

Monkey On His Back

Charles V. De Vet



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Title: Monkey On His Back

Author: Charles V. De Vet

Release Date: September 10, 2008 [EBook #26569]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MONKEY ON HIS BACK ***

Produced by Greg Weeks, David Wilson and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

Transcriber's note:

This story was published in *Galaxy* magazine, June 1960. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

¹³⁵ By CHARLES V. DE VET

monkey on his back

Under the cloud of cast-off identities

lay the shape of another man—

was it himself?

Illustrated by DILLON

HE was walking endlessly down a long, glass-walled corridor. Bright sunlight slanted in through one wall, on the blue knapsack across his shoulders. Who he was, and what he was doing here, was clouded. The truth lurked in some corner of his consciousness, but it was not reached by surface awareness.

The corridor opened at last into a large high-domed room, much like a railway station or an air terminal. He walked straight ahead.

At the sight of him a man leaning negligently against a stone pillar, to his right but within vision, straightened and barked an order to him, "Halt!" He lengthened his stride but gave no other sign.

¹³⁶ Two men hurried through a doorway of a small anteroom to his left, calling to him. He turned away and began to run.

Shouts and the sound of charging feet came from behind him. He cut to the right, running toward the escalator to the second floor. Another pair of men were hurrying down, two steps at a stride. With no break in pace he veered into an opening beside the escalator.

At the first turn he saw that the aisle merely circled the stairway, coming out into the depot again on the other side. It was a trap. He glanced quickly around him.

At the rear of the space was a row of lockers for traveler use. He slipped a coin into a pay slot, opened the zipper on his bag and pulled out a flat briefcase. It took him only a few seconds to push the case into the compartment, lock it and slide the key along the floor beneath the locker.

There was nothing to do after that—except wait.

The men pursuing him came hurtling around the turn in the aisle. He kicked his knapsack to one side, spreading his feet wide with an instinctive motion.

Until that instant he had intended to fight. Now he swiftly reassessed the odds. There were five of them, he saw. He should be able to incapacitate two or three and break out. But the fact that they had been expecting him meant that others would very probably be waiting outside. His best course now was to sham ignorance. He relaxed.

He offered no resistance as they reached him.

They were not gentle men. A tall ruffian, copper-brown face damp with perspiration and body oil, grabbed him by the jacket and slammed him back against the lockers. As he shifted his weight to keep his footing someone drove a fist into his face. He started to raise his hands; and a hard flat object crashed against the side of his skull.

The starch went out of his legs.

“**D**O you make anything out of it?” the psychoanalyst Milton Bergstrom, asked.

John Zarwell shook his head. “Did I talk while I was under?”

“Oh, yes. You were supposed to. That way I follow pretty well what you’re reenacting.”

“How does it tie in with what I told you before?”

Bergstrom’s neat-boned, fair-skinned face betrayed no emotion other than an introspective stillness of his normally alert gaze. “I see no connection,” he decided, his words once again precise and meticulous. “We don’t have enough to go on. Do you feel able to try another comanalysis this afternoon yet?”

“I don’t see why not.” Zarwell ¹³⁷ opened the collar of his shirt. The day was hot, and the room had no air conditioning, still a rare luxury on St. Martin’s. The office window was open, but it let in no freshness, only the mildly rank odor that pervaded all the planet’s habitable area.

“Good.” Bergstrom rose. “The serum is quite harmless, John.” He maintained a professional diversionary chatter as he administered the drug. “A scopolamine derivative that’s been well tested.”

The floor beneath Zarwell’s feet assumed abruptly the near transfluent consistency of a damp sponge. It rose in a foot-high wave and rolled gently toward the far wall.

Bergstrom continued talking, with practiced urbanity. “When psychiatry was a less exact science,” his voice went on, seeming to come from a great distance, “a doctor had to spend weeks, sometimes months or years interviewing a patient. If he was skilled enough, he could sort the relevancies from the vast amount of chaff. We are able now, with the help of the serum, to confine our discourses to matters cogent to the patient’s trouble.”

