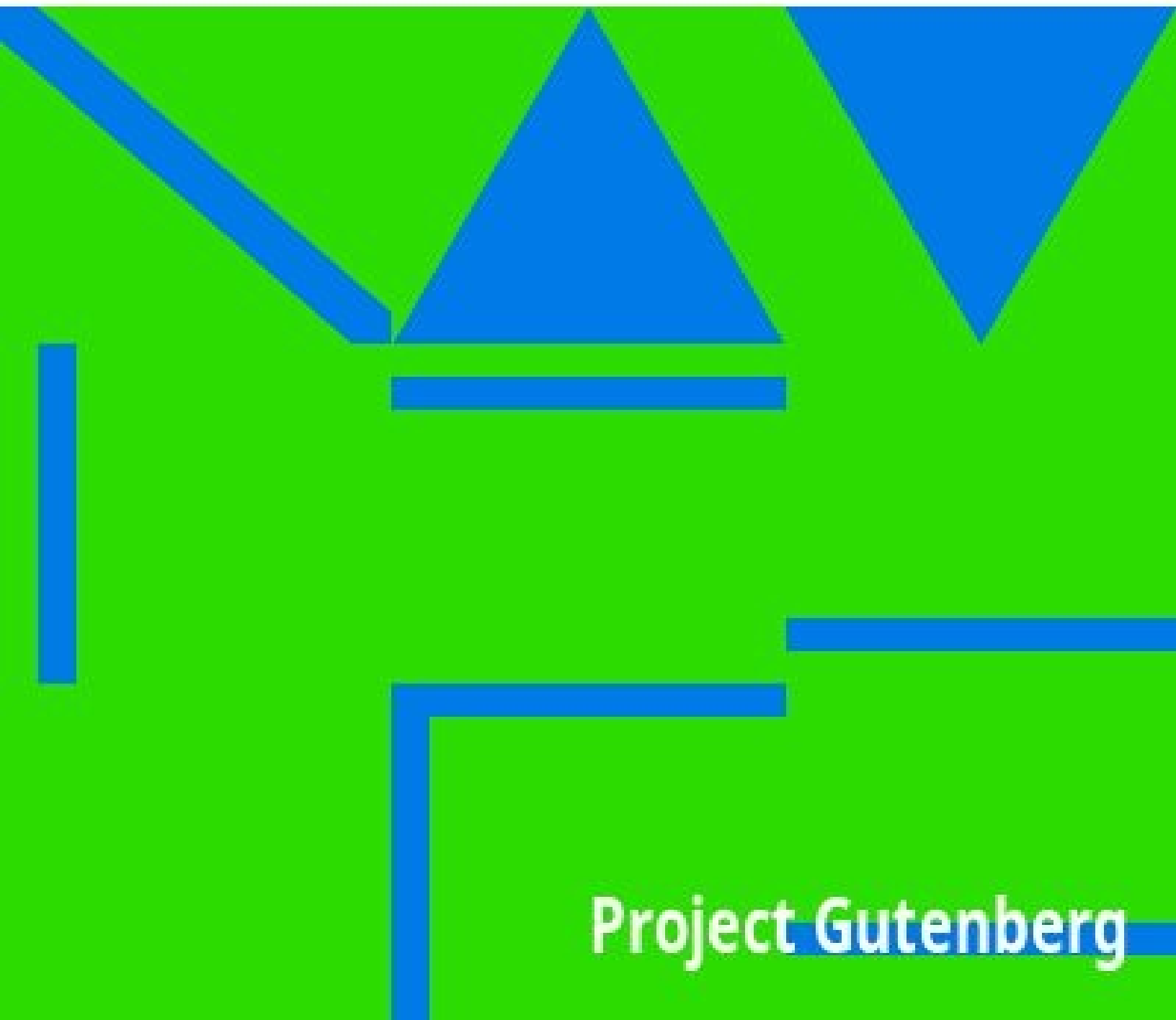


Master of None

Neil Goble



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MASTER OF NONE

BY NEIL GOBLE

The advantages of specialization are so obvious that, today, we don't even know how to recognize a competent syncretist!

