



*What chance can you possibly
have of whipping an enemy who
insists on joining your side?*

“We Don’t Want Any Trouble”

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“Well, that wasn’t a very long interview, was it?” asked the professor’s wife. She’d discovered the professor looking out of the living room window when she’d come home from shopping just now. “I wasn’t counting on having dinner before nine,” she said, setting her bundles down on the couch. “I’ll get at it right away.”

“No hurry about dinner,” the professor replied without turning his head. “I didn’t expect we’d be through there before eight myself.”

He had clasped his hands on his back and was swaying slowly, backward and forward on his feet, staring out at the street. It was a favorite pose of his, and she never had discovered whether it indicated deep thought or just daydreaming. At the moment, she suspected uncomfortably it was very deep thought, indeed. She took off her hat.

“I suppose you could call it an interview,” she said uneasily. “I mean you actually talked with it, didn’t you?”

"Oh, yes, we talked with it," he nodded. "Some of the others did, anyway."

"Imagine *talking* with something like that! It really *is* from another world, Clive?" She laughed uneasily, watching the back of his head with frightened eyes. "But, of course, you can't violate the security rules, can you? You can't tell me anything about it at all. . . ."

He shrugged, turning around. "There'll be a newscast at six o'clock. In ten minutes. Wherever there's a radio or television set on Earth, everybody will hear what we found out in that interview. Perhaps not quite everything, but almost everything."

"Oh?" she said in a surprised, small voice. She looked at him in silence for a moment, her eyes growing more frightened. "Why would they do a thing like that?"

"Well," said the professor, "it seemed like the right thing to do. The best thing, at any rate. There may be some panic, of course." He turned back to the window and gazed out on the street, as if something there were holding his attention. He looked thoughtful and abstracted, she decided. But then a better word came to her, and it was "resigned."

"Clive," she said, almost desperately, "what happened?"

He frowned absently at her and walked to the radio. It began to make faint, humming noises as the professor adjusted dials unhurriedly. The humming didn't vary much.

"They've cleared the networks, I imagine," he remarked.

The sentence went on repeating itself in his wife's mind, with no particular significance at first. But then a meaning came into it and grew and swelled swiftly, until she felt her head would burst with it. They've cleared the networks. All over the world this evening, they've cleared the networks. Until the newscast comes on at six o'clock. . . .

"As to what happened," she heard her husband's voice saying, "that's a little difficult to understand or explain. Even now. It was certainly amazing—" He interrupted himself. "Do you remember Milt Caldwell, dear?"

"Milt Caldwell?" She searched her mind blankly. "No," she said, shaking her head.

"A rather well-known anthropologist," the professor informed her, with an air of faint reproach. "Milt got himself lost in the approximate center of the Australian deserts some two years ago. Only we have been told he didn't get lost. They picked him up—"

"*They*?" she said. "You mean there's more than one?"

“Well, there would be more than one, wouldn’t there?” he asked reasonably. “That explains, at any rate, how they learned to speak English. It made it seem a little more reasonable, anyhow,” he added, “when it told us that. Seven minutes to six. . . .”

“What?” she said faintly.

“Seven minutes to six,” the professor repeated. “Sit down, dear. I believe I can tell you, in seven minutes, approximately what occurred. . . .”

The Visitor from Outside sat in its cage, its large gray hands slackly clasping the bars. Its attitudes and motions, the professor had noted in the two minutes since he had entered the room with the other men, approximated those of a rather heavily built ape. Reporters had called it “the Toad from Mars,” on the basis of the first descriptions they’d had of it—the flabby shape and loose, warty skin made that a vaguely adequate identification. The round, horny head almost could have been that of a lizard.

With a zoologist’s fascination in a completely new genus, the professor catalogued these contradicting physical details in his mind. Yet something somewhat like this might have been evolved on Earth, if Earth had chosen to let the big amphibians of its Carboniferous Period go on evolving.

That this creature used human speech was the only almost-impossible feature.

