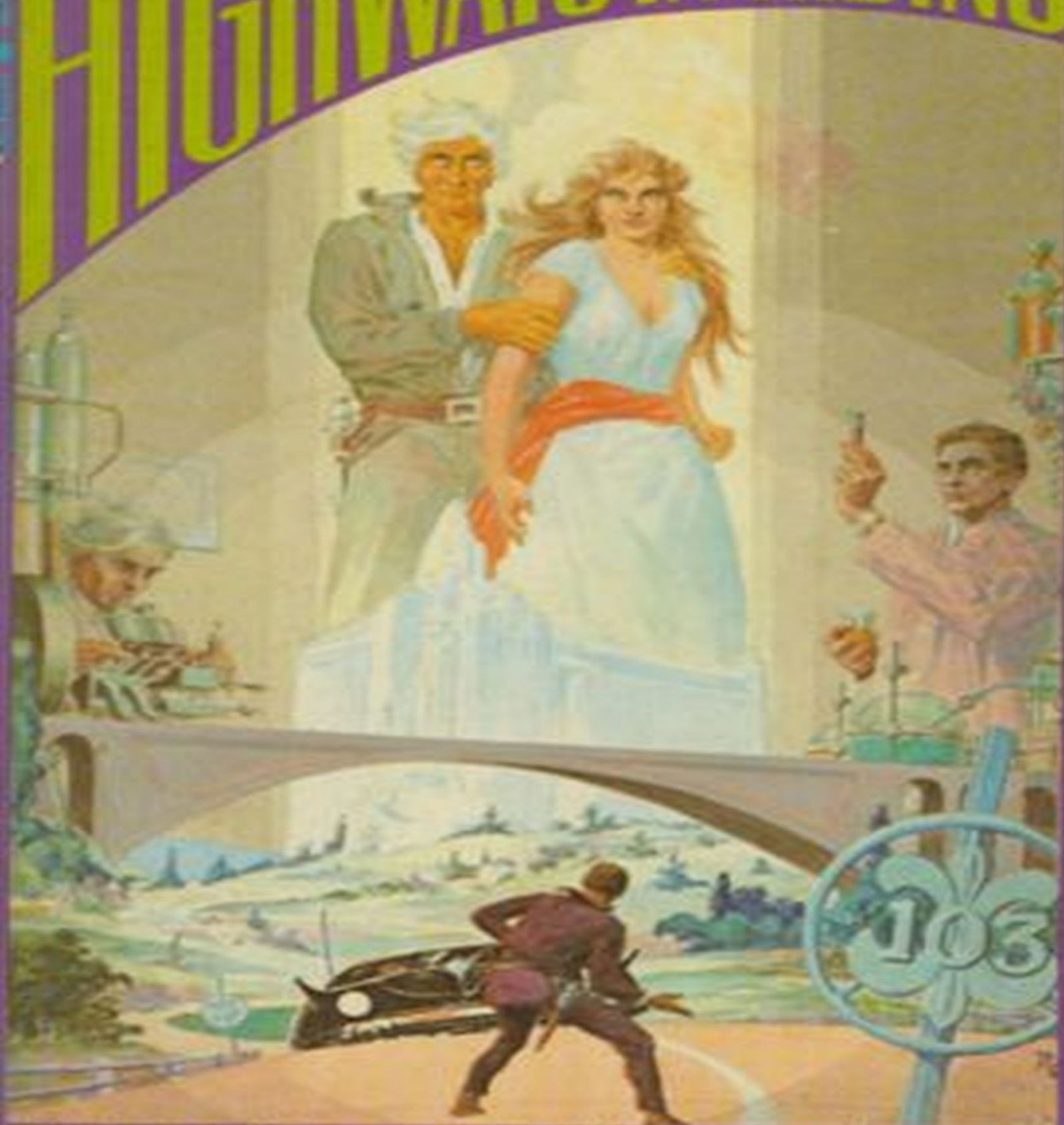


A Science - Fiction masterpiece
BY THE AUTHOR OF VENUS EQUILATERAL: **GEORGE O. SMITH**

HIGHWAYS IN HIDING



Strange signposts led to an underworld of ESP, espionage . . . and untold danger

HIGHWAYS IN HIDING

GEORGE O. SMITH

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For my drinking uncle
DON
and, of course
MARIAN

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Historical Note

In the founding days of Rhine Institute the need arose for a new punctuation mark which would indicate on the printed page that the passage was of mental origin, just as the familiar quotation marks indicate that the words between them were of verbal origin. Accordingly, the symbol # was chosen, primarily because it appears on every typewriter.

