

An abstract painting with a rich, textured surface. The composition is dominated by dark, swirling colors like deep blue, black, and green, which form a complex, almost cellular pattern. Interspersed within these darker areas are bright, saturated patches of yellow, orange, and red. The overall effect is one of intense energy and organic complexity, reminiscent of a microscopic view of a living organism or a cosmic nebula. The brushstrokes are visible, adding to the tactile quality of the image.

*from the Golden Age
of Science Fiction*

THE
JOHN BERRYMAN
READER

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CARD ... TRICK

By WALTER BUPP

Illustrated by Douglas

The Psi Lodge had their ways and means of applying pressure, when pressure was needed. But the peculiar talent this fellow showed was one that even they'd never heard of...!



The game was stud. There were seven at the table, which makes for good poker. Outside of Nick, who banked the game, nobody looked familiar. They all had the beat look of compulsive gamblers, fogged over by their individual attempts at a poker face. They were a cagey-looking lot. Only one of them was within ten years of my age.

"Just in case, gamblers," the young one said. I looked up from stacking the chips I had just bought from Nick. The speaker was a skinny little guy with a sharp chin and more freckles than I'd like to have.

"If any one of you guys has any psi powers," the sharp-chinned gambler said sourly, "you better beat it. All gamblers here will recoup double their losses from any snake we catch using psi powers to beat the odds."

He shot a hard eyed look around a room not yet dimmed by cigar smoke. I got the most baleful glare, I thought. He didn't need to worry. I'd been certified Normal by an expert that very evening.

The expert was Dr. Shari King, whom I had taken to dinner before joining the game at Nick's. It had gotten to be a sort of weekly date—although this night had given signs of being the last one. For a while that spring, desoxyribonucleic acid had begun to take second place in my heart. This is a pitiful admission for a biochemist to make—DNA should be the cornerstone of his life. But Shari was something rare—a gorgeous woman, if somewhat distant, who was thoroughly intelligent. She had already earned her doctorate, while I was still struggling with the tag ends of my thesis.

"Poker, Tex?" Shari had asked, when the waitress was bringing dessert. "Is this becoming a problem? You've played every night this week."

"No problem, Shari," I said. "I'm winning, and I see no point in not pocketing all that found money."

"Compulsive gambling is a sickness," she said, looking at me thoughtfully. She was wearing a shirtwaist and skirt that had the bright colors and fullness you associate with peasant dress.

"The only sick thing about me is my bank account," I grinned, relishing her dark, romantic quality. "I need the dough, Shari. I've got a thesis to finish if I

ever want to get a job teaching."

Her thick eyebrows fluttered upward, a danger signal I had learned to look for. "That's a childish rationalization, Tex," she said with a lot more sharpness than I had expected. "There are certainly other ways to get money!"

"So I'm not as smart as you," I told her.

"Smart?" She didn't think I was tracking.

"I wasn't as shrewd as you were in picking my parents," I said. "Mine never had much, and left me less than that when they died."

She threw her spoon to the table. "I'll remind you of how silly these remarks sound, after you've hit a losing streak," she told me.

I laughed at that one. "I don't lose, Shari," I said. "And I don't intend to."

Her lashes veiled her violet eyes as she smiled and said more quietly, "Then you are in even worse trouble than I thought. I hear a lot about what happens to these strange people who never lose at cards or at dice or at roulette. Aren't you afraid of winding up in the gutter with your throat slit? Isn't that what happens to people with psi powers who gamble?" she insisted. "What's your trick, Tex? Do you stack the deck with telekinesis, or does precognition tell you what's about to be dealt?"

"That crack isn't considered very funny in Texas," I growled.

"Is it any more silly for me to think you might be a psi personality than for you to think you never lose at cards?" she nailed me.

I could feel my face getting red. "Damn it!" I started. "Nobody talks to a friend like that!"

"Pretty convincing proof!" Shari said tartly.

"Of what?"

"Of the fact that you aren't making any sense about this gambling kick you're on, Tex. You should have laughed my teasing off. Who would seriously suggest that *you* were a psi personality?" she demanded. "And most of all, with my background in psi, do you think I could be misled about it?"

I shrugged, trying to cool down. Shari's doctorate had been earned with a

startling thesis on psi phenomena and psi personalities, and she had stayed on at Columbia as a research fellow in the field. In egghead circles, she rated as a psi expert, all right.

"Guess not," I said, trying to kill the subject.