Freddy the Fish glanced at the folded newspaper beside him on the bench. A little one-column headline caught his eye:

MYSTERIOUS SIGNALS FROM OUTER SPACE

"Probably from Cygnus," he said.

Freddy mashed a peanut, popped the meat into his mouth, and tossed the shell to the curb in front of his bench. He munched and idly watched two sparrows arguing over the discarded delicacy; the victor flitted to the head of a statue, let go a triumphant dropping onto the marble nose, and hopped to a nearby branch.

"Serves him right," Freddy said. He yawned and rubbed the stubble on his chin. Not yet long enough for scissors, he decided. He pulled his feet up on the bench, twisting in an effort to get comfortable. The sun was in his eyes, so he reclaimed the discarded newspaper and spread it over his face. His eyes momentarily focused on MYSTERIOUS SIGNALS FROM OUTER SPACE, right over his nose.

"Sure, Cygnus," he muttered, and closed his eyes and dropped off to sleep.

When he was awakened, it was by an excited hand shaking his shoulder and a panting, "Freddy! Freddy! Lookit the Extra just came out!"

Freddy slowly sat up, ascertained the identity of the intruder and the fact that the sun was setting, and said, "Good evening, Willy. Please stop rattling that paper in my face."

"But just read it, Freddy," Willy shrieked, waving the paper so frantically that

Freddy couldn't make out the big black headline. "'Positive contact from another planet,' the guy was yellin'. They put out an Extra so I snitched one from the boy. Read it to me, huh, Freddy? I'm dyin' o' curious."

"So give it here and I'll read it for you. Quit shakin' it or you'll tear it all up," Freddy snorted.

"Read it to me, huh, Freddy," Willy said, handing over the paper. "I don't know no one else that reads so good."

Freddy studied the headline and the first paragraph silently, then whistled lightly and lowered the paper.

"Y'know, Willy," he said, "the last thing I read before I dropped off a while ago was about these signals. But the funny thing is, I'd just assumed they were from Cygnus."

"What's a Cygnus, Freddy?" Willy asked, still pop-eyed. "A smoke? A dame? Or you mean like from Hunger?"

"Cygnus, my boy," Freddy explained patronizingly, "is a constellation within which there are two colliding galaxies. These colliding galaxies produce the most powerful electromagnetic radiations in the universe—an undecillion watts!"

"What's an undecillion?"

"An undecillion is ten raised to the 36th power," Freddy sighed, fearing that he wasn't getting through to Willy.

"No foolin'? What's a watt ... aw, you're pullin' my leg again, Freddy, talkin' riddles. Where'd ya ever learn to talk that way anyhow!"

"Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Oxford, Georgia Tech, Oklahoma. Picked up a little here, a little there," Freddy said, reflecting on his indiscriminate past.

"Aw, cut it out, Freddy! C'mon, read it to me. Betcha can't! Where'd ya say it was from? Cygnus?"

"Not Cygnus. Ganymede." Freddy cleared his throat and rattled the newspaper authoritatively. "Washington: White House sources declared today that intelligent beings on a Jupiter moon have contacted the United States government. While the contents of the message have been made secret, the

White House emphasized the message was friendly."

Freddy continued, "The signals, which were intercepted yesterday, were decoded this morning by a team of government scientists and cryptographers who had been at the task all night. While officials were noncommittal about the nature of the message contained in the signals, they declared, 'We are authorized to state that the received message was friendly and appears to represent a sincere attempt by another race of intelligent beings to contact the people of Earth. A reply message is being formulated.' Officials further explained that the possibility of the signal's being a hoax has been thoroughly investigated and that there is no doubt whatsoever that the message is a genuine interspatial communication from intelligent beings on Ganymede. Ganymede is one of twelve moons of the planet Jupiter, and is larger than the planet Mercury."

Freddy stopped.

"Ain't there any more?" Willy whined.

"The rest of it is about how far away Ganymede is, and its relative density and mass and stuff. You wouldn't be interested, Willy."

"Oh. I guess not." Willy helped himself to a peanut. "What's it mean, Freddy?"

"Nothing much, Willy. Just that there's people somewhere besides here on Earth, and they called us on the phone."

"Whadd'ya know about that!" Willy gasped. "I didn't even know they was other people!" He stared with disbelief at the paper.