It had spoken as they came in. “What do you wish to know?” it asked. The horny, toothed jaws moved, and a broad yellow tongue became momentarily visible, forming the words. It was a throaty, deliberate “human” voice.

For a period of several seconds, the human beings seemed to be shocked into silence by it, though they had known the creature had this ability. Hesitantly, then, the questioning began.

The professor remained near the back of the room, watching. For a while, the questions and replies he heard seemed to carry no meaning to him. Abruptly he realized that his thoughts were fogged over with a heavy, cold, physical dread of this alien animal. He told himself that under such circumstances fear was not an entirely irrational emotion, and his understanding of it seemed to lighten its effects a little.

But the scene remained unreal to him, like a badly lit stage on which the creature in its glittering steel cage stood out in sharp focus, while the humans were shadow-shapes stirring restlessly against a darkened background.

“This won’t do!” he addressed himself, almost querulously, through the fear. “I’m here to observe, to conclude, to report—I was selected as a man they could trust to think and act rationally!”

He turned his attention deliberately away from the cage and what it contained, and he directed it on the other human beings, to most of whom he had been introduced only a few minutes before. A young, alert-looking Intelligence major, who was in some way in charge of this investigation; a sleepy-eyed general; a very pretty captain acting as stenographer, whom the major had introduced as his fiancée. The handful of other scientists looked for the most part like brisk business executives, while the two Important Personages representing the government looked like elderly professors.

He almost smiled. They were real enough. This was a human world. He returned his attention again to the solitary intruder in it.

“Why shouldn’t I object?” the impossible voice was saying with a note of lazy good humor. “You’ve caged me like—a wild animal! And you haven’t even informed me of the nature of the charges against me. Trespassing, perhaps—eh?”

The wide mouth seemed to grin as the Thing turned its head, looking them over one by one with bright black eyes. The grin was meaningless; it was the way the lipless jaws set when the mouth was closed. But it gave expression to the pleased malice the professor sensed in the voice and words.

The voice simply did not go with that squat animal shape.

Fear surged up in him again. He found himself shaking.

If it looks at me now, he realized in sudden panic, I might start to scream!

One of the men nearest the cage was saying something in low, even tones. The captain flipped over a page of her shorthand pad and went on writing, her blonde head tilted to one side. She was a little pale, but intent on her work. He had a moment of bitter envy for their courage and self-control. But they’re insensitive, he tried to tell himself; they don’t know Nature and the laws of Nature. They can’t feel as I do how *wrong* all this is!

Then the black eyes swung around and looked at him.

Instantly, his mind stretched taut with blank, wordless terror. He did not move, but afterward he knew he did not faint only because he would have looked ridiculous before the others, and particularly in the presence of a young woman. He heard the young Intelligence officer speaking sharply; the eyes left him unhurriedly, and it was all over.

“You indicate,” the creature’s voice was addressing the major, “that you can force me to reveal matters I do not choose to reveal at this time. However, you are mistaken. For one thing, a body of this type does not react to any of your drugs.”

“It will react to pain!” the major said, his voice thin and angry.

Amazed by the words, the professor realized for the first time that he was not the only one in whom this being's presence had aroused primitive, irrational fears. The other men had stirred restlessly at the major's threat, but they made no protest.

The Thing remained silent for a moment, looking at the major.

"This body will react to pain," it said then, "only when I choose to let it feel pain. Some of you here know the effectiveness of hypnotic blocks against pain. My methods are not those of hypnosis, but they are considerably more effective. I repeat, then, that for me there is no pain, unless I choose to experience it."

"Do you choose to experience the destruction of your body's tissues?" the major inquired, a little shrilly.

The captain looked up at him quickly from the chair where she sat, but the professor could not see her expression. Nobody else moved.

The Thing, still staring at the major, almost shrugged.

"And do you choose to experience death?" the major cried, his face flushed with excitement.

