

*A Short Story*

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TINY WINDOWS

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Mr. 3 took the small, gray box from his pocket. Smiling, he handed it to Mr. 7.

"Wait!" exclaimed Shalimar Smith.

"Sorry," said Mr. 7, pressing the red button on the right-hand side of the box.

Shalimar Smith disappeared from the room.

"An excellent plan, indeed," commented Mr. 1.

Messrs. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 nodded agreement and muttered among themselves.

"And now," pursued Mr. 7, "Stage Two." He pressed the green button on the left-hand side of the gray box.

The Messrs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 also disappeared from the room.

Shalimar Smith's living room stood empty.

Immediately after Mr. 7 had pressed the red button on the right-hand side of the gray box, Shalimar Smith found himself sitting comfortably in a reclining seat on a fast-moving train. After contemplating the sudden transition and making himself thoroughly dizzy, he turned in some alarm to considering where he was going. He peered out the window, trying to make something from the mixture of blackness and lights spinning by, overlaid by stationary reflections from inside the car.

"Your ticket, sir," said the conductor for the second time.

"Eh—oh!" Shalimar looked up, felt in the breast pocket of his coat for a ticket that was not there. "Here it—" he pulled the pocket inside out—"isn't," he finished lamely.

"That's nice," said the conductor sarcastically.

Shalimar groaned and dug into his other pockets, distributing their contents over the seat. Finally he gave a cry of jubilation, pulled his hand from his inside coat pocket and handed the conductor a small square of cardboard.

The conductor punched three heart-shaped holes through Shalimar's name and handed him back his driver's license. Shalimar gazed at it stupidly. "I—must have lost it," he ventured.

The thoroughly enraged official grabbed Shalimar by the scruff of his coat in an undignified way, pulling the emergency cord with his other hand. He shoved the unfortunate man down the aisle of the car as the train slowed to a halt.

"Stop!" shouted Shalimar.

"*Why?*" grunted the conductor savagely, shoving him out the door as the speed of the train diminished. Shalimar landed on his hands and knees, rolled for several yards, and skidded to a halt on his stomach. He sat up and watched in exasperation as the train gathered speed and roared away into the darkness.

Finally he stood up, rubbing his head with one hand and feeling of his skinned knee with the other, and took stock of his surroundings. A moon in quarter phase illuminated dimly the gleaming lines of the railroad tracks, showed a tree in silhouette on a hill not far away. Clouds scudded across the sky. Shalimar endeavoured to ascertain where he was, gave up, and headed toward the hill and the silhouetted tree. In the far distance the whistle of a train wailed mournfully.

From the top of the hill Shalimar looked over a country of rolling plains and grainfields. A single light shone yellow about a half-mile off—probably a farm-house. Shalimar headed off toward the light, mentally cursing the monotonous chirping clamor of crickets

and other nocturnal insects. He was trying to remember something—something of vital importance—something that he had to remember before it was too late. The memory hung there, just below the surface of conscious thought, defying him, taunting him. Eventually the lighted window showed clearly through a nearby grove of trees, and the outlines of a small farm-house stood out against the dim sky.

He walked up the gravel path and knocked on the door. Steps sounded inside and the door opened, a crack of light shining out onto the ground. A face peered at him, withdrew, and the door opened wide. A figure stood silhouetted against the light.

"Come in," said Mr. 7.

"Oh, *no!*" Shalimar turned and started to run off. Mr. 7 grasped him firmly by the coat-collar and dragged him back into the house.

"Let me go," gurgled Shalimar, gagging as his shirt collar pressed tightly against his throat.

"Not until—" Mr. 7 began, his face suddenly brightening. Footsteps scraped up the gravel path and Messrs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 strode into the room. Mr. 3 expeditiously took the small, gray box from his pocket and handed it to Mr. 7. "Nowhere around here," he said briskly. "Probably off another psychological sidetrack."

Mr. 7's hand released Shalimar's coat-collar and poised over the red button on the right-hand side of the box.

"Wait," cried Shalimar.

Mr. 7 depressed the button. Shalimar Smith disappeared from the room.

Mr. 7 then pressed the green button on the left-hand side of the box. The Messrs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 vanished in like manner. The silent emptiness of the room was broken only by the sound of the bound and gagged farmer grunting from inside a handy closet.

Shalimar Smith abruptly felt himself falling. He had just realized that fact when something cold, hard and wet slapped against his face and engulfed him, and he submerged gaspingly in the water. He came up, choking and treading water, and took his bearings.

He had just done a perfect jackknife from the high board of the public swimming pool in Stockton, Ohio. The quarter moon glinted faintly off the surface of the water. He was aware of the fact that he was still fully dressed, and that his clothes were soaking up water at an alarming rate, bearing him down.