She wasn't going to let it die. "I don't think you're a psi, Tex. You're a Normal!" The way she said it, it didn't sound like a compliment. "Worse than that," she insisted. "You're beginning to act like a compulsive gambler." She took a deep breath, and let me have the clincher: "I could never marry a gambler, Tex!"

"You've never been asked," I reminded her.

She had the last word. "Let's go!" she snapped.

Angry as I was about her acting as though I were a snake, I wished I could have thrown her certification that I was a Normal in the freckled face of the sharp-chinned gambler at Nick's later that night. After Shari's needling, I didn't take very kindly to his popping off with the Law of the Pack. It's understood wherever people gamble that psis aren't welcome.

Nick didn't like it any better than I did. "All right, Lefty," he said to the sharp-chinned gambler. "Calm down, huh, kid? What kinda game you think I run, huh?"

I didn't let the sour start spoil my game. I was lucky right from the start and hit big in several hands.

Lefty, the gambler who had yelped about psi powers at the game, dealt the tenth hand. He gave me the eight of spades in the hole. By the fourth card I had three other spades showing, which gave me four-fifths of a rare flush in stud poker. But by the fourth card Lefty had given himself a pair of jacks. That drove all the other gamblers to cover.

Lefty raised, of course, and it cost me five hundred bucks to see my fifth card. It was a classic kind of stand-off in stud, and the waiter stopped with his tray of drinks to press in among the other kibitzers and watch the pay-off.

Lefty shucked out the last two cards carelessly, as if they didn't really matter. His own fifth card made no difference—his jacks already had a busted flush beaten. His smile was just a little too sharp as he tossed me my last card face

up and reached for the pot with the same left-handed gesture.

I took the poker panetella out of my teeth. "All blue," I said, turning up my hole card with the other hand.

Lefty threw the unused part of the deck to the center of the table. "That does it, you snake!" he swore at me.

It took a second for his accusation to sink in. I started across the table after him. If they hadn't stopped me, I would have torn his lying throat out. Funny, but there were kibitzers on my shoulders before I could rise an inch out of my chair.

"Down in Texas you could get shot for a crack like that, Lefty!" I said. I guess I really yelled it.

"And in New York you can, and probably will, get your rotten throat slit for a trick like the one *you* just pulled," he replied. He turned to the other gamblers, most of whom had their hands on the edge of the table, ready to jump to their feet if it got any rougher.

"I stacked the deck this last deal," he said coolly. He held a palm up at their surprised mutter. "Tex's fifth card was stacked to be a heart, gamblers. You saw him get a spade and take the pot. I won't sit at the same table with a guy that can do that. Telekinesis has no place in poker."

"Pretty near as bad as stacked decks," one of the gamblers rasped. But the others weren't with him. I only had to take one look at Nick's face.

I stood up slowly, and the hands on my shoulders didn't hold me down any longer. "Lefty says he stacked the deck," I told them. "I say he lies. You know there's nothing to choose between our statements. Lefty is a cheap grandstander, and I'll settle with him myself. Nick, I won't embarrass you tonight. This isn't your fault. But I'll be here tomorrow night, and you had better be glad to see me!"

"Sure, Tex," he said uncomfortably, rising with me. "Take my seat, Shorty," he directed one of the kibitzers. He walked around to grab me by the elbow and steer me as far away from Lefty's truculent face as he could. At least the sharp-chinned little rat had quit the game, too. Both of us had left our chips on the table.

Nick wanted me to leave. "Pay me off," I insisted. He said yes a lot quicker than I thought he would. The other gamblers could have squawked that my chips should go into the next pot, but apparently none of them did.

Lefty sidled out as Nick was paying me off. "Wait outside for me," I said to him.

"Why not?" he said, sticking his chin out at me and walking out.

Nick grabbed me again. "Don't get hot, Tex," he warned me. "I don't want a killing on my own sidewalk. Take it some place else, huh, kid?"

"Sure," I said.

There wasn't any danger Lefty would hang around. I was big enough to break him in two, which is exactly what I planned if I caught up with him.

It had been dark for some hours by the time I hit the street and waved for a skim-copter. Nick's games start late.