The floor continued its transmutation, and Zarwell sank deep into viscous depths. “Lie back and relax. Don’t ...”

The words tumbled down from above. They faded, were gone.

ZARWELL found himself standing on a vast plain. There was no sky above, and no horizon in the distance. He was in a place without space or dimension. There was nothing here except himself—and the gun that he held in his hand.

A weapon beautiful in its efficient simplicity.

He should know all about the instrument, its purpose and workings, but he could not bring his thoughts into rational focus. His forehead creased with his mental effort.

Abruptly the unreality about him shifted perspective. He was approaching—not walking, but merely shortening the space between them—the man who held the gun. The man who was himself. The other “himself” drifted nearer also, as though drawn by a mutual attraction.

The man with the gun raised his weapon and pressed the trigger.

With the action the perspective shifted again. He was watching the face of the man he shot jerk and twitch, expand and contract. The face was unharmed, yet it was no longer the same. No longer his own features.

The stranger face smiled approvingly at him.

“**O**DD,” Bergstrom said. He brought his hands up and joined the tips of his fingers against his chest. “But it’s another piece in the 138 jig-saw. In time it will fit into place.” He paused. “It means no more to you than the first, I suppose?”

“No,” Zarwell answered.

He was not a talking man, Bergstrom reflected. It was more than reticence, however. The man had a hard granite core, only partially concealed by his present perplexity. He was a man who could handle himself well in an emergency.

Bergstrom shrugged, dismissing his strayed thoughts. “I expected as much. A quite normal first phase of treatment.” He straightened a paper on his desk. “I think that will be enough for today. Twice in one sitting is about all we ever try. Otherwise some particular episode might cause undue mental stress, and set up a block.” He glanced down at his appointment pad. “Tomorrow at two, then?”

Zarwell grunted acknowledgment and pushed himself to his feet, apparently unaware that his shirt clung damply to his body.

THE sun was still high when Zarwell left the analyst's office. The white marble of the city's buildings shimmered in the afternoon heat, squat and austere as giant tree trunks, pock-marked and gray-mottled with windows. Zarwell was careful not to rest his hand on the flesh searing surface of the stone.

The evening meal hour was approaching when he reached the Flats, on the way to his apartment. The streets of the old section were near-deserted. The only sounds he heard as he passed were the occasional cry of a baby, chronically uncomfortable in the day's heat, and the lowing of imported cattle waiting in a nearby shed to be shipped to the country.

All St. Martin's has a distinctive smell, as of an arid dried-out swamp, with a faint taint of fish. But in the Flats the odor changes. Here is the smell of factories, warehouses, and trading marts; the smell of stale cooking drifting from the homes of the laborers and lower class techmen who live there.

Zarwell passed a group of smaller children playing a desultory game of lic-lic for pieces of candy and cigarettes. Slowly he climbed the stairs of a stone flat. He prepared a supper for himself and ate it without either enjoyment or distaste. He lay down, fully clothed, on his bed. The visit to the analyst had done nothing to dispel his ennui.

139 sketch of faces with clenched fists

The next morning when Zarwell awoke he lay for a moment, unmoving. The feeling was there again, like a scene waiting only to be gazed at directly to be perceived. It was as though a great wisdom lay at the edge of understanding. If he rested quietly it would all come to him. Yet always, when his mind lost its sleep-induced 140 lethargy, the moment of near understanding slipped away.

This morning, however, the sense of disorientation did not pass with full wakefulness. He achieved no understanding, but the strangeness did not leave as he sat up.

He gazed about him. The room did not seem to be his own. The furnishings, and the clothing he observed in a closet, might have belonged to a stranger.

He pulled himself from his blankets, his body moving with mechanical reaction. The slippers into which he put his feet were larger than he had expected them to be. He walked about the small apartment. The place was familiar, but only as it would have been if he had studied it from blueprints, not as though he lived there.

