

my ankle and I slid out, reluctantly, stretching my sight of the bright square until the falling of the spread broke it. Mrs. Klevity worked her way under the bed, her breath coming pantingly, her big, ungainly body inching along awkwardly.

She crawled and crawled and crawled until she should have come up short against the wall, and I knew she must be funneling down into the brightness, her face, head and shoulders, so small, so lovely, like her silvery voice. But the rest of her, still gross and ugly, like a butterfly trying to skin out of its cocoon.

Finally only her feet were sticking out from under the bed and they thrashed and waved and didn't go anywhere, so I got down on the floor and put my feet against hers and braced myself against the dresser and pushed. And pushed and pushed. Suddenly there was a going, a finishing, and my feet dropped to the floor.

There, almost under the bed, lay Mrs. Klevity's shabby old-lady black shoes, toes pointing away from each other. I picked them up in my hands, wanting, somehow, to cry. Her saggy lisle stockings were still in the shoes.

Slowly I pulled all of the clothes of Mrs. Klevity out from under the bed. They were held together by a thin skin, a sloughed-off leftover of Mrs. Klevity that only showed,

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gray and lifeless, where her bare hands and face would have been, and her dull gray filmed eyes.

I let it crumple to the floor and sat there, holding one of her old shoes in my hand.

The door rattled and it was gray, old, wrinkled Mr. Klevity.

"Hello, child," he said. "Where's my wife?"

"She's gone," I said, not looking at him. "She left you a note there on the table."

"Gone—?" He left the word stranded in mid-air as he read Mrs. Klevity's note.

THE paper fluttered down. He yanked a dresser drawer open and snatched out spool-looking things, both hands full. Then he practically dived under the bed, his elbows thudding on the floor, to-hurt hard. And there was only a wiggle or two and *his* shoes slumped away from each other.

I pulled his cast-aside from under the bed and crawled under it myself. I saw the tiny picture frame — bright, bright, but so small.

I crept close to it, knowing I couldn't go in. I saw the tiny perfection of the road, the landscape, the people — the laughing people who crowded around the two new rejoicing figures — the two silvery, lovely young creatures who cried out in tiny voices as they danced. The girl-one threw a kiss outward before they all turned away and

GALAXY

ran up the winding white road together.

The frame began to shrink, faster, faster, until it squeezed to a single bright bead and then blinked out.

All at once the house was empty and cold. The upsurge was gone. Nothing was real any more. All at once the faint ghost of the smell of eggs was frightening. All at once I whimpered, "My lunch money!"

I scrambled to my feet, tumbling Mrs. Klevity's clothes into a disconnected pile. I gathered up my jammies and leaned across the table to get my sweater. I saw my name on a piece of paper. I picked it up and read it.

Everything that is ours in this house now belongs to Anna-across-the-court, the little girl that's been staying with me at night.

Ahvlaree Klevity

I looked from the paper around the room. All for me? All for us? All this richness and wonder of good things? All this and the box in the bottom drawer, too? And a paper that said so, so that nobody could take them away from us.

A fluttering wonder filled my chest and I walked stiffly around the three rooms, visualizing everything without opening a drawer or door. I stood by the stove and looked at the frying pan hanging

above it. I opened the cupboard door. The paper bag of eggs was on the shelf. I reached for it, looking back over my shoulder almost guiltily.

The wonder drained out of me with a gulp. I ran back over to the bed and yanked up the spread. I knelt and hammered on the edge of the bed with my clenched fists. Then I leaned my forehead on my tight hands and felt my knuckles bruise me. My hands went limply to my lap, my head drooping.

I got up slowly and took the paper from the table, bundled my jammies under my arm and got the eggs from the cupboard. I turned the lights out and left.

I felt tears wash down from my eyes as I stumbled across the familiar yard in the dark. I don't know why I was crying — unless it was because I was homesick for something bright that I knew I would never have, and because I knew I could never tell Mom what really happened.

Then the pale trail of light from our door caught me and I swept in on an astonished Mom, calling softly, because of the sleeping kids, "Mom! Mom! Guess what!"

YES, I remember Mrs. Klevity because she had eggs for *breakfast! Every day!* That's one of the reasons I remember her.