"You asked me to wait," somebody said. I spun around and saw Lefty standing in the alleyway beside the building. I went for him, charging hard. He scuttled back into the alley, out of what little light there was that far downtown. Just as I reached for him, somebody slugged me in the gut. I went down on a knee, gasping. I hadn't seen his sidekick—the alley was pretty dark. I heard Lefty's breath suck in sharply as I came up out of my crouch, diving for him. After all, it was only pain, something inside my head. It wasn't as though I had been really crippled. My fingers clawed at his jacket, and would have held him. But the other guy grabbed at my ankle and threw me down on the slippery cobbles again.

I came up slower that time. I'd bunged up my kneecap more than I wanted to think about. Lefty was still out of reach. I called him a name that was always good for a fight in Texas, and started after him, but slower than before. I wasn't fast enough to avoid the hard thing that rammed against my spine. Even down in Texas, a gun in the back freezes you up.

Lefty was all guts now that I was hung up on the gun barrel. It might as well have been a meat hook.

"I warned you not to use psi in the game!" he snapped. "Now you'll have to talk to Pete."

"One of us isn't going to live through this," I promised him, starting to reach for his throat. The gun jabbed a reminder to watch my manners.

"Do you come quietly?" Lefty asked shrilly. "Or do we—?"

The sudden shrillness of his voice scared me more than anything else. He was worked up worse than I was. "Quietly," I conceded, trying to get some saliva to flow again. The pressure against my spine eased off.

Lefty stepped out of the alley to the curb and flagged down a cruising 'copter. He made me get in first, which gave me a chance to turn, when I sat down, and see who had been holding the gun on me from behind. The gunman had sure drifted in one awful hurry. There wasn't a soul except Lefty around.

He hopped in after me. The turbine howled as the driver gunned us up on the air cushion and sent us skimming away. The trip lasted only four or five minutes through the thinning traffic of late evening. We pulled up in front of a brownstone house in the upper Eighties that reared up four stories among a string of three-story neighbors.

I limped to the top of the steps after Lefty. He let us in with a key. We were in a dimly-lit hall that had a staircase against its left wall and an open door at its right, leading into a darkened room.

A tall skinny girl was sitting about a third of the way up the carpeted flight of steps. Her face was drawn out to a point by a long, thin nose. "Here they are," she called up the stairway, showing braces on her teeth. She stood up and came down the hall. She was clad in a shortie wrapper that showed off her race-horse legs.

"Billy Joe," she said to Lefty. "I *told* them you were coming."

"Hi, Pheola," he said. "Good for you." He sounded pleased.

There were steps above, and two others joined us. First came a short square man with gray hair and bushy gray eyebrows. He was wrapped up in a flannel robe that had once been maroon and was now rusty with age and wear. It only served to confirm that he had just been yanked out of bed. He hadn't bothered to put anything on his bare feet or to comb his hair. A pretty wild looking old man.

Behind him stumped a chunky woman, crowding fifty. She was in a worse

state of dishabille. She hadn't quite made it to bed and was still in her slip. Her stockings had been unhitched from her garters and hung in slack transparency around her fat calves, like the sloughed-off skin of a snake.

"I *told* you," Pheola said to the gray-haired man.

"It's nice that you're right once in a while," he said in a scratchy, sleepy voice, walking past her to switch on the ceiling of the room on the right side of the hall.

She didn't like that. Lefty stopped her reply. "Will it be PC?" he asked her.

"No," she said.

"You missed that one," Lefty said.

"Didn't neither!"

"Well, sit in with us and see," he suggested.

"What for?" she asked. "I know what's going to happen in there. You'll be along to bed right soon, darlin' Billy!"

He looked over at me. "Go on in, Tex," he said.

"Darlin' Billy!" I sneered.

"Don't pay any attention to her," he said. "She's in another space-time continuum." I pointedly ogled the girl's pretty legs going up the stairs and whistled softly. "My wife," he said, blushing. "A powerful PC, or one day will be."

"You're kidding," I said. His arm on my elbow pushed me into the lighted room.

It had been the front parlor of the old brownstone in its prime, and was now fixed up as an office. The place held an executive desk with several buttons and enough other controls to put it in orbit. There were a number of cushioned straight-backed chairs and a comfortable leather couch under the window. Only the fact that it was getting on toward midnight made me willing to believe that the couple who had walked down the stairs expected to be taken seriously.

"This is George Robertson, the poker whiz," Lefty said briefly to the two

sleepy heads. "They call him Tex. Tex, this is Peter Maragon, Grand Master of the Lodge."