The feeling was still with him when he returned to the psychoanalyst.

THE scene this time was more kaleidoscopic, less personal.

A village was being ravaged. Men struggled and died in the streets. Zarwell moved among them, seldom taking part in the individual clashes, yet a moving force in the conflict.

The background changed. He understood that he was on a different world.

Here a city burned. Its resistance was nearing its end. Zarwell was riding a shaggy pony outside a high wall surrounding the stricken metropolis. He moved in and joined a party of short, bearded men, directing them as they battered at the wall with a huge log mounted on a many-wheeled truck.

The log broke a breach in the concrete and the besiegers charged through, carrying back the defenders who sought vainly to plug the gap. Soon there would be rioting in the streets again, plundering and killing.

Zarwell was not the leader of the invaders, only a lesser figure in the rebellion. But he had played a leading part in the planning of the strategy that led to the city's fall. The job had been well done.

Time passed, without visible break in the panorama. Now Zarwell was fleeing, pursued by the same bearded men who had been his comrades before. Still he moved with the same firm purpose, vigilant, resourceful, and well prepared for the eventuality that had befallen. He made his escape without difficulty.

He alighted from a space ship on still another world—another shift in time—and the atmosphere of conflict engulfed him.

Weary but resigned he accepted it, and did what he had to do ...

BERGSTROM was regarding him with speculative scrutiny. “You’ve had quite a past, apparently,” he observed.

¹⁴¹ Zarwell smiled with mild embarrassment. “At least in my dreams.”

“Dreams?” Bergstrom’s eyes widened in surprise. “Oh, I beg your pardon. I must have forgotten to explain. This work is so routine to me that sometimes I forget it’s all new to a patient. Actually what you experienced under the drug were not dreams. They were recollections of real episodes from your past.”

Zarwell’s expression became wary. He watched Bergstrom closely. After a minute, however, he seemed satisfied, and he let himself settle back against the cushion of his chair. “I remember nothing of what I saw,” he observed.

“That’s why you’re here, you know,” Bergstrom answered. “To help you remember.”

“But everything under the drug is so ...”

“Haphazard? That’s true. The recall episodes are always purely random, with no chronological sequence. Our problem will be to reassemble them in proper order later. Or some particular scene may trigger a complete memory return.

“It is my considered opinion,” Bergstrom went on, “that your lost memory will turn out to be no ordinary amnesia. I believe we will find that your mind has been tampered with.”

“Nothing I’ve seen under the drug fits into the past I do remember.”

“That’s what makes me so certain,” Bergstrom said confidently. “You don’t remember what we have shown to be true. Conversely then, what you think you remember must be false. It must have been implanted there. But we can go into that later. For today I think we have done enough. This episode was quite prolonged.”

“I won’t have any time off again until next week end,” Zarwell reminded him.

“That’s right.” Bergstrom thought for a moment. “We shouldn’t let this hang too long. Could you come here after work tomorrow?”

“I suppose I could.”

“Fine,” Bergstrom said with satisfaction. “I’ll admit I’m considerably more than casually interested in your case by this time.”

A WORK truck picked Zarwell up the next morning and he rode with a tech crew to the edge of the reclam area. Beside the belt bringing ocean muck from the converter plant at the seashore his bulldozer was waiting.

He took his place behind the drive wheel and began working dirt down between windbreakers anchored in the rock. Along a makeshift road into the badlands trucks brought crushed lime and phosphorus to supplement the ocean sediment. The progress of life from the sea to the land was a mechanical ¹⁴² process of this growing world.

Nearly two hundred years ago, when Earth established a colony on St. Martin’s, the land surface of the planet had been barren. Only its seas thrived with animal and vegetable life. The necessary machinery and technicians had been supplied by Earth, and the long struggle began to fit the world for human needs. When Zarwell arrived, six months before, the vitalized area already extended three hundred miles along the coast, and sixty miles inland. And every day the progress continued. A large percentage of the energy and resources of the world were devoted to that essential expansion.

