it's rather annoying." He appeared to control a grimace of pain. "I wonder? I hate to ask it but—"

"Yes, Mr. Brady?" This time it was Lucy who was sympathetic.

"I wonder if we could go back to the hotel." He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his forehead. "I hate to disappoint you like this but—"

"Shouldn't you see a doctor?" Lucy softened her voice. "I mean, if you are ill—"

"It's nothing, nothing serious, that is." He made more play with the handkerchief. "I've had these attacks before. I'll be all right if I just lie down for a while and sleep a little." He leaned forward, snapped orders to the porters. The cart jolted into motion and steadied into a smooth glide. To Brady it seemed to crawl.

To be safe he needed to be among others of his own kind. The natural place they would congregate would be the bar. He sat on a stool, as close to a group of gossiping contract-men as he could, ordered whisky and drank it while his mind edged at the problem. He called for another drink, left it on the counter while he crossed the room to a public visbooth. He inserted coins, adjusted the muscles of his face and dialed a number. The screen cleared and revealed a smooth, native face.

"Spaceport," the native announced. "Your pleasure, sir?"

Brady told him, his voice husky, like his features distorted beyond recognition. The clerk consulted his files.

"The next Terran departure is in seven days, sir."

"Seven days?"

"That is correct. There is a Vegan ship in two and a Wendian in five." The clerk's crest showed the color of amusement. "I doubt if you would care to travel on either of those, sir."

Brady doubted it, too. He wasn't accustomed either to sleeping in oil or breathing an atmosphere loaded with sulphureted hydrogen.

"I understood the *Solar Star* was leaving tomorrow," he said. The clerk shrugged.

"No, sir. That is the vessel departing in seven days time. A slight case of contamination," he explained. "The ship has been detained for cleansing."

"I see." Brady felt himself beginning to sweat.

"Was there any urgency, sir?"

"No. I was just asking for a friend."

Brady broke the connection and stood, staring at the empty screen, conscious of the tautness of his nerves. Deliberately he forced himself to relax, easing the muscles of his face, taking deep breaths to ease the pounding of his heart. Even if he couldn't control the workings of his mind he was still the master of his body. When he left the booth he appeared just like any other ordinary business man who had just made an ordinary, routine call.

The bar was even more crowded than before. Little groups of men clustered at the counter and a sprinkling of women made lighter sounds in the hum of conversation. He recognized the sisters who, after one glance at him, concentrated on their fruit juice. He had, he knew, insulted them beyond forgiveness. He dismissed them from his mind as he reviewed the situation.

First the contact. Somehow the suspicion of the guards had been aroused and they had trapped the area of the rendezvous. He had escaped, the contact, obviously, hadn't. He must have been tortured to death and Ligurian Intelligence now knew that he had passed the information to an Earthman. That would account for the delayed vessel; obviously they didn't know just which Terrestrial was the one they wanted.

Brady wasn't surprised at that. He had taken elementary precautions as he had when calling the spaceport, but even so he doubted if any native could describe one Earthman from another. That wasn't the main problem.

He couldn't consciously keep remembering not to think about what he mustn't; the strain was too great. He was like the man who went around looking for a piebald horse while telling himself that he mustn't think of its tail. The very effort of not-remembering was, in itself, a danger signal.

At the hotel he was fairly safe; sheer numbers would protect him if he should slip, a telepath could hardly be expected to distinguish one

mental radiation from another. The spaceport was a different story.

You went singly at the spaceport. You had to pass emigration, embarkation, health, customs, examinations and all the rest of it. For a man to pass through all that knowing he must not think of a certain thing; knowing that he must not even think about not thinking of it, wasn't going to be easy.

In fact it was going to be impossible.

Unless?

Brady felt that he could use a good hypnotist. If he could be conditioned to forget until safe in space then his problems would be over. He thought longingly of all the experts back on Earth who could tweak out an unpleasant memory, blanket an entire episode or implant false experiences without any trouble at all. But this wasn't Earth and there were no hypnotists on Liguria. Only a regular doctor attached to the spaceport who would be under constant supervision and who couldn't help even if he were qualified.

Brady sighed and ordered another drink. He had the glass to his lips, the tang of the whisky in his throat when a hand fell on his shoulder.

It was Joe Hendricks and he had been drinking. He sat on a stool next to Brady and rapped the counter. He lifted his glass and looked owlishly over the rim.

"You," he said, "look a worried man."

"Do I?"

"You sure do." Hendricks swallowed his drink and called for another. "What's the matter chum? Girl stand you up or something?"

"Something," agreed Brady. He told Hendricks about the delayed ship departure. "The trouble is it will play hell with my schedule." He looked at Hendricks' drink, the third in almost as many minutes. "You look like a man with something on his mind, too."

"You can say that again." Joe made a grimace. "I've been trying to find something worth collecting on this planet—not a hope. Not a note, not even a couple of chords worth a second hearing. Now it seems I've got to stick here for another week." He shook his head and signaled to the bartender.

The native didn't immediately respond. He was busy serving a group of men lower down the bar. Hendricks glared at them.

"Look at them!" He snorted with contempt. "You'd think a man would do his drinking in a civilized manner, wouldn't you?"

Brady nodded.

"Not these guys! They've slipped the leash for three days and are they going to live it up!" Hendricks banged on the counter again. "I hate those guys," he said. "Wage-slaves the lot of them. Scared to step over the line in case they get hit in the pocket. Now they're on vacation they want to make up for lost time."

"Contract men?" Brady felt the stirring of alarm. "You mean they're all on vacation?"

"For three days. After that this place will look like a morgue—aside from us genuine transients, that is."