Up to the present time, the use of the symbol # to indicate directed mental communication has been restricted to technical papers, term theses, and scholarly treatises by professors, scholars, and students of telepathy.

Here, for the first time in any popular work, the symbol # is used to signify that the passage between the marks was mental communication.

Steve Cornell, *M. Ing.*

STALEMATE

Macklin said, "Please put that weapon down, Mr. Cornell. Let's not add attempted murder to your other crimes."

"Don't force me to it, then," I told him.

But I knew I couldn't do it. I hated them all. I wanted the whole Highways in Hiding rolled up like an old discarded carpet, with every Mekstrom on Earth rolled up in it. But I couldn't pull the trigger. The survivors would have enough savvy to clean up the mess before our bodies got cold, and the Highways crowd would be doing business at the same old stand. Without, I might add, the minor nuisance that people call Steve Cornell.

What I really wanted was to find Catherine.

And then it came to me that what I really wanted second of all was to possess a body of Mekstrom Flesh, to be a physical superman....

I

I came up out of the blackness just enough to know that I was no longer pinned down by a couple of tons of wrecked automobile. I floated on soft sheets with only a light blanket over me.

I hurt all over like a hundred and sixty pounds of boil. My right arm was numb and my left thigh was aching. Breathing felt like being stabbed with rapiers and the skin of my face felt stretched tight. There was a bandage over my eyes and the place was as quiet as the grave. But I knew that I was not in any grave because my nose was working just barely well enough to register the unmistakable pungent odor that only goes with hospitals.

I tried my sense of perception, but like any delicate and critical sense, perception was one of the first to go. I could not dig out beyond a few inches. I could sense the bed and the white sheets and that was all.

Some brave soul had hauled me out of that crack-up before the fuel tank went up in the fire. I hope that whoever he was, he'd had enough sense to haul Catherine out of the mess first. The thought of living without Catherine was too dark to bear, and so I just let the blackness close down over me again because it cut out all pain, both physical and mental.

The next time I awoke there was light and a pleasant male voice saying, "Steve Cornell. Steve, can you hear me?"

I tried to answer but no sound came out. Not even a hoarse croak.

The voice went on, "Don't try to talk, Steve. Just think it."

#Catherine?# I thought sharply, because most medicos are telepath, not perceptive.

"Catherine is all right," he replied.

#Can I see her?#

"Lord no!" he said quickly. "You'd scare her half to death the way you look right now."

#How bad off am I?#

"You're a mess, Steve. Broken ribs, compound fracture of the left tibia, broken humerus. Scars, mars, abrasions, some flashburn and post-accident shock. And if you're interested, not a trace of Mekstrom's Disease."

#Mekstrom's Disease—?# was my thought of horror.

"Forget it, Steve. I always check for it because it's been my specialty. Don't worry."

#Okay. So how long have I been here?#

"Eight days."

#Eight days? Couldn't you do the usual job?#

"You were pretty badly ground up, Steve. That's what took the time. Now, suppose you tell me what happened?"

#Catherine and I were eloping. Just like most other couples do since Rhine Institute made it difficult to find personal privacy. Then we cracked up.#

"What did it?" asked the doctor. "Perceptives like you usually sense danger before you can see it."

#Catherine called my attention to a peculiar road sign, and I sent my perception back to take another dig. We hit the fallen limb of a tree and went over and over. You know the rest.#

"Bad," said the doctor. "But what kind of a sign would call your interest so deep that you didn't at least see the limb, even if you were perceiving the sign?"

