

Teething Ring

James Causey

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Teething Ring

By **JAMES CAUSEY**

Anyone can make an error, but the higher the society ... the more disastrous the mistake!

Illustrated by **DICK FRANCIS**

HALF an hour before, while she had been engrossed in the current soap opera and Harry Junior was screaming in his crib, Melinda would naturally have slammed the front door in the little man's face. However, when the bell rang, she was wearing her new Chinese red housecoat, had just lustered her nails to a blinding scarlet, and Harry Junior was sleeping like an angel.

Yawning, Melinda answered the door and the little man said, beaming, "Excellent day. I have geegaws for information."

Melinda did not quite recoil. He was perhaps five feet tall, with a gleaming hairless scalp and a young-old face. He wore a plain gray tunic, and a peddler's tray hung from his thin shoulders.

"Don't want any," Melinda stated flatly.

"*Please.*" He had great, beseeching amber eyes. "They all say that. I haven't much time. I must be back at the University by noon."

"You working your way through college?"

He brightened. "Yes. I suppose you could call it that. Alien anthropology major."

Melinda softened. The initiations those frats pulled nowadays—shaving the poor guy's head, eating goldfish—it was criminal.

"Well?" she asked grudgingly. "What's in the tray?"

"Flangers," said the little man eagerly. "Oscilloscopes. Portable force-field generators. A neural distorter." Melinda's face was blank. The little man frowned. "You use them, of course? This *is* a Class IV culture?" Melinda essayed a weak shrug and the little man sighed with relief. His eyes fled past her to the blank screen of the TV set. "Ah, a monitor." He smiled. "For a moment I was afraid—May I come in?"

MELINDA shrugged, opened the door. This might be interesting, like a vacuum-cleaner salesman who had cleaned her drapes last week for free. And Kitty Kyle Battles Life wouldn't be on for almost an hour.

"My name is Porteous," said the little man with an eager smile. "I'm doing a thematic on Class IV cultures." He whipped out a stylus, began jotting down notes. The TV set fascinated him.

"It's turned off right now," Melinda said.

Porteous's eyes widened impossibly. "You mean," he whispered in horror, "that you're exercising Class V privileges? This is terribly confusing. I get doors slammed in my face, when Class Fours are supposed to have a splendid gregarian quotient—you *do* have atomic power, don't you?"

"Oh, sure," said Melinda uncomfortably. This wasn't going to be much fun.

"Space travel?" The little face was intent, sharp.

"Well," Melinda yawned, looking at the blank screen, "they've got

Space Patrol, Space Cadet, Tales of Tomorrow ..."

"Excellent. Rocket ships or force-fields?" Melinda blinked. "Does your husband own one?" Melinda shook her blonde head helplessly. "What are your economic circumstances?"

Melinda took a deep rasping breath, said, "Listen, mister, is this a demonstration or a quiz program?"

"Oh, my excuse. Demonstration, certainly. You will not mind the questions?"

"Questions?" There was an ominous glint in Melinda's blue eyes.

"Your delightful primitive customs, art-forms, personal habits—"

"Look," Melinda said, crimsoning. "This is a respectable neighborhood, and I'm not answering any Kinsey report, understand?"

The little man nodded, scribbling. "Personal habits are tabu? I so regret. The demonstration." He waved grandly at the tray. "Anti-grav sandals? A portable solar converter? Apologizing for this miserable selection, but on Capella they told me—" He followed Melinda's entranced gaze, selected a tiny green vial. "This is merely a regenerative solution. You appear to have no cuts or bruises."

"Oh," said Melinda nastily. "Cures warts, cancer, grows hair, I suppose."

Porteous brightened. "Of course. I see you can scan. Amazing." He scribbled further with his stylus, glanced up, blinked at the obvious scorn on Melinda's face. "Here. Try it."

"You try it." Now watch him squirm!

Porteous hesitated. "Would you like me to grow an extra finger, hair —"

"Grow some hair." Melinda tried not to smile.

The little man unstopped the vial, poured a shimmering green drop on his wrist, frowning.

"Must concentrate," he said. "Thorium base, suspended solution. Really jolts the endocrines, complete control ... see?"