He swam clumsily over to the edge of the pool and climbed out. Then he sat down on the edge and began contemplating this new facet of the whole fantastic experience. He knew the pool well enough—had swum in it many times when he had lived in this small town in Ohio, before getting married and going to New York.

The question of *how* he had gotten here bothered him not so much as *why* he had. Something was trying to come to the surface of his mind again—the same urgent something which had bothered him after he had been thrown off the train. He grasped at the memory, cursing as it eluded him deftly time and again. When footsteps sounded on the concrete walk leading to the pool he looked up.

It was a night watchman. The man was swinging a flashlight at his side, throwing the beam around him as he walked. Probably he had heard the splash and was coming to investigate. Shalimar sighed and stood up.

The flashlight beam swung toward him, illuminating him embarrassingly and causing him to blink at the spot of white light before him. A suspicious voice asked, "What're you doin' here this time of night? Pool's closed."

"Yes, I know—" Shalimar thought hard. "I—was walking in my sleep and fell into the pool."

"With all your clothes on?" The beam of light lowered and Shalimar could see again. The watchman stood outlined against the darker trees, his face a blurred shadow.

"Yes, er—I fell asleep in my chair as I was reading the paper."

"Heh! At one o'clock in the morning? Where you live?"

Shalimar hadn't known it was so late. He racked his brains. "Just over the hill on Walnut Street."

The watchman stepped up and looked him over in the light of the flash. "Hmmm. Don't know you—must be new in town. You the one who bought the old Schultz place?"

"Why ... yeah."

"Heh! Thought that was a woman. Well, I guess it's okay. Better watch where you wander off to at night, though."

"Yeah." Shalimar breathed a sigh of relief and began to walk off. "Good-night."

"Better take one of them anty-histamines when you get home. Sound like you're comin' down with a cold. Good-night!" The watchman strolled back toward his shack.

Shalimar gulped. Close. He began trying to remember again.

"Hey!" yelled the watchman suddenly. "Jest thought of somethin'. How'd you get into the pool? I'd've seen you if you come in the gate, and the other three sides is walled off!"

Shalimar had hoped the watchman wouldn't think of that. He began to run down the driveway.

"Wait up!" cried the watchman. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

Shalimar ran. Three shots buzzed by him, then he was safely around the corner and away. He ducked down a tree-lined street, ran around the corner house and off across the back yard. Behind him he heard the man run on down the main street, yelling.

This was bad. The old fool would wake up the authorities, if not the whole town. Why did that damned button transport him into such messes? He ducked down an alley and into a small toolshed which he noticed at the end of it. What to do next? He stood in the shed, panting. As he backed up to the far wall, something brushed his face. A light cord! He pulled on it; the shed exploded into light.



Mr. 7 stood leaning against the far side of the shed, arms folded across chest. "Failed again," he remarked philosophically.

Shalimar leaped back with a cry.

The Messrs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, standing along the farther wall, murmured among themselves in interested tones.

"He has too many memory sidetracks," remarked Mr. 3, handing Mr. 7 the small gray box. "It certainly wasn't here. Nothing to do but try again." Mr. 7's finger hovered over the red button on the box's right-hand side.

Shalimar braced himself.

Mr. 7 shoved violently down on the button. Shalimar behaved in the expected fashion; he vanished.

Mr. 7 then pressed the green button on the left side. He and his colleagues followed after Shalimar.

Immediately after Mr. 7 pressed the aforementioned red button, Shalimar Smith felt a violent pain on the top of his head, followed shortly by another. He deduced that somebody was beating him over the head with something.

"Peeping Tom!" shrieked the outraged woman. "Help! Police!" She poised the vase for another blow. Shalimar winced as it descended and took stock of where he was.

He found that he was hanging by his fingertips from a ledge about five stories up on an apartment building in what must be a rather large city. It was, in fact, a window ledge, and immediately above him, leaning from the window, was a woman in a rather flimsy negligee, screaming and wielding a spiked heel on top of his defenseless cranium. He groaned as the heel descended for the fifth time on his skull then the shoe slipped from her grasp and fell to the street below. He remembered vaguely that he had once lived in an apartment like the one to whose window ledge he clung—probably, even, the same apartment—and that he had been accustomed to wash the windows from the outside. That explained

his position. Now the shoe had been replaced by another makeshift weapon. A goldfish bowl came down upon him, showering him with fish, water and splinters of glass. Below, a cruising precinct police car had stopped and several men sporting the blue uniform of the Law were looking up.



"Come down from there," demanded a wrathful voice from below.

"How?" gasped Shalimar weakly.

"Come down, I say!" shouted the voice. Several people in adjoining apartments were looking out their respective windows at the scene and thoroughly enjoying his discomfiture. Shalimar cursed them and edged his way along the ledge until he felt another one under his feet. He came to a standing position on the lower one, hugging the wall of the building. The lady in the negligee poised a vase of flowers preparatory to heaving at him.