—ZENNA HENDERSON

SOMETHING BRIGHT

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CRYING JAG

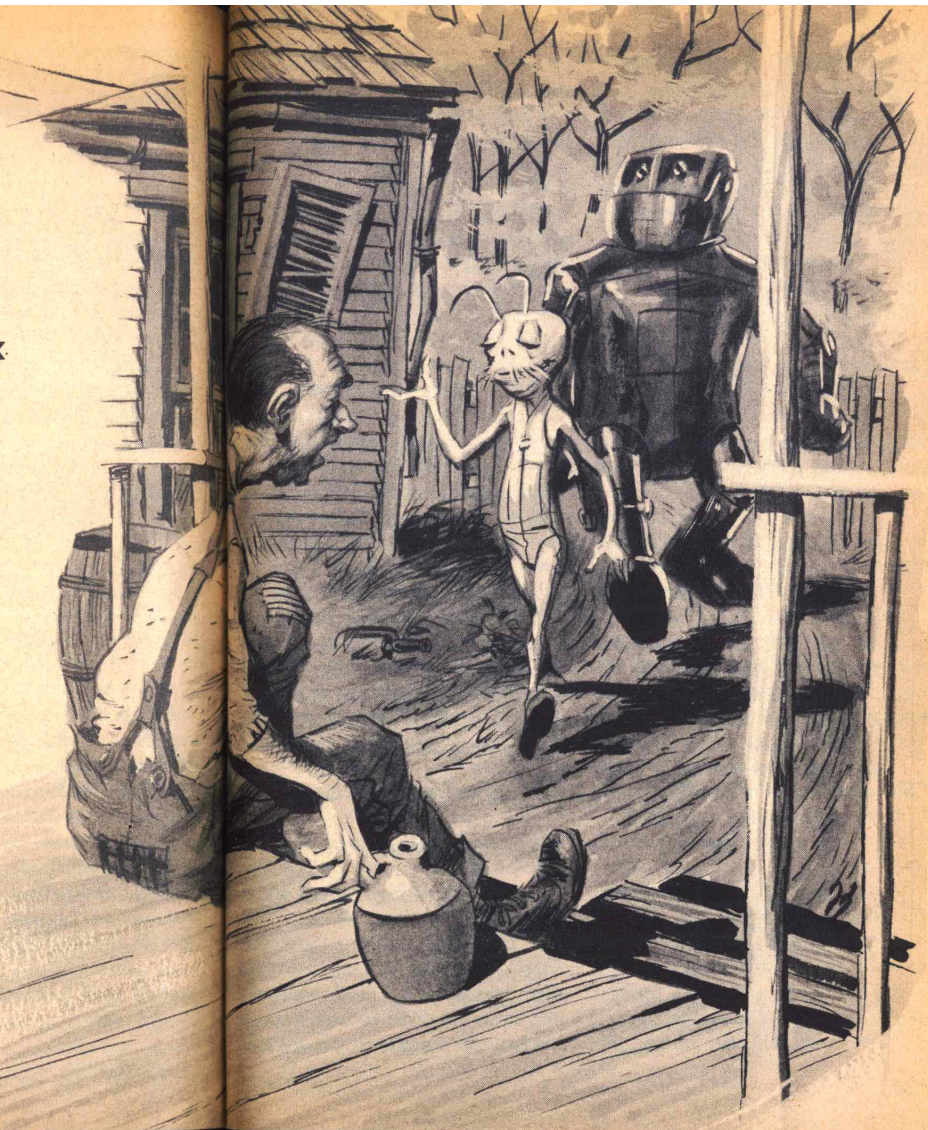
By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Solitary luses are not the worst kind. The worst are aliens like this—because of what they tank up on — and right in public, too!

Illustrated by WOOD

It was Saturday evening and I was sitting on the stoop, working up a jag. I had my jug beside me, handy, and I was feeling good and fixing to feel better, when this alien and his robot came tramping up the driveway.

I knew right off it was an alien. It looked something like a man,



but there weren't any humans got robots trailing at their heels.

If I had been stone sober, I might have gagged a bit at the idea there was an alien coming up the driveway and done some arguing with myself. But I wasn't sober — not entirely, that is.

So I said good evening and asked him to sit down and he thanked me and sat.

"You, too," I said to the robot, moving over to make room.

"Let him stand," the alien said. "He cannot sit. He is a mere machine."

The robot clanked a gear at him, but that was all it said.

"Have a snort," I said, picking up the jug, but the alien shook his head.

"I wouldn't dare," he said. "My metabolism."

That was one of the double-jointed words I had acquaintance with. From working at Doc Abel's sanitorium, I had picked up some of the medic lingo.

"That's a dirty shame," I said. "You don't mind if I do?"

"Not at all," the alien said.

So I had a long one. I felt the need of it.

I put down the jug and wiped my mouth and asked him if there was something I could get him. It seemed plain inhospitable for me to be sitting there, lapping up that liquor, and him not having any.

"You can tell me about this

town," the alien said. "I think you call it Millville."