#Peculiar sign,# I thought. Ornamental wrought iron gizmo with curlicues and a little decorative circle that sort of looks like the Boy Scout tenderfoot badge suspended on three spokes. One of the spokes were broken away; I got involved because I was trying to guess whether it had been shot away by some vandal who missed the central design. Then—blooie!#

"It's really too bad, Steve. But you'll be all right in a while."

#Thanks, doctor. Doctor? Doctor—?#

"Sorry, Steve. I forget that everybody is not telepath like I am. I'm James Thorndyke."

Much later I began to wake up again, and with better clarity of mind, I found that I could extend my esper as far as the wall and through the door by a few inches. It was strictly hospital all right; sere white and stainless steel as far as my esper could reach.

In my room was a nurse, rustling in starched white. I tried to speak, croaked once, and then paused to form my voice.

"Can—I see—How is—? Where is?" I stopped again, because the nurse was probably as esper as I was and required a full sentence to get the thought behind it. Only a telepath like the doctor could have followed my jumbled ideas. But the nurse was good. She tried:

"Mr. Cornell? You're awake!"

"Look—nurse—"

"Take it easy. I'm Miss Farrow. I'll get the doctor."

"No—wait. I've been here eight days—?"

"But you were badly hurt, you know."

"But the doctor. He said that she was here, too."

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Cornell."

"But he said that she was not badly hurt."

"She wasn't."

"Then why was—is—she here so long?"

Miss Farrow laughed cheerfully. "Your Christine is in fine shape. She is still here because she wouldn't leave until you were well out of danger. Now stop fretting. You'll see her soon enough."

Her laugh was light but strained. It sounded off-key because it was as off-key as a ten-yard-strip of baldfaced perjury. She left in a hurry and I was able to esper as far as outside the door, where she leaned back against the wood and began to cry. She was hating herself because she had blown her lines and she knew that I knew it.

And Catherine had never been in this hospital, because if she had been brought in with me, the nurse would have known the right name.

Not that it mattered to me now, but Miss Farrow was no esper or she'd have dug my belongings and found Catherine's name on the license. Miss Farrow was a telepath; I'd not called my girl by name, only by an affectionate mental image.

II

I was fighting my body upright when Doctor Thorndyke came running. "Easy, Steve," he said with a quiet gesture. He pushed me gently back down in the bed with hands that were as soft as a mother's, but as firm as the kind that tie bow knots in half-inch bars. "Easy," he repeated soothingly.

"Catherine?" I croaked pleadingly.

Thorndyke fingered the call button in some code or other before he answered me. "Steve," he said honestly, "you can't be kept in ignorance forever. We hoped it would be a little longer, when you were stronger—"

"Stop beating around!" I yelled. At least it felt like I was yelling, but maybe it was only my mind welling.

"Easy, Steve. You've had a rough time. Shock—" The door opened and a nurse came in with a hypo all loaded, its needle buried in a fluff of cotton. Thorndyke eyed it professionally and took it; the nurse faded quietly from the room. "Take it easy, Steve. This will—"

"No! Not until I know—"

"Easy," he repeated. He held the needle up before my eyes. "Steve," he said, "I don't know whether you have enough esper training to dig the contents of this needle, but if you haven't, will you please trust me? This contains a neurohypnotic. It won't put you under. It will leave you as wide awake as you are now, but it will disconnect your running gear and keep you from blowing a fuse." Then with swift deftness that amazed me, the doctor slid the needle into my arm and let me have the full load.

I was feeling the excitement rise in me because something was wrong, but I could also feel the stuff going to work. Within half a minute I was in a chilled-off frame of mind that was capable of recognizing the facts but not caring much one way or the other.

When he saw the stuff taking hold, Thorndyke asked, "Steve, just who is Catherine?"

The shock almost cut through the drug. My mind whirled with all the things that Catherine was to me, and the doctor followed it every bit of the way.

"Steve, you've been under an accident shock. There was no Catherine with you. There was no one with you at all. Understand that and accept it. No one. You were alone. Do you understand?"