"I don't suppose anyone knew."

"How d'ya suppose they knew?" Willy asked. "I mean, that we was here, if we didn't know they was there?"

"I've been wondering about that, Willy. You know that last rocket we shot?"

"From Cape Carnival you mean?"

"Yeh. It was supposed to go into orbit around Jupiter. I wouldn't be surprised if maybe it didn't land on Ganymede; the people there could have examined it, figured out where it came from, and then radioed us on the same frequency the rocket transmitter used. Paper doesn't say that, of course, but it's a reasonable hypothesis."

"Freddy, I think you must be a genius or sumpin'."

Freddy smiled and stretched out to sleep again as Willy wandered off, staring blankly at the newspaper.

Carlton Jones, America's Number One personnel specialist, scowled at the pamphlet on his desk.

SECRET, it said in big red letters across the top and bottom. Special Instructions for Operation Space Case, said the smaller letters across the middle of the top sheet.

"Now I ask you, Dwindle," Jones said to his clerkish aide, "where, in this worldful of specialists, am I going to find someone with a well-rounded education? Much less one who'll take a chance on a flier like this?"

"Gosh, Mr. Jones, I just wouldn't know," Dwindle blinked. "Have you tried looking through your files?"

"Have I tried looking through my files," Jones sighed, looking at the ceiling light. "Dwindle, my files include every gainfully employed person in the United States of America and its possessions. Millions of them. One doesn't just browse through the files looking for things."

"Oh," Dwindle said. "I'm kinda new at this specialty," he explained.

"Yes, Dwindle. However," Jones continued, "one does make IBM runouts to find things."

"Hey, that's great!" Dwindle said, brightening. "Why don't you try making an IBM runout?"

"I did, Dwindle. Please let me finish? Our instructions call for finding a person with a well-rounded education. More specifically, a person who is capable of intelligently discussing and explaining some two dozen major 'fields of knowledge.' Plus, of course, at least a passing acquaintance with some one or two hundred minor fields of knowledge.

"So I set Mathematics into the IBM sorter. Mathematics is one of the major fields of knowledge, you see."

"Yeh," Dwindle acknowledged.

"So I took the few million mathematicians' cards which I got—good mathematicians and bad mathematicians, but at least people who can get their decimals in the right place. I set the IBM sorter for Biology, and ran the mathematicians' cards through. So I got several thousand mathematician-biologists."

"That's pretty sharp!" Dwindle exclaimed with a twinkle. "Whoever thought of that!"

"Please, Dwindle," Jones moaned, pressing his palms to his eyes. "Next I sorted according to Geology. Three hundred cards came through. Three hundred people in America who know their math, biology and geology!"

"That doesn't sound like so many to me," Dwindle said hesitantly, as if wondering what there was to get so excited about.

"And of those three hundred, do you know how many understand, even vaguely, Electronics? Twelve. And of those twelve, guess how many have an adequate background in History and Anthropology? Much less an understanding of eighteen other fields?"

"Not very many, I'll bet," Dwindle replied smartly.

"None! Not even one! I tried running the cards through in every order imaginable. We've bred a race of specialists and there's not a truly educated man among us!"

"Say, you know what I bet? Even if you did find a guy who's like what all you said ..."

"Go ahead, Dwindle."

"... I bet he wouldn't even go up there to Ganymede. I sure wouldn't! I'd be scared to death," Dwindle chattered, waving his finger. "How's he gonna get back, even if he gets there O.K.? Couldn't anyone fool me with a bunch of pretty talk; I know the government doesn't have a rocket that could take off again after it got there. Gotta have launching pads and computers and all that stuff. Government ever think about that?"

Jones held his head in anguish. "Dwindle, why don't you be a good boy and run

along to the snack bar for a coffee break? And bring me some aspirin when you come back."

Freddy the Fish, Willy and Oscar Fronk were occupying the same bench, a comradeship made necessary by the overpopulation of the park on such a glorious day. Oscar was surveying the passing girls and scouting for worthwhile cigarette stubs. Willy was admiring a hovering beetle's power of flight, and Freddy was reading a discarded copy of *Scientific American*.