"That's the name, all right. What you want to know about it?"

"All the sad stories," said the robot, finally speaking up.

"He is correct," the alien said, settling down in an attitude of pleasurable anticipation. "Tell me about the troubles and the tribulations."

"Starting where?" I asked.

"How about yourself?"

"Me? I never have no troubles. I janitor all week at the sanitorium and I get drunk on Saturday. Then I sober up on Sunday so I can janitor another week. Believe me, mister," I told him, "I haven't got no troubles. I am sitting pretty. I have got it made."

"But there must be people . . ."

"Oh, there are. You never saw so much complaining as there is in Millville. There ain't nobody here except myself but has got a load of trouble. And it wouldn't be so bad if they didn't talk about it."

"Tell me," said the alien.

SO I had another snort and then I told him about the Widow Frye, who lives just up the street. I told him how her life had been just one long suffering, with her husband running out on her when their boy was only three years old, and how she took in washing and worked her fingers to the bone to

support the two of them, and the kid ain't more than thirteen or fourteen when he steals this car and gets sent up for two years to the boys' school over at Glen Lake.

"And that is all of it?" asked the alien.

"Well, in rough outline," I said. "I didn't put in none of the flourishes nor the grimy details, the way the widow would. You should hear her tell it."

"Could you arrange it?"

"Arrange what?"

"To have her tell it to me."

"I wouldn't promise you," I told him honestly. "The widow has a low opinion of me. She never speaks to me."

"But I can't understand."

"She is a decent, church-going woman," I explained, "and I am just a crummy bum. And I drink."

"She doesn't like drinking?"

"She thinks it is a sin."

The alien sort of shivered. "I know. I guess all places are pretty much alike."

"You have people like the Widow Frye?"

"Not exactly but the attitude's the same."

"Well," I said, after another snort, "I figure there is nothing else to do but bear up under it."

"Would it be too much bother," asked the alien, "to tell me another one?"

"None at all," I said.

So I told him about Elmer Trotter, who worked his way through law school up at Madison, doing all kinds of odd jobs to earn his way, since he had no folks, and how he finally got through and passed the bar examination, then came back to Millville to set up an office.

I couldn't tell him how it happened or why, although I had always figured that Elmer had got a belly full of poverty and grabbed this chance to earn a lot of money fast. No one should have known better than he did that it was dishonest, being he was a lawyer. But he went ahead and did it and he got caught.

"And what happened then?" asked the alien breathlessly. "Was he punished?"

I told him how Elmer got disbarred and how Eliza Jenkins gave him back his ring and how Elmer went into insurance and just scraped along in a hand-to-mouth existence, eating out his heart to be a lawyer once again, but he never could.

"You got all this down?" the alien asked the robot.

"All down," the robot said.

"What fine nuances!" exclaimed the alien, who seemed to be much pleased. "What stark, overpowering reality!"

I didn't know what he was talking about, so I had another drink instead.

THEN I went ahead, without being asked, and I told him about Amanda Robinson and her unhappy love affair and how she turned into Millville's most genteel and sorriest old maid. And about Abner Jones and his endless disappointments, but his refusal to give up the idea that he was a great inventor, and how his family went in rags and hungry while he spent all his time inventing.

"Such sadness!" said the alien. "What a lovely planet!"

"You better taper off," the robot warned him. "You know what happens to you."

"Just one more," the alien begged. "I'm all right. Just one more."

"Now, look here," I told him, "I don't mind telling them, if that is what you want. But maybe first you better tell me a bit about yourself. I take it you're an alien."

"Naturally," said the alien.

"And you came here in a spaceship."

"Well, not exactly a spaceship."

"Then, if you're an alien, how come you talk so good?"

"Now, that," the alien said, "is something that still is tender to me."

The robot said scornfully: "They took him good and proper."

"You mean you paid for it."

"Too much," the robot said. "They saw that he was eager, so they hiked the price on him."

"But I'll get even with them," the alien cut in. "If I don't turn a profit on it, my name isn't——." And he said a word that was long and twisted and didn't make no sense.

"That your name?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure. But you can call me Wilbur. And the robot, you may call him Lester."

"Well, boys," I said, "I'm mighty glad to know you. You can call me Sam."

And I had another drink.

We sat there on the stoop and the moon was coming up and the fireflies were flickering in the lilac hedge and the world had an edge on it. I'd never felt so good. "Just one more," said Wilbur pleadingly.

So I told him about some of the mental cases up at the sanitorium and I picked the bad ones and alongside of me Wilbur started blubbing and the robot said: "Now see what you've done. He's got a crying jag."