The gray-haired man gave me a tired nod. "I imagine you're a pretty angry young man, Mr. Robertson," he said in his scratchy voice. I started to tell him quite a little about how I felt, but he held up his hand. "I've had a hard day," he complained. "And I got out of bed solely to adjudicate your case. Now, this will go a lot more quickly if you listen." He smacked his lips a couple times as if he wondered where he had left his partial plate. I hoped he had swallowed it. "Sit down, sit down," he said irritably, pointing at the chair across the desk from him.

I debated it, but took the chair, grinding my teeth.

"You aren't stupid, or you wouldn't be a scientist," he said, revealing that he knew a lot more about me than I did about him. "Let's start out with a couple facts."

He pointed a gnarled finger at Lefty. "Wally Bupp stacked a deck of cards on you tonight," he said gruffly. "What you don't know is that he stacked them with telekinesis. He's a TK."

"A snake!" I gasped.

"Watch your lip!" Maragon croaked. "Everybody in this room is a psi. 'Snake' is a dirty word around here, Mr. Robertson. Mr. Bupp has a special aversion to it."

"What's the purpose...?" I began hotly.

"Hah!" Maragon barked. "A good word!" He cackled a laugh at me. "Purpose. Exactly, Mr. Robertson. Well, the Lodge has a purpose, and you'll act a lot more sensibly if you know it."

"You," he said to me. "Are a TK."

"You," I yelled right back. "Are a liar!"

He ignored me completely. "We can't afford to have you gambling and cheating Normals," he went on. "One of the Lodge's fundamental rules is that no psi may use his powers to the detriment of Normals. Lefty's big scene at Nick's fixed it so you won't be welcome in a big-time poker game anywhere in town. We did that deliberately. And we're telling you to quit gambling, as

of this minute."

"You say you are a TK," I interrupted.

"Somewhat," he said. "I have psi powers, but I'm not mainly a TK."

"Whatever your powers are," I said. "They don't make you supermen immune from the laws of libel. If you or anybody I can catch breathes one false word about my being a snake, you'll be on the receiving end of the roughest lawsuit you ever heard of!"

"The silliness of that statement will occur to you in a while," he said dryly. "And truth is a defense against a claim of libel. But to get back to purpose. Our second purpose tonight is to get it through your thick head, Mr. Robertson, that the Lodge insists on its right to control your actions insofar as they involve the use of your psi powers. We mean business, Mr. Robertson, and before you are through with our heartless Mr. Bupp tonight, you'll know it. That's all that's behind our little charade."

He came to a stop and took a deep breath.

"I'm going to make one statement and rest on it," I said, trying to keep my voice calm and level.

He shrugged. "Your turn," he said.

"I'm a Normal," I said. "I flatly deny that I have the slightest shred of psi power. I accuse that freckled snake over there of lying deliberately. I'll make him pay for it, and he'll be lucky if it isn't with his blood."

"That's all?"

"Isn't it enough?"

He laughed harshly and grinned over at Lefty. "Some of you maverick psis scream like a gelded porker," he said. "I figured you'd tell me we'd cost you a fortune in prospective poker winnings, to say the least."

My stomach dropped. I hadn't thought of that, not as much as I should have. It was my only income! "Something a darn sight more important than money is involved," I said.

"Maybe you aren't such a bad guy," he decided. He looked over at the woman standing silently in her slip beside his desk, her bare arms folded over her

ample bosom.

"How about it, Milly?" he asked her.

She shrugged. "He believes what he says," she told him. "He honestly doesn't think he has any psi powers."

"That mitigates the affair," Maragon said. "Still, our purpose demands an object lesson. I have to fine you, Mr. Robertson. You've broken one of our rules by using TK to stack a poker deck. Because you weren't aware of it, though, half of your fine will be remitted if you join the Lodge within a week. Accordingly I assess you ... uh, how much, Milly?" he asked.

"He's got eight thousand and some in his breast pocket," she said with fiendish accuracy. "Every penny he has in the world."

"Assess you eight thousand dollars," Maragon concluded. He got wearily to his feet, and started to pad past me toward the door. "Mr. Bupp will collect," he said. The woman followed him, her hose hanging down around her ankles, and climbed the stairs stolidly behind him.

Lefty, whom Maragon had called Wally Bupp, walked around behind the desk and took the swivel chair that the older man had just vacated. "I'll take the eight thousand now, Tex," he said, poking his chin at me belligerently.

"You'll take four," I said, getting my feet under me.

He frowned. "Four?" he repeated.