The beetle landed on Willy's sleeve and promptly located a gaping tear in the fabric, through which bare arm showed. Willy raised his other hand menacingly.

"Don't," Freddy barked, causing Willy to jump with enough force to dislodge the beetle.

"Aw, Freddy," Willy whined, "why dintcha lemme kill it? What good's a stupid bug?"

"That would have been a rather unfortunate kill, Willy, by your bare hand on your bare arm. You must learn to be cognizant of our insect friends and insect enemies."

"So what's he, poison or sumpin'?"

"Unpleasant, at least," Freddy said. "That was a blister beetle; smash it on your arm and you'll grow a nice welt. A member of the Meloidae family."

"You mean bugs have families and all, too?" Willy asked.

"Beetle 'families' are groupings of similar species of insects," Freddy explained. "Not actually kinfolk. For instance, this beetle is related to the *Lytta vesicatoria* of southern Europe, more commonly known as the—" Freddy glanced out of the corner of his eye at Oscar, hoping to shield the next bit of information from his perverted brain, and whispered the name.

Willy's eyes widened. "Hey, Oscar," he hollered, jumping up. "You hear what Freddy said? That bug I almost swatted's practically a Spanish Fly!"

"Which way'd he go?" Oscar squeaked, allowing his collection of stubs to scatter as he hopped around, looking on and under and behind the bench for the

escaping insect.

"Hold it, hold it," Freddy commanded, trying to restore order. "I said it's like it, not IS it. It doesn't have what it takes, so skip it, huh?"

Willy and Oscar sat down again. "Freddy," Willy sighed with adoration, "how'd ya ever get so smart? I mean, bein' a bum and all?"

"I keep telling you guys; I went to nothing but the finest universities. Well, except toward the end, when I was getting desperate, I guess I wasn't so choosy."

"Aw, g'wan now, Freddy. Collitches cost money, and you're as poor as the rest of us. Bummin' for a cuppa coffee, and all the time talking about Yale, and Oxford, and Hah-vad."

"What would you say, Willy, if I told you that once I belonged to the richest family in Mississippi?"

"I'd say Mississippi was a pretty poor state," Willy said, and Oscar giggled.

"I once was Frederik Van Smelt, spoiled son of the wealthy shrimp and oyster scion. And there's nothing as bad, my father said, as spoiled Smelt. He disowned me, of course. I owned six Cadillacs—one right after the other, I wrecked them all. I traveled all over the world and probably counteracted a billion dollars' worth of foreign aid. I was kicked out of the best schools in the world."

"How come if you're so smart you flunked out of all them schools?" Oscar asked.

"Me? Flunked out? I never made less than an A in any course I took during my eight years at war with college. I was expelled from nine schools and barely escaped the highway patrol when I was bootlegging at Oklahoma University!"

"Freddy," Willy said, "you're lyin' like a dog, butcha make it sound s' real!"

Jones squirmed uncomfortably in his seat in the briefing room, phrasing and rephrasing his thoughts. It seemed that no matter which arrangement of words he chose, it still was going to be obvious that he'd flopped. He re-examined his fingernails and selected one which was still long enough to chew.

General Marcher concluded his current appraisal of the situation and began

calling on the various individuals with whom certain phases of OPERATION SPACE CASE had been entrusted. Jones groaned as each arose and gave favorable progress reports.

"The pod is completed and has been tested, sir. It will by no means be plush, but it will be sufficiently comfortable even for the long voyage to Ganymede."

"The guidance system is perfected to the extent that we need."

"There are no further deceleration problems to be solved."

"The crash program has been approved for the two-way rocket; it is on the drawing board and current estimates are that the envoy can be brought back in three years."

"Ganymede has replied to our last message; a suitable artificial environment will be available for the envoy."

"Personnel Specialist Jones?"

Carlton gave his chin a final sweaty rub and slowly rose to his feet. "General Marcher, sir," he choked, "I'm ... we're ... experiencing a little difficulty finding a volunteer, so far—"

"Negative perspiration on that count, Jones," the Project Officer interrupted. "The draft has never been abolished; we can grab anyone you put your finger on! Now, who will it be?"