But Wilbur wiped his eyes and said it was all right and that if I'd just keep on he'd do the best he could do get a grip himself.

"What is going on here?" I asked in some astonishment. "You sound like you get drunk from hearing these sad stories."

"That's what he does," said Lester, the robot. "Why else do you think he'd sit and listen to your blabber."

"And you?" I asked of Lester. "Of course not," Wilbur said. "He has no emotions. He is a mere machine."

I HAD another drink and I thought it over and it was as clear as day. So I told Wilbur my philosophy: "This is Saturday night and that's the time to howl. So let's you and I together—"

"I am with you," Wilbur cried, "as long as you can talk."

Lester clanked a gear in what must have been disgust, but that was all he did.

"Get down every word of it," Wilbur told the robot. "We'll make ourselves a million. We'll need it to get back all overpayment for our indoctrination." He sighed. "Not that it wasn't worth it. What a lovely, melancholy planet."

So I got cranked up and kept myself well lubricated and the night kept getting better every blessed minute.

Along about midnight, I got falling-down drunk and Wilbur maudlin drunk and we gave up by a sort of mutual consent. We got up off the stoop and by bracing one another we got inside the door and I lost Wilbur somewhere, but made it to my bed and that was the last I knew.

When I woke up, I knew it was Sunday morning. The sun was streaming through the window and it was bright and sanctimonious,

like Sunday always is around here.

Sundays usually are quiet, and that's one thing wrong with them. But this one wasn't quiet. There was an awful din going on outside. It sounded like someone was throwing rocks and hitting a tin can.

I rolled out of bed and my mouth tasted just as bad as I knew it would be. I rubbed some of the sand out of my eyes and started for the living room and just outside the bedroom door I almost stepped on Wilbur.

He gave me quite a start and then I remembered who he was and I stood there looking at him, not quite believing it. I thought at first that he might be dead, but I saw he wasn't. He was lying flat upon his back and his catfish mouth was open and every time he breathed the feathery whiskers on his lips stood straight out and fluttered.

I stepped over him and went to the door to find out what all the racket was. And there stood Lester, the robot, exactly where we'd left him the night before, and out in the driveway a bunch of kids were pegging rocks at him. Those kids were pretty good. They hit Lester almost every time.

I yelled at them and they scattered down the road. They knew I'd tan their hides.

I was just turning around to go back into the house when a car swung into the drive. Joe Fletcher,

our constable, jumped out and came striding toward me and I could see that he was in his best fire-eating mood.

JOE stopped in front of the stoop and put both hands on his hips and stared first at Lester and then at me.

"Sam," he asked with a nasty leer, "what is going on here? Some of your pink elephants move into live with you?"

"Joe," I said solemn, passing up the insult, "I'd like you to meet Lester."

Joe had opened up his mouth to yell at me when Wilbur showed up at the door.

"And this is Wilbur," I said. "Wilbur is an alien and Lester is a..."

"Wilbur is a *what!*" roared Joe.

Wilbur stepped out on the stoop and said: "What a sorrowful face. And so noble, too!"

"He means you," I said to Joe.

"If you guys keep this up," Joe bellowed, "I'll run in the bunch of you."

"I meant no harm," said Wilbur. "I apologize if I have bruised your sensitivities."

That was a hot one — Joe's sensitivities!

"I can see at a glance," said Wilbur, "that life's not been easy for you."

"I'll tell the world it ain't," Joe said.

"Nor for me," said Wilbur, sitting down upon the stoop. "It seems that there are days a man can't lay away a dime."

"Mister, you are right," said Joe. "Just like I was telling the missus this morning when she up and told me that the kids needed some new shoes..."

"It does beat hell how a man can't get ahead."

"Listen, you ain't heard nothing yet..."

And so help me Hannah, Joe sat down beside him and before you could count to three started telling his life story.

"Lester," Wilbur said, "be sure you get this down."

I beat it back into the house and had a quick one to settle my stomach before I tackled breakfast.

I didn't feel like eating, but I knew I had to. I got out some eggs and bacon and wondered what I would feed Wilbur. For I suddenly remembered how his metabolism couldn't stand liquor, and if it couldn't take good whisky, there seemed very little chance that it would take eggs and bacon.

AS I was finishing my breakfast, Higman Morris came busting through the back door and straight into the kitchen. Higgy is our mayor, a pillar of the church, a member of the school board and a director of the bank, and he is a big stuffed shirt.

"Sam," he yelled at me, "this town has taken a lot from you. We have put up with your drinking and your general shiftlessness and your lack of public spirit. But this is too much!"

I wiped some egg off my chin. "What is too much?"

