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DOES A BEE CARE?

The ship began as a metal skeleton. Slowly a shining skin was layered on without and odd-shaped vitals were crammed within.

Thornton Hammer, of all the individuals (but one) involved in the growth, did the least physically. Perhaps that was why he was most highly regarded. He handled the mathematical symbols that formed the basis for lines on drafting paper, which, in turn, formed the basis for the fitting together of the various masses and different forms of energy that went into the ship.

Hammer watched now through close-fitting spectacles somberly. Their lenses caught the light of the fluorescent tubes above and sent them out again as highlights. Theodore Lengyel, representing Personnel of the corporation that was footing the bill for the project, stood beside him and said, as he pointed with a rigid, stabbing finger:

“There he is. That's the man.” Hammer peered. “You mean Kane?”

“The fellow in the green overalls, holding a wrench.”

“That's Kane. Now what is this you've got against him?”

“I want to know what he does. The man's an idiot.” Lengyel had a round, plump face and his jowls quivered a bit.

Hammer turned to look at the other, his spare body assuming an air of displeasure along every inch. “Have you been bothering him?”

“Bothering him? I've been talking to him. It's my job to talk to the men, to get their viewpoints, to get information out of which I can build campaigns for improved morale.”

“How does Kane disturb that?”

“He's insolent. I asked him how it felt to be working on a ship that would reach the moon. I talked a little about the ship being a pathway to the stars. Perhaps Imade a little speech about it, built it up a bit, when he turned away in the rudest possible manner. I called him back and said, 'Where are you going?' And he said, 'I get tired of that kind of talk. I'm going out to look at the stars.'”

Hammer nodded. “All right. Kane likes to look at the stars.”

“It was daytime. The man's an idiot. I've been watching him since and he doesn't do any work.”

“I know that.”

“Then why is he kept on?”

Hammer said with a sudden, tight fierceness, “Because I want him around. Because he's my luck.”

“You luck?” faltered Lengyel. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that when he's around I think better. When he passes me, holding his damned wrench, I get ideas. It's happened three times. I don't explain it; I'm not interested in explaining it. It's happened. He stays.”

“You're joking.”

“No, I'm not. Now leave me alone.”

Kane stood there in his green overalls, holding his wrench.

Dimly he was aware that the ship was almost ready. It was not designed to carry a man, but there was space for a man. He knew that the way he knew a lot of things; like keeping out of the way of most people most of the time; like carrying a wrench until people grew used to him carrying a wrench and stopped noticing it. Protective coloration consisted of little things, really-like carrying the wrench.

He was full of drives he did not fully understand, like looking at the stars. At first, many years back, he had just looked at the stars with a vague ache. Then, slowly, his attention had centered itself on a certain region of the sky, then to a certain pinpointed spot. He didn't know why that certain spot. There were no stars in that spot. There was nothing to see.

That spot was high in the night sky in the late spring and in the summer months and he sometimes spent most of the night watching the spot until it sank toward the southwestern horizon. At other times in the year he would stare at the spot during the day.

There was some thought in connection with that spot which he couldn't quite crystallize. It had grown stronger, come nearer to the surface as the years passed, and it was almost bursting for expression now. But still it had not quite come clear.

Kane shifted restlessly and approached the ship. It was almost complete, almost whole. Everything fitted just so. Almost.

For within it, far forward, was a hole a little larger than a man; and leading to that hole was a pathway a little wider than a man. Tomorrow that pathway would be filled with the last of the vitals, and before that was done the hole had to be filled, too. But not with anything they planned.

Kane moved still closer and no one paid any attention to him. They were used to him.

There was a metal ladder that had to be climbed and a catwalk that had to be moved along to enter the last opening. He knew where the opening was as exactly as if he had built the ship with his own hands. He climbed the ladder and moved along the catwalk. There was no one there at the mo-

He was wrong. One man.

That one said sharply, “What are you doing here?” Kane straightened and his vague eyes stared at the speaker. He lifted his wrench and brought it down on the speaker's head lightly. The man who was struck (and who had made no effort to ward off the blow) dropped, partly from the effect of the blow.

Kane let him lie there, without concern. The man would not remain unconscious for long, but long enough to allow Kane to wriggle into the hole. When the man revived he would recall nothing about Kane or about the fact of his own unconsciousness. There would simply be five minutes taken out of his life that he would never find and never miss.

It was dark in the hole and, of course, there was no ventilation, but Kane paid no attention to that. With the sureness of instinct, he clambered upward toward the hold that would receive him, then lay there, panting, fitting the cavity neatly, as though it were a womb.