The reclam crews filled and sodded the sterile rock, planted binding grasses, grain and trees, and diverted rivers to keep it fertile. When there were no rivers to divert they blasted out springs and lakes in the foothills to make their own. Biologists developed the necessary germ and insect life from what they found in the sea. Where that failed, they imported microorganisms from Earth.

Three rubber-tracked crawlers picked their way down from the mountains until they joined the road passing the belt. They were loaded with ore that would be smelted into metal for depleted Earth, or for other colonies short of minerals. It was St. Martin’s only export thus far.

Zarwell pulled his sun helmet lower, to better guard his hot, dry features. The wind blew continuously on St. Martin’s, but it furnished small relief from the heat. After its three-thousand-mile journey across scorched sterile rock, it sucked the moisture from a man’s body, bringing a membrane-shrinking dryness to the nostrils as it was breathed in. With it came also the cloying taste of limestone in

a worker's mouth.

Zarwell gazed idly about at the other laborers. Fully three-quarters of them were beri-rabza ridden. A cure for the skin fungus had not yet been found; the men's faces and hands were scabbed and red. The colony had grown to near self-sufficiency, would soon have a moderate prosperity, yet they still lacked adequate medical and research facilities.

Not all the world's citizens were content.

Bergstrom was waiting in his office when Zarwell arrived that evening.

HE was lying motionless on a hard cot, with his eyes closed, yet with his every sense sharply quickened. Tentatively he tightened small muscles in his arms and legs. Across his wrists and thighs he felt straps binding him to the cot.

"So that's our big, bad man," a coarse voice above him observed ¹⁴³ caustically. "He doesn't look so tough now, does he?"

"It might have been better to kill him right away," a second, less confident voice said. "It's supposed to be impossible to hold him."

"Don't be stupid. We just do what we're told. We'll hold him."

"What do you think they'll do with him?"

"Execute him, I suppose," the harsh voice said matter-of-factly. "They're probably just curious to see what he looks like first. They'll be disappointed."

Zarwell opened his eyes a slit to observe his surroundings.

It was a mistake. "He's out of it," the first speaker said, and Zarwell allowed his eyes to open fully.

The voice, he saw, belonged to the big man who had bruised him against the locker at the spaceport. Irrelevantly he wondered how he knew now that it had been a spaceport.

His captor's broad face jeered down at Zarwell. "Have a good sleep?" he asked with mock solicitude. Zarwell did not deign to acknowledge that he heard.

The big man turned. "You can tell the Chief he's awake," he said. Zarwell followed his gaze to where a younger man, with a blond lock of hair on his forehead, stood behind him. The youth nodded and went out, while the other pulled a chair up to the side of Zarwell's cot.

While their attention was away from him Zarwell had unobtrusively loosened his bonds as much as possible with arm leverage. As the big man drew his chair nearer, he made the hand farthest from him tight and compact and worked it free of the leather loop. He waited.

The big man belched. "You're supposed to be great stuff in a situation like this," he said, his smoke-tan face splitting in a grin that revealed large square teeth. "How about giving me a sample?"

"You're a yellow-livered bastard," Zarwell told him.

The grin faded from the oily face as the man stood up. He leaned over the cot—and Zarwell's left hand shot up and locked about his throat, joined almost immediately by the right.

The man's mouth opened and he tried to yell as he threw himself frantically backward. He clawed at the hands about his neck. When that failed to break the grip he suddenly reversed his weight and drove his fist at Zarwell's head.

Zarwell pulled the struggling body down against his chest and held it there until all agitated movement ceased. He sat up then, letting the body slide to the floor.

The straps about his thighs came loose with little effort.

THE analyst dabbed at his upper lip with a handkerchief. "The episodes are beginning to tie together," he said, with an attempt at 144 nonchalance. "The next couple should do it."