I shook my head. I sounded to myself like an actor reading the script of a play for the first time. I wanted to pound on the table and add the vigor of physical violence to my hoarse voice, but all I could do was to reply in a calm voice:

"Catherine was with me. We were—" I let it trail off because Thorndyke knew very well what we were doing. We were eloping in the new definition of the word. Rhine Institute and its associated studies had changed a lot of customs; a couple intending to commit matrimony today were inclined to take off quietly and disappear from their usual haunts until they'd managed to get intimately acquainted with one another. Elopement was a means of finding some personal privacy.

We should have stayed at home and faced the crude jokes that haven't changed since Pithecanthropus first discovered that sex was funny. But our mutual desire to find some privacy in this modern fish-bowl had put me in the hospital and Catherine—where—?

"Steve, listen to me!"

"Yeah?"

"I know you espers. You're sensitive, maybe more so than telepaths. More imagination—"

This was for the birds in my estimation. Among the customs that Rhine has changed was the old argument as to whether women or men were smarter. Now the big argument was whether espers or telepaths could get along better with the rest of the world.

Thorndyke laughed at my objections and went on: "You're in accident shock. You piled up your car. You begin to imagine how terrible it would have been if your Catherine had been with you. Next you carefully build up in your subconscious mind a whole and complete story, so well put together that to you it seems to be fact."

But, #—how could anyone have taken a look at the scene of the accident and not seen traces of woman? My woman.#

"We looked," he said in answer to my unspoken question. "There was not a trace, Steve."

#Fingerprints?#

"You'd been dating her."

#Naturally!#

Thorndyke nodded quietly. "There were a lot of her prints on the remains of your car. But no one could begin to put a date on them, or tell how recent was the latest, due to the fire. Then we made a door to door canvas of the neighborhood to be sure she hadn't wandered off in a daze and shock. Not even a footprint. Nary a trace." He shook his head unhappily. "I suppose you're going to ask about that travelling bag you claim to have put in the trunk beside your own. There was no trace of any travelling bag."

"Doctor," I asked pointedly, "if we weren't together, suppose you tell me first why I had a marriage license in my pocket; second, how come I made a date with the Reverend Towle in Midtown; and third, why did I bother to reserve the bridal suite in the Reignoir Hotel in Westlake? Or was I nuts a long time before this accident. Maybe," I added, "after making reservations, I had to go out and pile myself up as an excuse for not turning up with a bride."

"I—all I can say is that there was not a trace of woman in that accident."

"You've been digging in my mind. Did you dig her telephone number?"

He looked at me blankly.

"And you found what, when you tried to call her?"

"I—er—"

"Her landlady told you that Miss Lewis was not in her apartment because Miss Lewis was on her honeymoon, operating under the name of Mrs. Steve Cornell. That about it?"

"All right. So now you know."

"Then where the hell is she, Doc?" The drug was not as all-powerful as it had been and I was beginning to feel excitement again.

"We don't know, Steve."

"How about the guy that hauled me out of that wreck? What does he say?"

"He was there when we arrived. The car had been hauled off you by block and tackle. By the time we got there the tackle had been burned and the car was back down again in a crumpled mass. He is a farmer by the name of Harrison. He had one of his older sons with him, a man about twenty-four, named Phillip. They both swore later that there was no woman in that car nor a trace of one."

"Oh, he did, did he?"

Dr. Thorndyke shook his head slowly and then said very gently. "Steve, there's no predicting what a man's mind will do in a case of shock. I've seen 'em come up with a completely false identity, all the way back to childhood. Now, let's take your case once more. Among the other incredible items—"

"Incredible?" I roared.

"Easy. Hear me out. After all, am I to believe your unsubstantiated story or the evidence of a whole raft of witnesses, the police detail, the accident squad, and the guys who hauled you out of a burning car before it blew up? As I was saying, how can we credit much of your tale when you raved about one man lifting the car and the other hauling you out from underneath?"

I shrugged. "That's obviously a mistaken impression. No one could—"

"So when you admit that one hunk of your story is mistaken—"

"That doesn't prove the rest is false!"

"The police have been tracking this affair hard," said the doctor slowly. "They've gotten nowhere. Tell me, did anyone see you leave that apartment with Miss Lewis?"

"No," I said slowly. "No one that knew us."

Thorndyke shook his head unhappily. "That's why we have to assume that you are in post-accident shock."