"Sir, it doesn't seem to be that so much as ... well ... sir, has any consideration been given to perhaps sending a delegation rather than a single envoy?"

The general smiled broadly. "Now, that is more like it! I take it you mean you have a number of equally-qualified persons who have expressed an intense desire to go to Ganymede, and there is no way to impartially select one of these men over the others? This is commendable. However, our space limitation clearly precludes sending more than one person. I'm afraid you will just have to make your choice from a hat."

Jones turned a trifle redder. "That's not exactly the problem, either, sir."

The general's smile wilted and became a frozen frown. "Just exactly what are you trying to say, Jones?"

"There's no one who can meet the qualifications, sir," Jones said, feeling sick at his stomach.

"Are you telling me that in the entire United States, there is not one person who has a basic understanding of the twenty-four major fields?"

"I'm afraid that's right, sir."

"See me after the briefing, Jones. I'm certain that the Foremost Personnel Specialist in the United States must have some further ideas on this matter."

Jones sank slowly back into his seat and covered his face with his hands. "I'm a goner," he whispered to himself. "Jones, you can be replaced."

Dwindle, sitting on his left, suddenly punched him vigorously in the ribs. "Say, Mr. Jones," he rattled, "I just thought of a great idea."

"Tell it to the general," Jones moaned. "Maybe then he'll realize what a handicap I've been working under."

"**H**i ya, Freddy," Willy said, sitting down on the bench and helping himself to some peanuts. "Workin' a crossword puzzle?"

Freddy pocketed his pencil stub and laid aside the newspaper. "Naw, not this time. Just playing around with one of those 'We're looking for bright young men' ads."

"Freddy! Y'ain't thinkin' a gettin' a JOB?"

"Nothing like that," Freddy laughed. "Just, exercising my mind. Filling out one of those little tests they always have. Helps keep a fella sharp, you know."

"Yeh, I seen the kind. Like what has pictures and you're supposed to find things wrong in the picture like dames with beards and dogs with six feet?"

"Kinda like that, only this one's all written and is a little tougher. You're supposed to send the answers in and whoever has good answers gets to take a tougher test and whoever does good on that test gets the job. Probably selling neckties on the corner or something."

"No kiddin'. That what it says?"

"Just says 'handsome rewards,' but that's probably close to it."

"You gonna send it in?" Willy asked.

"Naw, I just fill 'em out for fun, like I said. Can you imagine me peddling neckties on the corner?"

"Then how d'ya know if you got the right answers?"

"Hell, I know the answers," Freddy bragged. "Like I said, this is just exercise. Mental gymnastics. Like this last one; it was pretty tough compared to most of them. Had some questions about things I hadn't even thought about since college, things I'd forgotten I knew. What good's an education if you forget what things you know?"

"That's why I never bothered," Willy agreed. "'Cause I never could remember things so good."

"No, Willy. You've got it all wrong. I still know it, I just didn't know I know it."

"Aw, Freddy," Willy said unhappily. "You're pullin' my leg again!"

"Suit yourself," Freddy smiled. "Hold down the bench for me, O.K.? I'll be right back."

Willy watched Freddy until he went into the little brick building in the center of the park, and then grabbed Freddy's newspaper and scampered over to Oscar's bench.

"Hey, you know how Freddy's always talkin' big about how much he knows," Willy said breathlessly. "I got an idea how to call his bluff. He filled out one of these tests and says he knows all the answers. Let's send it in and see if he's as smart as he says!"

"Yeh! That's great, Willy!" Then Oscar's face darkened. "Wonder where we can steal a stamp?"

That was a pretty good idea of mine, about advertising in the paper, wasn't it, Mr. Jones?" Dwindle, America's Number One Personnel Specialist, asked his surly assistant.

"Yes, Dwindle."

Jones stared gloomily out the fourteenth story window into the park, where the local bums were loafing and sleeping and feeding peanuts to the pigeons. He was nauseated with the prospect of having to address his new boss as "Mr. Dwindle," and was toying with the idea of abandoning his specialty completely to join the ranks of the happy, carefree unemployed. He watched as two uniformed policemen approached one of the less wholesome-appearing characters.