Melinda's jaw dropped. She stared at the tiny tuft of hair which had sprouted on that bare wrist. She was thinking abruptly, unhappily, about that chignon she had bought yesterday. They had let her buy that for eight dollars when with this stuff she could have a natural one.

"How much?" she inquired cautiously.

"A half hour of your time only," said Porteous.

Melinda grasped the vial firmly, settled down on the sofa with one leg tucked carefully under her.

"Okay, shoot. But nothing personal."

PORTEOUS was delighted. He asked a multitude of questions, most of them pointless, some naive, and Melinda dug into her infinitesimal fund of knowledge and gave. The little man scribbled furiously, clucking like a gravid hen.

"You mean," he asked in amazement, "that you live in these primitive huts of your own volition?"

"It's a G.I. housing project," Melinda said, ashamed.

"Astonishing." He wrote: *Feudal anachronisms and atomic power,*

side by side. Class Fours periodically "rough it" in back-to-nature movements.

Harry Junior chose that moment to begin screaming for his lunch. Porteous sat, trembling. "Is that a Security Alarm?"

"My son," said Melinda despondently, and went into the nursery.

Porteous followed, and watched the ululating child with some trepidation. "Newborn?"

"Eighteen months," said Melinda stiffly, changing diapers. "He's cutting teeth."

Porteous shuddered. "What a pity. Obviously atavistic. Wouldn't the creche accept him? You shouldn't have to keep him here."

"I keep after Harry to get a maid, but he says we can't afford one."

"Manifestly insecure," muttered the little man, studying Harry Junior. "Definite paranoid tendencies."

"He was two weeks premature," volunteered Melinda. "He's real sensitive."

"I know just the thing," Porteous said happily. "Here." He dipped into the glittering litter on the tray and handed Harry Junior a translucent prism. "A neural distorter. We use it to train regressives on Rigel Two. It might be of assistance."

Melinda eyed the thing doubtfully. Harry Junior was peering into the shifting crystal depths with a somewhat strained expression.

"Speeds up the neural flow," explained the little man proudly. "Helps tap the unused eighty per cent. The pre-symptomatic memory is unaffected, due to automatic cerebral lapse in case of overload. I'm afraid it won't do much more than cube his present IQ, and an

intelligent idiot is still an idiot, but—"

"How dare you?" Melinda's eyes flashed. "My son is *not* an idiot! You get out of here this minute and take your—things with you." As she reached for the prism, Harry Junior squalled. Melinda relented. "Here," she said angrily, fumbling with her purse. "How much are they?"

"Medium of exchange?" Porteous rubbed his bald skull. "Oh, I really shouldn't—but it'll make such a wonderful addendum to the chapter on malignant primitives. What is your smallest denomination?"

"Is a dollar okay?" Melinda was hopeful.

Porteous was pleased with the picture of George Washington. He turned the bill over and over in his fingers, at last bowed low and formally, apologized for any tabu violations, and left via the front door.

"Crazy fraternities," muttered Melinda, turning on the TV set.

KITTY KYLE was dull that morning. At length Melinda used some of the liquid in the green vial on her eyelashes, was quite pleased at the results, and hid the rest in the medicine cabinet.

Harry Junior was a model of docility the rest of that day. While Melinda watched TV and munched chocolates, did and re-did her hair, Harry Junior played quietly with the crystal prism.

Toward late afternoon, he crawled over to the bookcase, wrestled down the encyclopedia and pawed through it, gurgling with delight. He definitely, Melinda decided, would make a fine lawyer someday,

not a useless putterer like Big Harry, who worked all hours overtime in that damned lab. She scowled as Harry Junior, bored with the encyclopedia, began reaching for one of Big Harry's tomes on nuclear physics. One putterer in the family was enough! But when she tried to take the book away from him, Harry Junior howled so violently that she let well enough alone.

At six-thirty, Big Harry called from the lab, with the usual despondent message that he would not be home for supper. Melinda said a few resigned things about cheerless dinners eaten alone, hinted darkly what lonesome wives sometimes did for company, and Harry said he was very sorry, but this might be *it*, and Melinda hung up on him in a temper.

Precisely fifteen minutes later, the doorbell rang. Melinda opened the front door and gaped. This little man could have been Porteous's double, except for the black metallic tunic, the glacial gray eyes.

"Mrs. Melinda Adams?" Even the voice was frigid.