Higgy almost strangled, he was so irritated. "This public exhibition. This three-ring circus! This nuisance! And on a Sunday, too!"

"Oh," I said, "you mean Wilbur and his robot."

"There's a crowd collecting out in front and I've had a dozen calls, and Joe is sitting out there with this — this—"

"Alien," I supplied.

"And they're bawling on one another's shoulders like a pair of three-year-olds and . . . *Alien!*"

"Sure," I said, "What did you think he was?"

Higgy reached out a shaky hand and pulled out a chair and fell weakly into it. "Samuel," he said slowly, "give it to me once again. I don't think I heard you right."

"Wilbur is an alien," I told him, "from some other world. He and his robot came here to listen to sad stories."

"Sad stories?"

"Sure. He likes sad stories. Some people like them happy and others like them dirty. He just likes them sad."

"If he is an alien," said Higgy, talking to himself.

"He's one, sure enough," I said.

"Sam, you're sure of this?"

"I am."

Higgy got excited. "Don't you appreciate what this means to Millville? This little town of ours — the first place on all of Earth that an alien visited!"

I wished he would shut up and get out so I could have an after breakfast drink. Higgy didn't drink especially on Sundays. He'd have been horrified.

"The world will beat a pathway to our door!" he shouted. He got out of the chair and started for the living room. "I must extend my official welcome."

I trailed along behind him, for this was one I didn't want to miss.

JOE had left and Wilbur was sitting alone on the stoop and I could see that he already had on a sort of edge.

Higgy stood in front of him and thrust out his chest and held out his hand and said, in his best official manner: "I am the mayor of Millville and I take great pleasure in extending to you our sincerest welcome."

Wilbur shook hands with him and then he said: "Being the mayor of a city must be something of a burden and a great responsibility. I wonder that you bear up under it."

"Well, there are times . . ." said Higgy.

"But I can see that you are the kind of man whose main concern is the welfare of his fellow creatures and as such, quite naturally, you become the unfortunate target of outrageous and ungrateful actions."

Higgy sat down ponderously on the stoop. "Sir," he said to Wilbur, "you would not believe all I must put up with."

"Lester," said Wilbur, "see that you get this down."

I went back into the house. I couldn't stomach it.

There was quite a crowd standing out there in the road — Jake Ellis, the junkman, and Don Myers, who ran the Jolly Miller, and a lot of others. And there, shoved into the background and sort of peering out, was the Widow Frye. People were on their way to church and they'd stop and look and then go on again, but others would come and take their place, and the crowd was getting bigger instead of thinning out.

I went out to the kitchen and had my after-breakfast drink and did the dishes and wondered once again what I would feed Wilbur. Although, at the moment, he didn't seem to be too interested in food.

Then I went into the living room and sat down in the rocking chair and kicked off my shoes. I sat there wiggling my toes and thinking about what a screwy thing it was that Wilbur should get drunk on

sadness instead of good red liquor.

The day was warm and I was wore out and the rocking must have helped to put me fast asleep, for suddenly I woke up and there was someone in the room. I didn't see who it was right off, but I knew someone was there.

It was the Widow Frye. She was all dressed up for Sunday, and after all those years of passing my house on the opposite side of the street and never looking at it, as if the sight of it or me might contaminate her—after all these years, there she was all dressed up and smiling. And me sitting there with all my whiskers on and my shoes off.

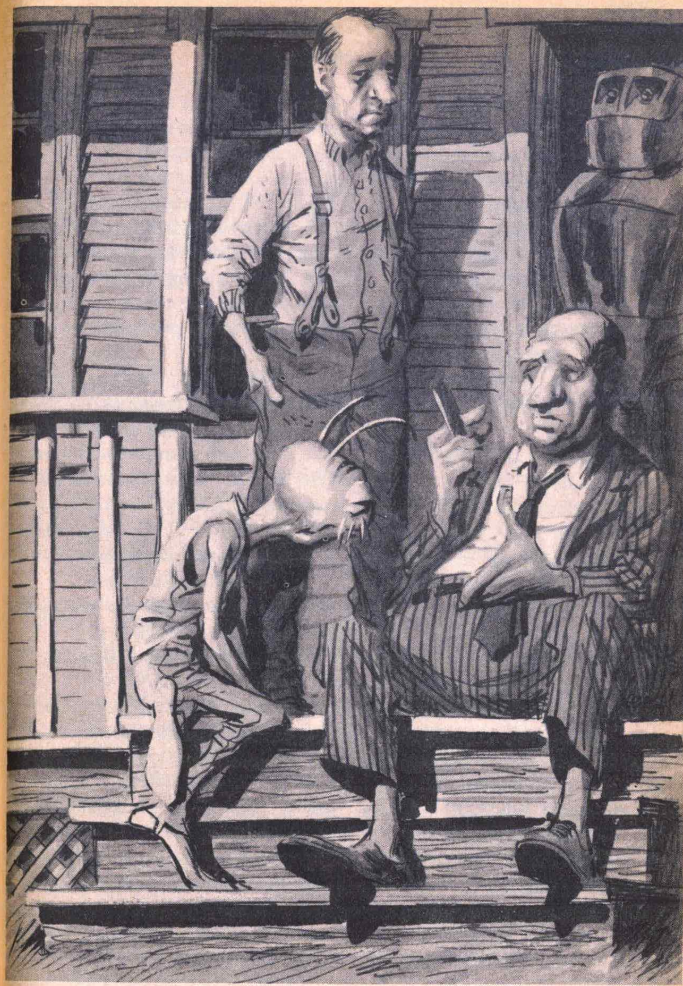
"SAMUEL," said the Widow Frye, "I couldn't help but tell you. I think your Mr. Wilbur is simply wonderful."