In two hours they would begin inserting the last of the vitals, close the passage, and leave Kane there, unknowingly. Kane would be the sole bit of flesh and blood in a thing of metal and ceramics and fuel.

Kane was not afraid of being prematurely discovered. No one in the project knew the hole was there. The design didn't call for it. The mechanics and construction men weren't aware of having put it in.

Kane had arranged that entirely by himself. He didn't know how he had arranged it but he knew he had. He could watch his own influence without knowing how it was

exerted. Take the man Hammer, for instance, the leader of the project and the most clearly influenced. Of all the indistinct figures about Kane, he was the least indistinct. Kane would be very aware of him at times, when he passed near him in his slow and hazy journeys about the grounds. It was all that was necessary-passing near him.

Kane recalled it had been so before, particularly with theoreticians. When Lise Meitner decided to test for barium among the products of the neutron bombardment of uranium, Kane had been there, an unnoticed plodder along a corridor nearby.

He had been picking up leaves and trash in a park in 1904 when the young Einstein had passed by, pondering. Einstein's steps had quickened with the impact of sudden thought. Kane felt it like an electric shock.

But he didn't know how it was done. Does a spider know architectural theory when it begins to construct its first web?

It went further back. The day the young Newton had stared at the moon with the dawn of a certain thought, Kane had been there. And further back still.

The panorama of New Mexico, ordinarily deserted, was alive With human ants crawling about the metal shaft lancing upward. This one was different from all the similar structures that had preceded it.

This would go free of Earth more nearly than any other. It would reach out and circle the moon before falling back. It would be crammed with instruments that would photograph the moon and measure its heat emissions, probe for radioactivity, and test by microwave for chemical structure. It would, by automation, do almost everything that could be expected of a manned vehicle. And it would learn enough to make certain that the next ship sent out would be a manned vehicle.

Except that, in a way, this first one was a manned vehicle after all.

There were representatives of various governments, of various industries, of various social and economic groupings. There were television cameras and feature writers.

Those who could not be there watched in their homes and heard numbers counted backward in painstaking monotone in the manner grown traditional in a mere three decades.

At zero the reaction motors came to life and ponderously the ship lifted.

Kane heard the noise of the rushing gases, as though from a distance, and felt the gathering acceleration press against him.

He detached his mind, lifting it up and outward, freeing it from direct connection with his body in order that he might be unaware of the pain and discomfort.

Dizzily, he knew his long journey was nearly over. He would no longer have to maneuver carefully to avoid having people realize he was immortal. He would no longer have to fade into the background, no longer wander eternally from place to place, changing names and personality, manipulating minds.

It had not been perfect, of course. The myths of the Wandering Jew and the Flying Dutchman had arisen, but he was still here. He had not been disturbed.

He could see his spot in the sky. Through the mass and solidity of the ship he could see it. Or not “see” really. He didn't have the proper word.

He knew there was a proper word, though. He could not say how he knew a fraction of the things he knew, except that as the centuries had passed he had gradually grown to know them with a sureness that required no reason.

He had begun as an ovum (or as something for which “ovum” was the nearest word he knew), deposited on Earth before the first cities had been built by the wandering hunting creatures since called “men.” Earth had been chosen carefully by his progenitor. Not every world would do.

What world would? What was the criterion? That he still didn't know.

Does an ichneumon wasp study ornithology before it finds the one species of spider that will do for her eggs, and stings it just so in order that it may remain alive?

The ovum spilt him forth at length and he took the shape of a man and lived among men and protected himself against men. And his one purpose was to arrange to have men travel along a path that would end with a ship and within the ship a hole and within the hole, himself.

It had taken eight thousand years of slow striving and stumbling.

The spot in the sky became sharper now as the ship moved out of the atmosphere. That was the key that opened his mind. That was the piece that completed the puzzle.

Stars blinked within that spot that could not be seen by a man's eye unaided. One in particular shone brilliantly and Kane yearned toward it. The expression that had been building within him for so long burst out now.

“Home,” he whispered.

He knew? Does a salmon study cartography to find the headwaters of the fresh-water stream in which years before it had been born?

The final step was taken in the slow maturing that had taken eight thousand years, and Kane was no longer larval, but adult.

The adult Kane fled from the human flesh that had protected the larva, and fled the ship, too. It hastened onward, at inconceivable speeds, toward home, from whichsomeday it, too, might set off on wanderings through space to fertilize some planet with its ovum.

It sped through Space, giving no thought to the ship carrying an empty chrysalis. It gave no thought to the fact that it had driven a whole world toward technology and space travel in order only that the thing that had been Kane might mature and reach its fulfillment.

Does a bee care what has happened to a flower when the bee has done and gone its way?