I snorted angrily. "Then explain the license, the date with the reverend, the hotel reservation?"

Thorndyke said quietly, "Hear me out, Steve. This is not my own idea alone,

but the combined ideas of a number of people who have studied the human mind—"

"In other words, I'm nuts?"

"No. Shock."

"Shock?"

He nodded very slowly. "Let's put it this way. Let's assume that you wanted this marriage with Miss Lewis. You made preparations, furnished an apartment, got a license, made a date with a preacher, reserved a honeymoon suite, and bought flowers for the bride. You take off from work, arrive at her door, only to find that Miss Lewis has taken off for parts unknown. Maybe she left you a letter—"

"Letter!"

"Hear me out, Steve. You arrive at her apartment and find her gone. You read a letter from her saying that she cannot marry you. This is a rather deep shock to you and you can't face it. Know what happens?"

"I blow my brains out along a country road at ninety miles per hour."

"Please, this is serious."

"It sounds incredibly stupid to me."

"You're rejecting it in the same way you rejected the fact that Miss Lewis ran away rather than marry you."

"Do go on, Doctor."

"You drive along the same road you'd planned to take, but the frustration and shock pile up to put you in an accident-prone frame of mind. You then pile up, not consciously, but as soon as you come upon something like that tree limb which can be used to make an accident authentic."

"Oh, sure."

Thorndyke eyed me soberly. "Steve," he asked me in a brittle voice, "you won't try to convince me that any esper will let physical danger of that sort get close enough to—"

"I've told you how it happened. My attention was on that busted sign!"

"Fine. More evidence to the fact that Miss Lewis was with you? Now listen to me. In accident-shock you'd not remember anything that your mind didn't want you to recall. Failure is a hard thing to take. So now you can blame your misfortune on that accident."

"So now you tell me how you justify the fact that Catherine told landladies, friends, bosses, and all the rest that she was going to marry me a good long time before I was ready to be verbal about my plans?"

"I—"

"Suppose I've succeeded in bribing everybody to perjure themselves. Maybe we all had it in for Catherine, and did her in?"

Thorndyke shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I really don't know, Steve. I wish I did."

"That makes two of us," I grunted. "Hasn't anybody thought of arresting me for kidnapping, suspicion of murder, reckless driving and cluttering up the highway with junk?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "The police were most thorough. They had two of their top men look into you."

"What did they find?" I asked angrily. No man likes to have his mind turned inside out and laid out flat so that all the little wheels, cables and levers are open to the public gaze. On the other hand, since I was not only innocent of any crime but as baffled as the rest of them, I'd have gone to them willingly to let them dig, to see if they could dig past my conscious mind into the real truth.

"They found that your story was substantially an honest one."

"Then why all this balderdash about shock, rejection, and so on?"

He shook his head. "None of us are supermen," he said simply. "Your story was honest, you weren't lying. You believe every word of it. You saw it, you went through it. That doesn't prove your story true."

"Now see here—"

"It does prove one thing; that you, Steve Cornell, did not have any malicious, premeditated plans against Catherine Lewis. They've checked everything from hell to breakfast, and so far all we can do is make long-distance guesses

as to what happened."

I snorted in my disgust. "That's a telepath for you. Everything so neatly laid out in rows of slats like a snow fence. Me—I'm going to consult a scholar and have him really dig me deep."

Thorndyke shook his head. "They had their top men, Steve. Scholar Redfern and Scholar Berks. Both of them Rhine Scholars, *magna cum laude*."

I blinked as I always do when I am flabbergasted. I've known a lot of doctors of this and that, from medicine to languages. I've even known a scholar or two, but none of them intimately. But when a doctor of psi is invited to take his scholarte at Rhine, that's it, brother; I pass.

Thorndyke smiled. "You weren't too bad yourself, Steve. Ran twelfth in your class at Illinois, didn't you?"

I nodded glumly. "I forgot to cover the facts. They'd called all the bright boys out and collected them under one special-study roof. I majored in mechanical ingenuity not psi. Hoped to get a D. Ing. out of it, at least, but had to stop. Partly because I'm not ingenious enough and partly because I ran out of cash."