In a flash of insight, the professor understood why no one was interfering. Each in his own way, they had felt what he was feeling: that here was something so outrageously strange and new that no amount of experience, no rank, could guide a human being in determining how to deal with it. The major was dealing with it—in however awkward a fashion. With no other solution to offer, they were, for the moment, unable or unwilling to stop him.

The Thing then said slowly and flatly, "Death is an experience I shall never have at your hands. That is a warning. I shall respond to no more of your threats. I shall answer no more questions.

"Instead, I shall tell you what will occur now. I shall inform my companions that you are as we judged you to be—foolish, limited, incapable of harming the least of us. Your world and civilization are of very moderate interest. But they are a novelty which many will wish to view for themselves. We shall come here and leave here, as we please. If you attempt to interfere again with any of us, it will be to your own regret."

"Will it?" the major shouted, shaking. "Will it now?"

The professor jerked violently at the quick successive reports of a gun in the young officer's hand. Then there was a struggling knot of figures around the major, and another man's voice was shouting hoarsely, "You fool! You damned hysterical fool!"

The captain had dropped her notebook and clasped her hands to her face. For an instant, the professor heard her crying, "Jack! Jack! Stop—don't—"

But he was looking at the thing that had fallen on its back in the cage, with the top of its skull shot away and a dark-brown liquid staining the cage floor about its shoulders.

What he felt was an irrational satisfaction, a warm glow of pride in the major's action. It was as if he had killed the Thing himself.

For that moment, he was happy.

Because he stood far back in the room, he saw what happened then before the others did.

One of the Personages and two of the scientists were moving excitedly about the cage, staring down at the Thing. The others had grouped around the chair into which they had forced the major. Under the babble of confused, angry voices, he could sense the undercurrent of almost joyful relief he felt himself.

The captain stood up and began to take off her clothes.

She did it quickly and quietly. It was at this moment, the professor thought, staring at her in renewed terror, that the height of insanity appeared to have been achieved in this room. He wished fervently that he could keep that sense of insanity wrapped around him forevermore, like a protective cloak. It was a terrible thing to be rational! With oddly detached curiosity, he also wondered what would happen in a few seconds when the others discovered what he already knew.

The babbling voices of the group that had overpowered the major went suddenly still. The three men at the cage turned startled faces toward the stillness. The girl straightened up and stood smiling at them.

The major began screaming her name.

There was another brief struggling confusion about the chair in which they were holding him. The screaming grew muffled as if somebody had clapped a hand over his mouth.

"I warned you," the professor heard the girl say clearly, "that there was no death. Not for us."

Somebody shouted something at her, like a despairing question. Rigid with fear, his own blood a swirling roar in his ears, the professor did not understand the words. But he understood her reply.

"It could have been any of you, of course," she nodded. "But I just happened to like *this* body."

After that, there was one more shot.

The professor turned off the radio. For a time, he continued to gaze out the window.

“Well, they know it now!” he said. “The world knows it now. Whether they believe it or not—At any rate. . . .” His voice trailed off. The living room had darkened and he had a notion to switch on the lights, but decided against it. The evening gloom provided an illusion of security.

He looked down at the pale oval of his wife’s face, almost featureless in the shadows.

“It won’t be too bad,” he explained, “if not too many of them come. Of course, we don’t know how many there are of them, actually. Billions, perhaps. But if none of our people try to make trouble—the aliens simply don’t want any trouble.”

He paused a moment. The death of the young Intelligence major had not been mentioned in the broadcast. Considering the issues involved, it was not, of course, a very important event and officially would be recorded as a suicide. In actual fact, the major had succeeded in wresting a gun from one of the men holding him. Another man had shot him promptly without waiting to see what he intended to do with it.

At all costs now, every rational human being must try to prevent trouble with the Visitors from Outside.

He felt his face twitch suddenly into an uncontrollable grimace of horror.

“But there’s no way of being absolutely sure, of course,” he heard his voice tell the silently gathering night about him, “that they won’t decide they just happen to like *our* kind of bodies.”