"Hell!" groaned Shalimar, ducking as the vase shattered against the wall above his head. He edged his way around the corner of the building where the lady could no longer see him, and slipped into an open window.

A man lay sleeping in the apartment he had just entered. Praying that the man was a heavy sleeper, Shalimar tip-toed through the apartment and out into the hall. By now, he imagined, the place was a bedlam. The elevator was coming up—loaded with police, no doubt—and footsteps were ascending the stairs. Shalimar spotted a weathered door and ducked through it.

He emerged on the roof. Looking over the edge, he was immediately spotted from below. Cries of, "There he is!" and "On the roof!" floated to his horrified ears. He ran across the room and jumped to an adjoining one. He zig-zagged across it, keeping well away from the edges, and reached yet another adjoining roof. There he popped into a small utility shed. Stairs led down, and Shalimar followed them, not bothering to worry where they went. He raced down six flights and emerged in the basement.

Dark—too dark to see anything—but there was no mistaking that voice.

"Wrong again," said Mr. 7 cheerfully.

Shalimar couldn't see, but he knew that Mr. 7 was pressing the small red button. There was not enough light for anybody to see that Shalimar had once more vanished.

Apparently, nothing had happened. Shalimar waited expectantly. The darkness was as blank as ever. Shalimar looked about him, felt the air about him. Nothing. He took several steps forward.

*BAM!*

Shalimar fell back. No mistaking that rough surface. He had just bumped into a tree. Cautiously, he approached it again, feeling in front of him with his hands. Presently he encountered the rough bark; he could put his arms around the tree. He felt upward—and got a surprise.

It was broken off at the top—rather, burnt or charred off.

"*Why?*"

His memory went to work again. He was getting closer now, much closer. Something was coming to the surface of his conscious mind, something that he had to remember, something—

He noticed then that it was lighter. A wind was blowing, the sky showed palely overhead. Clouds were obscuring the stars and moon. Vague outlines of other blasted trees showed against the dull sky. The ground wasn't the way ground *should* be ... glassy ... hard....

He knew this place. But where? When?

Then he saw it, the tall thing, cylindrical and with a pointed nose shoved at the sky. He began to remember, though it came slowly. He thought, the tall thing, with a tapered nose silhouetted against the sky, was....

*Home.*

"I presume you have by now broken away from the limitations of your disintegrating Earth-personality," said a familiar voice.

Mr. 7! And he *knew* Mr. 7!

"When we arrived—almost twenty years ago—in the role of a Galactic study-group assigned to determine whether the planet Earth was yet fit for full Galactic citizenship," said Mr. 7 slowly, "we found it necessary to assume the roles, separately, of representative beings of Earth, in order to obtain what information we required without arousing suspicion. To do this it was necessary, through standard psychological procedure, to isolate the larger portion of our complete Galactic personalities and to leave only a small pseudopersonality, completely equipped with Earth-memories, under which guise we might proceed with our studies.

"In order to assure complete control of the Earth-personality, it was of course necessary to isolate the Galactic one completely and further to remove all knowledge of its existence until such a predetermined time as we would be finished with our work and ready to return home."

Mr. 7 droned on. Shalimar nodded—and remembered.

"Our study of Earth now being finished, we shall return to our headquarters. We could not return, however, until we located the ship in which we had come—and *you* were the key to that."

Shalimar remembered now. He was ... *he was*....

"You gave us a rather hard time," continued Mr. 7.

"Because my personality was the most psychologically malleable," Shalimar said slowly, "I was chosen to hide the ship where it would be safe until we required it. The seven of you teleported to the Earth's surface and waited while I hid the ship—where you did not know its location. Then I alone knew where the ship was, and because I was the most malleable, my Earth-personality was the most foolproof. Therefore it was extremely unlikely that in any moments of duress or psychological strain, I would babble the location of the ship—which it was imperative to guard."

"But," said Mr. 7, "*your* Earth-personality was *too* well-integrated. The location of the ship was locked somewhere in your subconscious and wouldn't come out. The only thing we could do was teleport you to various places in your memory, stimulating your Galactic personality each time, and hope that eventually you would lead us to the ship."

"Which," said Shalimar, "I did."

"Which you did," agreed Mr. 7. "Are we ready, then, to take off, Captain?"

"We are ready, Lieutenant," said Shalimar Smith, otherwise—Mr. Zero.

THE END

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**B**ill Venable was a science fiction writer who published several stories in the 1950s and 1960s, primarily in pulp magazines such as Thrilling Wonder Stories and Fantastic. Apart from "If At First," some of his other notable works include "The Perfect Planet" and "The Eye of Allah." Not much else is known about his personal life or career beyond his short stories.



## TINY WINDOWS

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