Doctor Thorndyke nodded. "I know how it is," he said. I realized that he was leading me away from the main subject gently, but I couldn't see how to lead him back without starting another verbal hassle. He had me cold. He could dig my mind and get the best way to lead me away, while I couldn't read his. I gave up. It felt better, too, getting my mind off this completely baffling puzzle even for a moment. He caught my thoughts but his face didn't twitch a bit as he picked up his narrative smoothly:

"I didn't make it either," he said unhappily. "I'm psi and good. But I'm telepath and not esper. I weasled my way through pre-med and medical by main force and awkwardness, so to speak." He grinned at me sheepishly. "I'm not much different than you or any other psi. The espers all think that perception is superior to the ability to read minds, and vice versa. I was going to show 'em that a telepath can make Scholar of Medicine. So I 'pathed my way through med by reading the minds of my fellows, who were all good espers. I got so good that I could read the mind of an esper watching me do a delicate dissecting job, and move my hands according to his perception. I

could diagnose the deep ills with the best of them—so long as there was an esper in the place."

"So what tripped you up?"

"Telepaths make out best dealing with people. Espers do better with things."

"Isn't medicine a field that deals with people?"

He shook his head. "Not when a headache means spinal tumor, or indigestion, or a bad cold. 'Doctor,' says the patient, 'I've a bad ache along my left side just below the ribs,' and after you diagnose, it turns out to be acute appendicitis. You see, Steve, the patient doesn't know what's wrong with him. Only the symptoms. A telepath can follow the patient's symptoms perfectly, but it takes an esper to dig in his guts and perceive the tumor that's pressing on the spine or the striae on his liver."

"Yeah."

"So I flopped on a couple of tests that the rest of the class sailed through, just because I was not fast enough to read their minds and put my own ability to work. It made 'em suspicious and so here I am, a mere doctor instead of a scholar."

"There are fields for you, I'm sure."

He nodded. "Two. Psychiatry and psychology, neither of which I have any love for. And medical research, where the ability to grasp another doctor or scholar's plan, ideas and theories is slightly more important than the ability to dig esper into the experiments."

"Don't see that," I said with a shake of my head.

"Well, Steve, let's take Mekstrom's Disease, for instance."

"Let's take something simple. What I know about Mekstrom's Disease could be carved on the head of a pin with a blunt butter knife."

"Let's take Mekstrom's. That's my chance to make Scholar of Medicine, Steve, if I can come up with an answer to one of the minor questions. I'll be in the clinical laboratory where the only cases present are those rare cases of Mekstrom's. The other doctors, espers every one of them, and the scholars over them, will dig the man's body right down to the last cell, looking and combing—you know some of the better espers can actually dig into the

constituency of a cell?—but I'll be the doctor who can collect all their information, correlate it, and maybe come up with an answer."

"You picked a dilly," I told him.

It was a real one, all right. Otto Mekstrom had been a mechanic-tech at White Sands Space Station during the first flight to Venus, Mars and Moon round-trip with landings. About two weeks after the ship came home, Otto Mekstrom's left fingertips began to grow hard. The hardening crawled up slowly until his hand was like a rock. They studied him and worked over him and took all sorts of samples and made all sorts of tests until Otto's forearm was as hard as his hand. Then they amputated at the shoulder.

But by that time, Otto Mekstrom's toes on both feet were getting solid and his other hand was beginning to show signs of the same. On one side of the creepline the flesh was soft and normal, but on the other it was all you could do to poke a sharp needle into the skin. Poor Otto ended up a basket case, just in time to have the damned stuff start all over again at the stumps of his arms and legs. He died when hardening reached his vitals.

Since that day, some twenty-odd years ago, there had been about thirty cases a year turn up. All fatal, despite amputations and everything else known to modern medical science. God alone knew how many unfortunate human beings took to suicide without contacting the big Medical Research Center at Marion, Indiana.

Well, if Thorndyke could uncover something, no one could claim that a telepath had no place in medicine. I wished him luck.

I did not see Thorndyke again in that hospital. They released me the next day and then I had nothing to do but to chew my fingernails and wonder what had happened to Catherine.