"He's an alien," I said. I had just woke up and was considerable befuddled.

"I don't care what he is," said the Widow Frye. "He is such a gentleman and so sympathetic. Not in the least like a lot of people in this horrid town."

I got to my feet and I didn't know exactly what to do. She'd caught me off my guard and at a terrible disadvantage. Of all people in the world, she was the last I would have expected to come into my house.

I almost offered her a drink,



but caught myself just in time.

"You been talking to him?" I asked lamely.

"Me and everybody else," said the Widow Frye. "And he has a way with him. You tell him your troubles and they seem to go away. There's a lot of people waiting for their turn."

"Well," I told her, "I am glad to hear you say that. How's he standing up under all this?"

The Widow Frye moved closer and dropped her voice to a whisper. "I think he's getting tired. I would say — well, I'd say he was intoxicated if I didn't know better."

I took a quick look at the clock.

"Holy smoke!" I yelled.

It was almost four o'clock. Wilbur had been out there six or seven hours, lapping up all the sadness this village could dish out. By now he should be stiff clear up to his eyebrows.

I busted out the door and he was sitting on the stoop and tears were running down his face and he was listening to Jack Ritter—and Old Jack was the biggest liar in all of seven counties. He was just making up this stuff he was telling Wilbur.

"Sorry, Jack," I said, pulling Wilbur to his feet.

"But I was just telling him . . ."

"Go on home," I hollered, "you and the others. You got him all tired out."

"Mr. Sam," said Lester, "I am glad you came. He wouldn't listen to me."

The Widow Frye held the door open and I got Wilbur in and put him in my bed, where he could sleep it off.

WHEN I came back, the Widow Frye was waiting. "I was just thinking, Samuel," she said. "I am having chicken for supper and there is more than I can eat. I wonder if you'd like to come on over."

I couldn't say nothing for a moment. Then I shook my head.

"Thanks just the same," I said, "but I have to stay and watch over Wilbur. He won't pay attention to the robot."

The Widow Frye was disappointed. "Some other time?"

"Yeah, some other time."

I went out after she was gone and invited Lester in.

"Can you sit down," I asked, "or do you have to stand?"

"I have to stand," said Lester. So I left him standing there and sat down in the rocker.

"What does Wilbur eat?" I asked. "He must be getting hungry."

The robot opened a door in the middle of his chest and took out a funny-looking bottle. He shook it and I could hear something rattling around inside of it.

"This is his nourishment," said

Lester. "He takes one every day."

He went to put the bottle back and a big fat roll fell out. He stooped and picked it up.

"Money," he explained.

"You folks have money, too?"

"We got this when we were indoctrinated. Hundred-dollar bills."

"Hundred-dollar bills!"

"Too bulky otherwise," said Lester blandly. He put the money and the bottle back into his chest and slapped shut the door.

I sat there in a fog. Hundred-dollar bills!

"Lester," I suggested, "maybe you hadn't ought to show anyone else that money. They might try to take it from you."

"I know," said Lester. "I keep it next to me." And he slapped his chest. His slap would take the head right off a man.

I sat rocking in the chair and there was so much to think about that my mind went rocking back and forth with the chair. There was Wilbur first of all and the crazy way he got drunk, and the way the Widow Frye had acted, and all those hundred-dollar bills.

Eespecially those hundred-dollar bills.

"This indoctrination business?" I asked. "You said it was bootleg."

"It is, most definitely," said Lester. "Acquired by some misguided individual who sneaked in

and taped it to sell to addicts."