Brady took a deep breath, held it, let it slowly escape through his nose. Ligurian Intelligence were clever, he had never underestimated them, and now many things were clear. His surmise about the telepaths not being able to recognize individual thoughts from a crowd must be correct. The hotel was crowded, abnormally so, but soon it would be almost empty of Terrestrials. With the ship delayed and devoid of his camouflage, Brady wouldn't stand a chance.

"Cheer up!" Hendricks banged on the counter, swore as the flustered native bartender spilled whisky on the smooth plastic. "Take it easy, can't you!" He glowered his anger. "No appreciation," he complained to Brady. "No appreciation at all."

"No." Brady picked up his drink.

"Have another." Hendricks was hospitable. "Tell you what, let's get a bottle and have ourselves a ball."

"Take it easy." Brady toyed with his glass, his eyes speculative. "I've got a lot of thinking to do. 'Re-arrange my schedule,' he explained. "Try and figure out some way to make up for lost time."

"Forget it." Hendricks made a gesture. "Take time out to relax."

"I'm liable to relax too far." Brady swirled the whisky in his glass. "Suppose they alter the departure time? Suppose I'm too sozzled to hear about it? What then?"

"Then you do the same as I did on Fendle." Hendricks chuckled. "Went

on a bend there and didn't wake up until after ship-time. I had to sweat it out for a month until the next ship." He chuckled again. "It paid off though, I found three musical arrangements which are still paying me royalties."

Brady raised his eyebrows.

"I figured a system. I contact the medic and spin him a yarn and make him promise to get me to the ship even if I'm dead. Then I bribe a couple of natives to do the same. Between them I figure I'm safe."

Brady nodded, the music collector certainly had things worked out. The man must be quite a heavy drinker to have bothered about such a system. He looked at the thin face and for the first time noted the tiny mottled veins, the subtle air of dissipation.

"Well?" Hendricks was getting impatient. "Do we or don't we?"

"Do we or don't we what?"

"Have ourselves a ball. You on an expense account?" Brady nodded. "Then let's go to town. Let's get a couple of bottles and forget this hick planet."

"Make it four," said Brady.

The steward was discreet. He knocked on the cabin door, waited, knocked again. The man with him had no time for pleasantries, he reached past the steward, opened the door, walked into the cabin. He slammed shut the door and nodded towards the bed.

"How is he?"

"He'll live." The doctor made a final examination, snapped shut his

instrument case, and rose to his feet. The other man pointedly opened the door, waited until he was alone with the man on the bed, sat beside the bunk.

"Well?"

"I'm dying!" Brady made weak, grouping motions. His eyes opened, focused, then, by an effort of will, cleared. "Grimsdyke!"

"In person." He looked at his wrist. "And in a hurry. Blenkin didn't seem to want to co-operate."

"Blenkin's old-fashioned," said Brady. "I guess he didn't like being boarded and his ship practically taken over by a strange man with a badge and a mysterious errand." He winced at the pain in his skull. "How about letting the medic work on me?"

"He has." Grimsdyke looked thoughtfully at the man on the bed. "You know," he said quietly, "I didn't think you'd make it. Those new playmates of the Ligurians are tough customers."

"They exist then? I'd wondered."

"They exist all right. We got to them just after our friends. True neutrals, of course, they would be."

Brady nodded. He relaxed, feeling better by the minute, partly because of his improved physical condition but mostly because he knew that, at last, he was safe. In a little while, when he felt able, he would tape the stolen information and Grimsdyke would take it by fast shuttle to where it would do the most good.

Grimsdyke lit a cigarette. He looked thoughtful.

"What I can't understand," he

said, "is how you figured it out."

"You've heard of the piebald horse?" Brady told of the story. "You see the gimmick- You've got to remember what not to think about. To do that you've got to remember what it is you must forget. Follow?"

"I think so." Grimsdyke didn't seem too certain. "A little complicated, isn't it?"

"It's impossible." Brady helped himself to one of Grimsdyke's cigarettes. I thought of everything but nothing was any good. I thought of wearing tight shoes so that the pain would occupy my mind; of fixing an accident, something painful but not too serious, but I still had to strip naked for embarkation and it would only take one thought to give me away."

"So?"

"So nothing I could think of would work. I was just about ready to chance it being a bluff when I found the solution."

"You know," he said dreamily, "it's funny how we so often overlook the obvious. It takes a real effort of will to remember that we're up against alien minds with alien concepts of conduct." He turned on one elbow and aimed the cigarette at Grimsdyke. "What is the one thing peculiar to Terrestrials that we have never met up with in any other race?"

Grimsdyke looked blank.

"There you are!" Brady was triumphant. "You're doing it at this very moment and yet you can't recognize it."

"This?" Grimsdyke looked at his cigarette. "Smoking? But it's normal."

"Wrong." Brady spoke through a cloud of smoke. "Every *Terrestrial* does it, or almost every *Terrestrial*, but we are the only race who regard it as normal. In fact we are unique in being the only race of intelligent creatures who consistently poison their bodies with noxious substances such as nicotine and," he paused, "alcohol."

"I don't know why they think we do it," he continued. "Every race we've met must have their own ideas, they probably think it due to diet or something, but that isn't the point. The point is that they have no idea as to the effects of alcohol—the mental effects in particular."

"Man!" Grimsdyke looked at Brady with something like awe.

"Seven days," said Brady. "Seven days in which I got drunk and stayed drunk. Stinking, rotten, staggering drunk. So drunk that I didn't know what time of day it was; too drunk to care; too drunk to think."

"I had luck," he admitted. "I found just the right partner. How is Joe, by the way?"

"He'll live—just."

"I owe him a lot," said Brady. "He kept me so drunk that I didn't even think of the piebald horse let alone its tail. And her supplied a cast-iron alibi as well as camouflage." He sighed. "Joe is a nice guy—I hope he understands why I never want to see him again."

THE END