Zarwell did not answer. His memory seemed on the point of complete return, and he sat quietly, hopefully. However, nothing more came and he returned his attention to his more immediate problem.

Opening a button on his shirt, he pulled back a strip of plastic cloth just below his rib cage and took out a small flat pistol. He held it in the palm of his hand. He knew now why he always carried it.

Bergstrom had his bad moment. “You’re not going to ...” he began at the sight of the gun. He tried again. “You must be joking.”

“I have very little sense of humor,” Zarwell corrected him.

“You’d be foolish!”

Bergstrom obviously realized how close he was to death. Yet surprisingly, after the first start, he showed little fear. Zarwell had thought the man a bit soft, too adjusted to a life of ease and some prestige to meet danger calmly. Curiosity restrained his trigger finger.

“Why would I be foolish?” he asked. “Your Meninger oath of inviolable confidence?”

Bergstrom shook his head. “I know it’s been broken before. But you need me. You’re not through, you know. If you killed me you’d still have to trust some other analyst.”

“Is that the best you can do?”

“No.” Bergstrom was angry now. “But use that logical mind you’re supposed to have! Scenes before this have shown what kind of man you are. Just because this last happened here on St. Martin’s makes little difference. If I was going to turn you in to the police, I’d have done it before this.”

Zarwell debated with himself the truth of what the other had said. “Why didn’t you turn me in?” he asked.

“Because you’re no mad-dog killer!” Now that the crisis seemed to be past, Bergstrom spoke more calmly, even allowed himself to relax. “You’re still pretty much in the fog about yourself. I read more in those comanalyses than you did. I even know who you are!”

Zarwell’s eyebrows raised.

“Who am I?” he asked, very interested now. Without attention he put his pistol away in a trouser pocket.

Bergstrom brushed the question aside with one hand. “Your name makes little difference. You’ve used many. But you are an idealist. Your killings were necessary to bring justice to the places you visited. By now you’re almost a legend among the human worlds. I’d like to talk more with you on that later.”

While Zarwell considered, Bergstrom pressed his advantage. “One more scene might do it,” he said. “Should we try again—if you trust me, that is?”

¹⁴⁵ Zarwell made his decision quickly. “Go ahead,” he answered.

ALL Zarwell’s attention seemed on the cigar he lit as he rode down the escalator, but he surveyed the terminal carefully over the rim of his hand. He spied no suspicious loungers.

Behind the escalator he groped along the floor beneath the lockers until he found his key. The briefcase was under his arm a minute later.

In the basement lav he put a coin in the pay slot of a private compartment and went in.

As he zipped open the briefcase he surveyed his features in the mirror. A small muscle at the corner of one eye twitched spasmodically. One cheek wore a frozen quarter smile. Thirty-six hours under the paralysis was longer than advisable. The muscles should be rested at least every twenty hours.

Fortunately his natural features would serve as an adequate disguise now.

He adjusted the ring setting on the pistol-shaped instrument that he took from his case, and carefully rayed several small areas of his face, loosening muscles that had been tight too long. He sighed gratefully when he finished, massaging his cheeks and forehead with considerable pleasure. Another glance in the mirror satisfied him with the changes that had been made. He turned to his briefcase again and exchanged the gun for a small syringe, which he pushed into a trouser pocket, and a single-edged razor blade.

Removing his fiber-cloth jacket he slashed it into strips with the razor blade and flushed it down the disposal bowl. With the sleeves of his blouse rolled up he had the appearance of a typical workman as he strolled from the compartment.

Back at the locker he replaced the briefcase and, with a wad of gum, glued the key to the bottom of the locker frame.

One step more. Taking the syringe from his pocket, he plunged the needle into his forearm and tossed the instrument down a waste chute. He took three more steps and paused uncertainly.

When he looked about him it was with the expression of a man waking from a vivid dream.

“**Q**UITE ingenious,” Graves murmured admiringly. “You had your mind already preconditioned for the shot. But why would you deliberately give yourself amnesia?”