"But why sneak in?"

"Off limits," Lester said. "Outside the reservation. Beyond the pale. Is the meaning clear?"

"And this misguided adventurer figured he could sell the information he had taped, the — the —"

"The culture pattern," said Lester. "Your logic trends in the correct direction, but it is not as simple as you make it sound."

"I suppose not," I said. "And this same misguided adventurer picked up the money, too."

"Yes, he did. Quite a lot of it."

I sat there for a while longer, then went in for a look at Wilbur. He was fast asleep, his catfish mouth blowing the whiskers in and out. So I went into the kitchen and got myself some supper.

I had just finished eating when a knock came at the door.

It was old Doc Abel from the sanatorium.

"Good evening, Doc," I said. "I'll rustle up a drink."

"Skip the drink," said Doc. "Just trot out your alien."

He stepped into the living room and stopped short at the sight of Lester.

Lester must have seen that he was astonished for he tried immediately to put him at ease. "I am the so-called alien's robot. Yet despite the fact that I am a mere machine, I am a faithful servant. If you wish to tell your sadness, you may relate

it to me with perfect confidence. I shall relay it to my master."

Doc sort of rocked back on his heels, but it didn't floor him.

"Just any kind of sadness?" he asked, "or do you hanker for a special kind?"

"The master," Lester said, "prefers the deep-down sadness, although he will not pass up any other kind."

"Wilbur gets drunk on it," I said. "He's in the bedroom now sleeping off a jag."

"Likewise," Lester said, "confidentially, we can sell the stuff. There are people back home with their tongues hanging to their knees for this planet's brand of sadness."

DOC looked at me and his eyebrows were so high that they almost hit his hairline.

"It's on the level, Doc," I assured him. "It isn't any joke. You want to have a look at Wilbur?"

Doc nodded and I led the way into the bedroom and we stood there looking down at Wilbur. Sleeping all stretched out, he was a most unlovely sight.

Doc put his hand up to his forehead and dragged it down across his face, pulling down his chops so he looked like a bloodhound. His big, thick, loose lips made a blubbery sound as he pulled his palm across them.

"I'll be damned!" said Doc.

Then he turned around and

walked out of the bedroom and I trailed along behind him. He walked straight to the door and went out. He walked a ways down the driveway, then stopped and waited for me. Then he reached out and grabbed me by the shirt front and pulled it tight around me.

"Sam," he said, "you've been working for me for a long time now and you are getting sort of old. Most other men would fire a man as old as you are and get a younger one. I could fire you any time I want to."

"I suppose you could," I said, and it was an awful feeling, for I had never thought of being fired. I did a good job of janitoring up at the sanatorium and I didn't mind the work. And I thought how terrible it would be if a Saturday came and I had no drinking money.

"You been a loyal and faithful worker," said old Doc, still hanging onto my shirt, "and I been a good employer. I always give you a Christmas bottle and another one at Easter."

"Right," I said. "True, every word of it."

"So you wouldn't fool old Doc," said Doc. "Maybe the rest of the people in this stupid town, but not your old friend Doc."

"But, Doc," I protested, "I ain't fooling no one."

Doc let loose of my shirt. "By God, I don't believe you are. It's

like the way they tell me? He sits and listens to their troubles, and they feel better once they're through?"

"That's what the Widow Frye said. She said she told him her troubles and they seemed to go away."

"That's the honest truth, Sam?"

"The honest truth," I swore.

Doc Abel got excited. He grabbed me by the shirt again.

"Don't you see what we have?" he almost shouted at me.

"We?" I asked.

BUT he paid no attention. "The greatest psychiatrist," said Doc, "this world has ever known. The greatest aid to psychiatry anyone ever has dredged up. You get what I am aiming at?"

"I guess I do," I said, not having the least idea.

"The most urgent need of the human race," said Doc, "is someone or something they can shift their troubles to — someone who by seeming magic can banish their anxieties. Confession is the core of it, of course — a symbolic shifting of one's burden to someone else's shoulders. The principle is operative in the church confessional, in the profession of psychiatry, in those deep, abiding friendships offering a shoulder that one can cry upon."

"Doc, you're right," I said, beginning to catch on.

"The trouble always is that the agent of confession must be human, too. He has certain human limitations of which the confessor is aware. He can give no certain promise that he can assume the trouble and anxiety. But here we have something different. Here we have an alien — a being from the stars—unhampered by human limitations. By very definition, he can take anxieties and smother them in the depths of his own non-humanity..."

"Doc," I yelled, "if you could only get Wilbur up at the sanatorium!"