"Four knuckles," I gritted and started for him. The gun barrel rammed me in the kidney, harder than it had in the alley. They'd smuggled in some protection. I really slammed on the brakes, halfway across the desk. Lefty hadn't bothered to flinch, but sat there with his legs crossed, looking idly at his fingernails.

"Look behind you," he said.

I did. The gun eased off my kidney as I turned. There wasn't anybody there.

"TK," Lefty said. "I also used it to trip you up when you went for me in the alley, after I'd TK'd a left right in your gut. You're a hard guy to stop, Tex. But don't overdo it."

"Mere pain never stopped a guy who really meant it!" I went for him again.

Then it hit me. A deep and sickening pain throbbed from my breastbone down my left arm. The lights started to dim, and I sagged down on the desk.

"How'd that feel?" Lefty asked, apparently not expecting an answer. "I clamped your coronary artery shut for a few seconds. A post-mortem would never be able to tell it from the real thing if I held down tight."



His grin had a viciousness in it I hadn't seen before. He held out his hand. I struggled erect and handed my wallet to him. He only took out the big bills, and tossed it back across the desk to me. "Thanks," he said. "You'll get half of this back if you decide to join the Lodge within a week."

"What's all this about a Lodge?" I tried weakly. "What Lodge?"

"Why, this Lodge," Lefty said, waving a hand around loosely. "It's an organization of folks with psi powers. Guys like you and me, Tex."

"I'm no TK!" I growled. "I didn't manipulate those cards in any way."

"Funny you say that," he said, looking interested and leaning his elbows on the desk. "You're right. I hadn't actually bothered to stack the deck, Tex. Just kept a light TK touch on it to see if you were moving cards. You weren't, but you were hitting them right all the time. I haven't had time to tell Maragon the boys on the Crap Patrol were wrong. It wasn't telekinesis, Tex. It was precognition. You're a PC, Tex." He stood up and pointed toward the door. I was shaking so badly from the heart attack the snake had induced that I got up helplessly and allowed him to steer me out by the elbow.

"Remember," he said at the head of the steps that led down to the street. "You've got a week to make up your mind about joining the Lodge. In the meantime, don't gamble."

"Great," I said bitterly. "You sapped me down and rolled me for my poke, or the next thing to it. And now you tell me not to get in a game and try to get whole again. Why should you care?"

"You don't listen," he said sourly. "Look, psis *are* supermen, in spite of your sneers. And whether you like it or not, Tex, you've got some psi powers. Normals resent, fear and hate us. We can't afford to have you make a killing at a poker table and then get exposed as a 'snake.' We psis are a tiny minority. We all get blamed for things any one of us does."

"I'm a Normal," I said, a little hollowly.

"You're more fortunate than that," he assured me. "Just so you understand the origin and purpose of the Lodge. We find strength in union, strength to resist

the pressure of the majority. And membership in the Lodge gives us control—control over psis like you who might bring the wrath of the Normal majority down on us by their shortsightedness."

I shook my head. "You don't have to dress it up like this," I protested. "This is blackmail or extortion, I'm not sure which. I'm not joining anything you bunch of creeps are a part of."

"You won't find that practical," he said, turning to go back inside. "And remember: stay away from cards."

You're supposed to have nightmares at night. I had mine the whole next day. No, I wasn't a TK, Lefty had said. I was a PC. You don't have anemia, Tex. It's leukemia!

I made a farce of trying to get some work done in the lab. After letting the third test tube slip through my fingers and shatter on the lab bench, I gave it up. How would you have acted if you had gotten that kind of news? That first gut-twisting admission that you really *may* be a snake! Then sharp awareness of what it means. A guillotine couldn't cut you off more sharply from Normal humanity. But the spirit struggles and refuses to accept it. You *can't* be a snake!

"Take action!" I said aloud, getting a worried look from my lab assistant, busy mopping up my last shattered culture. "Don't spin around like this. Do *something*!"

I did the only thing I could think of, and dialed Shari at her laboratory. She refused to accept the call at first. Finally she tore herself away from a "delicate experiment" long enough to look at me angrily in the screen.

"We don't have anything to say to each other," she said coldly. "There are delicate experiments—"

"Can you test me for psi powers?" I interrupted.

"Whatever for?"

"To settle whether I have any," I snapped. "It's important to me."

"Not necessary," she said. "Do you think I'd be successful in the psi field if I weren't sensitive to this sort of thing? Don't worry, Tex. You're a Normal."