"No, I don't suppose I could tolerate being in and out of jail every week on a vagrancy charge," he told himself. But then he smiled bitterly as he thought of the strange parallel between the policemen arresting the bum and other officials, elsewhere in the United States, tapping respectable citizens on the shoulder at this very moment.

"Dwindle, do you really think it was wise to issue warrants to arrest all those persons who scored perfect on the first test? How many did you say there were?"

"Only a hundred or so," Dwindle smiled sweetly. "And besides, they're not being arrested. General Marcher explained to you that they are being drafted into the service of the government. Honestly, sometimes I think you worry too much."

Jones turned back to the window, brooding over Dwindle's transformation. "Maybe so," he sighed, watching the newly-arrested vagrant pointing an accusing finger toward one of the other bums.

Willy strained and twisted, trying to reclaim his arm from the policeman's grip.

"Honest, you guys. I didn't know it was against the law. Aw, I figgered it was against the rules mebbe to send in somebody else's answers, but we wuz only makin' a joke, Oscar 'n' me. Oscar's the one who actual put it in the mailbox and stole the stamp! I bet he's the one you're after!"

"Now calm down, Willy," the beefy policeman coaxed. "No one's broken any law. Nobody's under arrest. We just want to chat a minute with whoever it was filled out that test."

"Yeh, Willy," the second policeman broke in, "if you didn't do it, and I believe you when you say you didn't, then who did?"

"What's it to ya?" Willy asked, his mouth twitching nervously.

The first policeman glanced at the second and then back at Willy. "Well, it's like this, Willy," he said. "Whoever filled out those answers got every one of them right. The people who run the contest want to meet the guy, see? And they asked us to help find him because we know you people better than anyone else does. See? That's all!"

"Yeh," said the second. "That's all. Now who did it?"

Willy stood with his jaw drooping for a moment. "You mean he got ever' last one of 'em right?" he asked. "Freddy was always braggin' about his brains, but me 'n' Oscar figgered he was makin' most of it up."

"Freddy who? Freddy the Fish you mean?"

"Yeh, Freddy." Willy perked up and turned toward Freddy's bench. "Hey, Freddy! Hey, you know that test you took in the newspaper that you didn't know I sent in? You won the contest or sumpin'! Hey, that's great!"

Jones and Dwindle watched the draftees file into the examination room.

"I still don't see how this is going to solve the problem," Jones frowned.

"I believe it will," Dwindle contradicted him. "Specialists in each of the major fields have been consulted, and each provided fifty questions."

"The hardest questions they could think up, I imagine."

"No, not at all. The purpose is to provide comprehensive coverage of each field. And each question is of the type that, if the examinee knows the answer, it can be reasonably assumed that he knows quite a bit in that particular phase of the field. For instance, if he knows what enzyme is associated with the stomach, he probably knows what enzyme is associated with the liver."

"I know one big problem you're going to run into," Jones sulked. "Just like the IBM cards. You're going to find one guy who clobbers the Electronics part of the test but completely busts out in History and everything else."

"I don't think so," Dwindle said. "The preliminary test will have taken care of

that. It was designed so that, in order to answer every question right, a person would have to have at least a rudimentary knowledge of all twenty-four major fields."

As Jones was considering whether it would be better to slit his own throat or Dwindle's, General Marcher entered the room and approached.

"Excellent. Excellent," the general declared. "A very distinguished-looking group you've assembled here, Dwindle. Hello, Jones."

"Yes, sir," Dwindle said, "with the possible exception of the seedy chap in the rear."

Jones looked to the rear of the room, and his eyes bugged.

Freddy the Fish, clean-shaven but tattered, was alternately wetting the pencil lead in his mouth and eating peanuts.

"That's the bum who feeds sparrows in the park!" Jones gasped. "How did he get out of jail so quick? I saw a couple of policemen haul him off just a day or so ago."

"This is where they hauled him to," General Marcher said. "It just so happens that he answered every question right on the preliminary examination. He says his name's Freddy Smith, although I doubt that he could prove it."

"He says he never had a father," Dwindle added. "Says his family was too poor."

Jones stared at General Marcher, then stared at Dwindle, then turned and stared at Freddy the Fish, who had just left his seat and was ambling toward the trio.