Doc rubbed mental hands together. "The very thing that I had been thinking."

I could have kicked myself for my enthusiasm. I did the best I could to gain back the ground I'd lost.

"I don't know, Doc. Wilbur might be hard to handle."

"Well, let's go back in and have a talk with him."

"I don't know," I stalled.

"We got to get him fast. By tomorrow, the word will be out and the place will be overrun with newspapermen and TV trucks and God knows what. The scientific boys will be swarming in, and the government, and we'll lose control."

"I'd better talk to him alone," I said. "He might freeze up solid if you were around. He knows me and he might listen to me."

Doc hemmed and hawed, but finally he agreed.

"I'll wait in the car," he said. "You call me if you need me."

HE went crunching on down the driveway to where he had the car parked, and I went inside the house.

"Lester," I said to the robot, "I've got to talk to Wilbur. It's important."

"No more sad stories," Lester warned. "He's had enough today."

"No. I got a proposition."

"Proposition?"

"A deal. A business arrangement."

"All right," said Lester. "I will get him up."

It took quite a bit of getting up, but finally we had him fought awake and sitting on the bed.

"Wilbur, listen carefully," I told him. "I have something right down your alley. A place where all the people have big and terrible troubles and an awful sadness. Not just some of them, but every one of them. They are so sad and troubled they can't live with other people..."

Wilbur struggled off the bed, stood swaying on his feet.

"Lead me to 'em, pal," he said.

I pushed him down on the bed again. "It isn't as easy as all that. It's a hard place to get into."

"I thought you said—"

"Look, I have a friend who can

arrange it for you. But it might take some money—"

"Pal," said Wilbur, "we got a roll of cash. How much would you need?"

"It's hard to say."

"Lester, hand it over to him so he can make this deal."

"Boss," protested Lester, "I don't know if we should."

"We can trust Sam," said Wilbur. "He is not the grasping sort. He won't spend a cent more than is necessary."

"Not a cent," I promised.

Lester opened the door in his chest and handed me the roll of hundred-dollar bills and I stuffed it in my pocket.

"Now you will wait right here," I told them, "and I'll see this friend of mine. I'll be back soon."

And I was doing some fast arithmetic, wondering how much I could dare gouge out of Doc. It wouldn't hurt to start a little high so I could come down when Doc would roar and howl and scream and say what good friends we were and how he always had given me a bottle at Christmas and at Easter.

I turned to go out into the living room and stopped dead in my tracks.

For standing in the doorway was another Wilbur, although when I looked at him more closely I saw the differences. And before he said a single word or did a single

thing, I had a sinking feeling that something had gone wrong.

"Good evening, sir," I said. "It's nice of you to drop in."

He never turned a hair. "I see you have guests. It shall desolate me to tear them away from you."

BEHIND me, Lester was making noises as if his gears were stripping, and out of the corner of my eye I saw that Wilbur sat stiff and stricken and whiter than a fish.

"But you can't do that," I said. "They only just showed up."

"You do not comprehend," said the alien in the doorway. "They are breakers of the law. I have come to get them."

"Pal," said Wilbur, speaking to me, "I am truly sorry. I knew all along it would not work out."

"By this time," the other alien said to Wilbur, "you should be convinced of it and give up trying."

And it was plain as paint, once you came to think of it, and I wondered why I hadn't thought of it before. For if Earth was closed to the adventurers who'd gathered the indoctrination data...

"Mister," I said to the alien in the doorway, "there are factors here of which I know you ain't aware. Couldn't you and me talk the whole thing over alone?"

"I should be happy," said the alien, so polite it hurt, "but please understand that I must carry out a duty."

"Why, certainly," I said.

The alien stepped out of the doorway and made a sign behind him and two robots that had been standing in the living room just out of my line of vision came in.

"Now all is secure," said the alien, "and we can depart to talk. I will listen most attentively."

So I went out into the kitchen and he followed me. I sat down at the table and he sat across from me.

"I must apologize," he told me gravely. "This miscreant imposes upon you and your planet."

"Mister," I told him back, "you have got it all wrong. I like this renegade of yours."

"Like him?" he asked, horrified. "That is impossible. He is a drunken lout and furthermore than that—"

"And furthermore than that," I said, grabbing the words right from his mouth, "he is doing us an awful lot of good."

The alien looked flabbergasted. "You do not know that which you say! He drags from you your anxieties and feasts upon them most disgustingly, and he puts them down on record so he can't pull them forth again and yet again to your eternal shame, and furthermore than that—"

"It's not that way at all," I shouted. "It does us a lot of good to pull out our anxieties and show them—"