“What better disguise than to believe the part you’re playing?”

“A good man must have done that job on your mind,” Bergstrom commented. “I’d have hesitated to try it myself. It must have taken a lot of trust on your part.”

¹⁴⁶ “Trust and money,” Zarwell said drily.

“Your memory’s back then?”

Zarwell nodded.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Bergstrom assured him. “Now that you’re well again I’d like to introduce you to a man named Vernon Johnson. This world ...”

Zarwell stopped him with an upraised hand. “Good God, man, can’t you see the reason for all this? I’m tired. I’m trying to quit.”

“Quit?” Bergstrom did not quite follow him.

“It started on my home colony,” Zarwell explained listlessly. “A gang of hoods had taken over the government. I helped organize a movement to get them out. There was some bloodshed, but it went quite well. Several months later an unofficial envoy from another world asked several of us to give them a hand on the same kind of job. The political conditions there were rotten. We went with him. Again we were successful. It seems I have a kind of genius for that sort of thing.”

He stretched out his legs and regarded them thoughtfully. “I learned then the truth of Russell’s saying: ‘When the oppressed win their freedom they are as oppressive as their former masters.’ When they went bad, I opposed them. This time I failed. But I escaped again. I have quite a talent for that also.

“I’m not a professional do-gooder.” Zarwell’s tone appealed to Bergstrom for understanding. “I have only a normal man’s indignation at injustice. And now I’ve done my share. Yet, wherever I go, the word eventually gets out, and I’m right back in a fight again. It’s like the proverbial monkey on my back. I can’t get rid of it.”

He rose. “That disguise and memory planting were supposed to get me out of it. I should have known it wouldn’t work. But this time I’m not going to be drawn back in! You and your Vernon Johnson can do your own revolting. I’m through!”

Bergstrom did not argue as he left.

RESTLESSNESS drove Zarwell from his flat the next day—a legal holiday on St. Martin’s. At a railed-off lot he stopped and loitered in the shadow of an adjacent building watching workmen drilling an excavation for a new structure.

When a man strolled to his side and stood watching the workmen, he was not surprised. He waited for the other to speak.

“I’d like to talk to you, if you can spare a few minutes,” the stranger said.

Zarwell turned and studied the man without answering. He was medium tall, with the body of an athlete, though perhaps ten years ¹⁴⁷ beyond the age of sports. He had a manner of contained energy. “You’re Johnson?” he asked.

The man nodded.

Zarwell tried to feel the anger he wanted to feel, but somehow it would not come. “We have nothing to talk about,” was the best he could manage.

“Then will you just listen? After, I’ll leave—if you tell me to.”

Against his will he found himself liking the man, and wanting at least to be courteous. He inclined his head toward a curb wastebbox with a flat top. “Should we sit?”

Johnson smiled agreeably and they walked over to the box and sat down.

“When this colony was first founded,” Johnson began without preamble, “the administrative body was a governor, and a council of twelve. Their successors were to be elected biennially. At first they were. Then things changed. We

haven't had an election now in the last twenty-three years. St. Martin's is beginning to prosper. Yet the only ones receiving the benefits are the rulers. The citizens work twelve hours a day. They are poorly housed, poorly fed, poorly clothed. They ...”

Zarwell found himself not listening as Johnson's voice went on. The story was always the same. But why did they always try to drag him into their troubles?

Why hadn't he chosen some other world on which to hide?

The last question prompted a new thought. Just why had he chosen St. Martin's? Was it only a coincidence? Or had he, subconsciously at least, picked this particular world? He had always considered himself the unwilling subject of glib persuaders ... but mightn't some inner compulsion of his own have put the monkey on his back?

“... and we need your help.” Johnson had finished his speech.

Zarwell gazed up at the bright sky. He pulled in a long breath, and let it out in a sigh.

“What are your plans so far?” he asked wearily.

—CHARLES V. DE VET

decorative alien

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