"Y-Yes. Why—"

"Major Nord, Galactic Security." The little man bowed. "You were visited early this morning by one Porteous." He spoke the name with a certain disgust. "He left a neural distorter here. Correct?"

Melinda's nod was tremulous. Major Nord came quietly into the living room, shut the door behind him. "My apologies, madam, for the intrusion. Porteous mistook your world for a Class IV culture, instead of a Class VII. Here—" He handed her the crumpled dollar bill. "You may check the serial number. The distorter, please."

MELINDA shrunk limply onto the sofa. "I don't understand," she said painfully. "Was he a thief?"

"He was—careless about his spatial coordinates." Major Nord's teeth showed in the faintest of smiles. "He has been corrected. Where is it?"

"Now look," said Melinda with some asperity. "That thing's kept Harry Junior quiet all day. I bought it in good faith, and it's not my fault—say, have you got a warrant?"

"Madam," said the Major with dignity, "I dislike violating local tabus, but must I explain the impact of a neural distorter on a backwater culture? What if your Neanderthal had been given atomic blasters? Where would you have been today? Swinging through trees, no doubt. What if your Hitler had force-fields?" He exhaled. "Where is your son?"

In the nursery, Harry Junior was contentedly playing with his blocks. The prism lay glinting in the corner.

Major Nord picked it up carefully, scrutinized Harry Junior. His voice was very soft.

"You said he was—playing with it?"

Some vestigial maternal instinct prompted Melinda to shake her head vigorously. The little man stared hard at Harry Junior, who began whimpering. Trembling, Melinda scooped up Harry Junior.

"Is *that* all you have to do—run around frightening women and children? Take your old distorter and get out. Leave decent people alone!"

Major Nord frowned. If only he could be sure. He peered stonily at Harry Junior, murmured, "Definite egomania. It doesn't seem to have

affected him. Strange."

"Do you want me to scream?" Melinda demanded.

Major Nord sighed. He bowed to Melinda, went out, closed the door, touched a tiny stud on his tunic, and vanished.

"The manners of some people," Melinda said to Harry Junior. She was relieved that the Major had not asked for the green vial.

Harry Junior also looked relieved, although for quite a different reason.

BIG HARRY arrived home a little after eleven. There were small worry creases about his mouth and forehead, and the leaden cast of defeat in his eyes. He went into the bedroom and Melinda sleepily told him about the little man working his way through college by peddling silly goods, and about that rude cop named Nord, and Harry said that was simply astonishing and Melinda said, "Harry, you had a drink!"

"I had two drinks," Harry told her owlishly. "You married a failure, dear. Part of the experimental model vaporized, *woosh*, just like that. On paper it looked so good—"

Melinda had heard it all before. She asked him to see if Harry Junior was covered, and Big Harry went unsteadily into the nursery, sat down by his son's crib.

"Poor little guy," he mused. "Your old man's a bum, a useless tinker. He thought he could send Man to the stars on a string of helium nuclei. Oh, he was smart. Thought of everything. Auxiliary jets to

kick off the negative charge, bigger mercury vapor banks—a fine straight thrust of positive Alpha particles." He hiccuped, put his face in his hands.

"Didn't you ever stop to think that a few air molecules could defocus the stream? Try a vacuum, stupid."

Big Harry stood up.

"Did you say something, son?"

"Gurgle," said Harry Junior.

Big Harry reeled into the living room like a somnambulist.

He got pencil and paper, began jotting frantic formulae. Presently he called a cab and raced back to the laboratory.

MELINDA was dreaming about little bald men with diamond-studded trays. They were chasing her, they kept pelting her with rubies and emeralds, all they wanted was to ask questions, but she kept running, Harry Junior clasped tightly in her arms. Now they were ringing alarm bells. The bells kept ringing and she groaned, sat up in bed, and seized the telephone.

"Darling." Big Harry's voice shook. "I've got it! More auxiliary shielding plus a vacuum. We'll be rich!"

"That's just fine," said Melinda crossly. "You woke the baby."

Harry Junior was sobbing bitterly into his pillow. He was sick with disappointment. Even the most favorable extrapolation showed it would take him nineteen years to become master of the world.

An eternity. Nineteen years!

—JAMES CAUSEY

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