

He had betrayed mankind,
but he was not afraid of
the consequences — ever!

THE MIGHTIEST MAN

By PATRICK FAHY

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 **l a u g h e d** 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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PENNY WISE AND FASHION FOOLISH

By THEODORE STURGEON

YOU'RE getting robbed.

Let's not go looking for the robber just now; he isn't easy to catch, partly because he's got too many accomplices, and partly because he's too doggone big. But he can be locked out.

What you're getting robbed of is books—or to put it more personally, you're missing what these books have stored up for you, and it's a real injustice.

One reason is that you are, as you've been taught to be, penny-wise. I can't completely knock that. Waiting for a cheap edition sometimes makes sense, providing you don't forget, while waiting, what it was you were waiting for. But there are times when there isn't a paperback reprint and there won't be. You may well be thrifting yourself out of some real riches.

Another reason is that you (this time, it's a collective, averaged "you") are fashion-foolish, and for this you ought to go have your silly head candled. There has been for many years a never-ex-

amined, taken-for-granted conviction that books are perishables, and must be bought and consumed while crisp, like iceberg lettuce. This conviction is of course fostered by bookclubs, who go right along with the idea that it Just Isn't Done to be seen reading a book Everybody Was Reading last year, or even last spring.

It may seem simple-minded to say this in so many words, but it must be said: Honest to goodness, friend; any book is a new book if it's new to you. And further: Any price is a cheap price if it substantially increases your understanding.

There's a whole wide category of wonderful books which you never see because some reviewers back off from their high price-tags, or because some reviewers never get to see them (they're published by small firms who can circulate only just so many review copies) or because, even when you hear about them, you're unwilling to part with the dough or because,

most criminal of all, you won't look at something with a last-year's copyright on it.

HERE are two cases in point: *The Human Animal*, by Weston La Barre, Chicago University Press, 1954. 372 pp. with index. \$6.00. And: *A Handbook of Space Flight*, by Wayne A Proell and Norman J. Bowman, Perastadion Press (10630 S. Saint Louis Ave., Chicago) 1958. 458 pp with index. \$7.00.

The La Barre is a handsome volume and an absolute delight to read. There are times when the author is a very funny man indeed. None of which keeps it from being a thorough, scholarly, sometimes profound examination of the human animal, as seen from the points of view of the biologist, the physical anthropologist, the cultural ditto, and the psychologist, all of which Mr. La Barre seems to be. When he is through with you, you will understand as you never did before why we walk and talk and marry and govern ourselves the way we do—really why, starting from the engineering of the body itself, and all that went into that, clear back to the amoeba.

Mr. La Barre, in the interests of accuracy, will be using his share of anthropological (and other) technicalities; but never once does he throw you a term without making sure you understand it.

The *Handbook* is surely one of the most extraordinary collections of scientific, technological and speculative data ever put between covers. Excellently cross-indexed, clearly and sensibly written, it hands you an example of how to calculate the exhaust velocity and thrust of a rocket by the Hirshfelder static equilibrium method; what to do if someone spills rocket-fuel on your ring-finger; formulae for solid propellants; pages and pages of conversion factors (to convert horsepower into kilogram calories per minute, multiply by 10.694). There are diagrams of practical space-ships, including a real beauty by Arthur C. Clarke, and a long list of speculative space drives culled from s-f magazines. There's a truly marvellous 3-dimensional projection of surrounding space, with all its stars up to 15 light-years away precisely located; there's a list of major UFO sightings up to publication date; there are lucid descriptions of 7 different types of nuclear reaction, a list of possible careers in the space game and where to apply for jobs...it is impossible to describe, or even to list, the scope of this remarkable book and the number of its subjects.

Don't let yourself be cheated out of a chance to read it!
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