"Looks like he's throwing in the towel," Jones, said happily. "He's bringing his paper with him."

"Maybe he just wants clarification on a question," Dwindle said.

"I'm all done," Freddy said. "Who gets this?"

"Go ahead, Dwindle," Carlton Jones smirked. "Grade the man's paper. He's all done."

Dwindle smiled uncertainly. "You're allowed all the time you need, Mr. Smith."

"Oh, that's O.K. I'm done."

Dwindle produced his red pencil and the answer sheet which had 1,200 small circles punched in it. He sat down, placed the key over the test paper, and began searching for white spaces showing through.

"That's the last one, sir," Dwindle said six hours later as he added the one hundred twelfth graded test to the neat stack at the left of his desk. He stared through the thousand-plus holes in the answer key as if expecting the holes to shift.

"And still no change in the standings?" General Marcher asked again.

"Mr. Smith still has the best grade," Dwindle answered.

"The percentages again?" the general asked.

"Over all, ninety-six per cent for Mr. Smith," Dwindle said for the fourth time. "His lowest percentage in any one category was eighty per cent. The next highest score was by Dr. Schmelling, who had seventy-eight per cent, but he failed in six categories. The third highest score was by Dr. Ranson, seventy-six per cent, failing in seven categories. The fourth highest score was—"

"Enough. Enough," General Marcher interrupted. "I think we've found our man, don't you, Dwindle?"

"I hope we don't have to use pressure, sir," Dwindle replied.

Jones turned from the window, from which he was observing the bums in the park. "How can you possibly consider such a thing," he blurted, "as to send a penniless, unemployed, dirty, ragged tramp to Ganymede as the United States' Number One emissary?"

"Jones, perhaps I'd best clarify a point or two for you," General Marcher said in measured tones. "We've been searching the nation over, seeking a man who can fulfill our exacting requirements. We have found that man. There is no doubt in my mind that Mr. Smith possesses the greatest single store of knowledge about this planet and its people. So far as I'm concerned, which is considerable, it doesn't matter that this man has chosen the way of a philosopher instead of seeking an occupation. It doesn't matter that he lacks the necessary status to be listed on your IBM cards. It doesn't matter that you failed to find this man, because Dwindle succeeded. And, it doesn't matter whether I ever see you

again!"

"Yes, sir," Jones said, and picked up his hat and left.

"Now, back to the business at hand, Dwindle. You say these prospects don't know the reasons behind the test?"

"That is correct, sir. I feared there might be some temptation for the prospects to not do their best, if they knew that success might result in their being removed from the face of the Earth."

"Wise. Then I suggest we approach Mr. Smith on the idea, cautiously, to determine his sentiments. If he doesn't want to go, of course, we've got to draft him."

Freddy cracked the peanut, put half in his mouth and tossed the other half to the sparrows.

"I might be going away for a while, Willy," he said, ending a rather long silence.

"You ain't gettin' a job, are ya Freddy?"

"Watch yer language," Oscar scolded.

"Naw, not really a job. At least not the kind you think of. Sort of an all-expense-paid vacation, with a change of scenery."

"Ya ain't had a run-in with the bulls, have ya?" the stricken Willy asked.

"Me? You know me better, Willy. Nothing like that. And I'm not even sure the thing will pan out, but you know all those newspaper stories about messages from another planet?"

"Yeh! Yeh! Ya read it to me!" Willy jabbered excitedly.

"And that test I took that you sent in and the fellas talked to me about?"

"Yeh! Say, I hope that didn't make you trouble, Freddy, 'cuz me 'n' Oscar was just kinda jokin', see, and—"

"It's O.K., Willy. Well, one of the fellas I talked to was General Marcher, who's been mentioned in the newspaper stories in connection with ... here, Willy, take

these," he interrupted himself when he saw the two men approaching. "See that new guy at the bench over yonder? Give him these peanuts. I think he'd like to feed my sparrows while I'm gone. Name's Jones, and he'll probably be around for a spell."

Freddy stood up to greet the two arrivals.

"Hello, general," he said, tipping his battered cap. "It's about the trip to Ganymede, I suppose?"

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Analog Science Fact and Science Fiction* February 1962. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note. Dialect spellings have been retained.

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