

# Identity

**By GEORGE O. SMITH**

# Identity

Cal Blair paused at the threshold of the Solarian Medical Association and held the door while four people came out. He entered, and gave his name to the girl at the reception desk, and then though he had the run of the place on a visitor basis, Cal waited until the girl nodded that he should go on into the laboratories.

His nose wrinkled with the smell of neoform, and shuddered at the white plastic walls. He came to the proper door and entered without knocking. He stood in the center of the room as far from the shelves of dangerous-looking bottles on one wall as he could get—without getting too close to the preserved specimens of human viscera on the other wall.

The cabinet with its glint of chrome-iridium surgical tools seemed to be like a monster, loaded to the vanishing point with glittering teeth. In here, the odor of neoform was slightly tainted with a gentle aroma of perfume.

Cal looked around at the empty room and then opened the tiny door at one side. He had to pass between a portable radiology machine and a case of anatomical charts, both of which made his hackles tingle. Then he was inside of the room, and the sight of Tinker Elliott's small, desirable head bent over the binocular microscope made him forget his fears. He stepped forward and kissed her on the ear.

She gasped, startled, and squinted at him through half-closed eyelids.

"Nice going," she said sharply.

"Thought you liked it," he said.

"I do. Want to try it over again?"

"Sure."

"Then don't bother going out and coming in again. Just stay here."

Cal listened to the words, but not the tone.

"Don't mind if I do. Shall we neck in earnest?"

"I'd as soon that as having you pop in and out, getting my nerves all upended by kissing me on the ear."

"I like kissing you on the ear."

Tinker Elliott came forward and shoved him onto a tall laboratory chair. "Good. But you'll do it at my convenience, next time."

"I'd rather surprise you."

"So I gathered. Why did you change your suit?"

"Change my suit?"

"Certainly."

"I haven't changed my suit."

"Well! I suppose that's the one you were wearing before."

"Look, Tinker, I don't usually wear a suit for three months. I think it was about time I changed. In fact, this one is about done for."

"The one you had on before looked all right to me."

"So? How long do you expect a suit to last, anyway?"

"Certainly as long as an hour."

"Hour?"

"Yes ... say, what is this?"

Cal Blair shook his head. "Are you all right?"

"Of course. Are you?"

"I think so. What were you getting at, Tinker? Let's start all over again."

"You were here an hour ago to bid me hello. We enjoyed our reunion immensely and affectionately. Then you said you were going home to change your suit—which you have done. Now you come in, acting as though this were the first time you'd seen me since Tony and I took off for Titan three months ago."

Cal growled in his throat.

"What did you say?" asked Tinker.

"Benj."

"Benj! Oh no!"

"I haven't been here before. He's my ... my—"

"I know," said Tinker softly, putting a hand on his. "But no one would dream of masquerading as anyone else. That's unspeakable!"

"It's ghastly! The idea is beyond revolting. But, Tinker, Benj Blair is revolting—or worse. We hate each other—"

"I know." Tinker shuddered and made a face that might have resulted from tasting something brackish and foul. "*Ugh!* I'm sorry, Cal."

"I'm raving mad! That dupe!"

"Cal—never say that word again. Not about your twin brother."

"Look, my neuropsychiatric female, I'm as stable as any twin could be. Dwelling on the subject of duplication is something I won't do. But the foul, rotten trick. What was he after, Tink?"

"Nothing, apparently. Just up to deviltry."

"Deviltry is fun. He was up to something foul. Imagine anyone trying to take another's identity. That's almost as bad as persona duplication."

Tinker went pale, and agreed. "Theft of identity—I imagine that Benj was only trying to be the stinker he is supposed to be. That was a rotten trick"—Tinker wiped her lips, applied neoform on a cello-cotton pad and sterilized them thoroughly—"to play on a girl." She looked at the pad and tossed it into the converter chute. "A lot of good that will do. Like washing your hands after touching a criminal. Symbolic—"

"Tinker, I feel cheated."

"And I feel defiled. Come here, Cal." The result of his approach was enough to wipe almost anything from the minds of both. It went a long way towards righting things, but it was not enough to cover the depths of their mental nausea at the foul trick. That would take years—and perhaps blood—to wash away.

"Hello, Cal," she said, as they parted.

"I'm glad you're back."

"I know," she laughed. "Only Dr. Tinker Elliott could drag Specialist Calvin Blair into anything resembling a hospital, let alone a neurosurgical laboratory."

"Wild horses couldn't," he admitted.

"That's a left-handed compliment, but I'll treasure it—with my left hand," she promised.

"Benj—and I can speak without foaming at the mouth now—couldn't have played that trick on you if you'd seen me during the last three months."

"True. Three months' absence from you made his disguise perfect. I'd forgotten just enough. The rotter must have studied ... no, he's an identical twin, isn't he?"

"Right," gritted Cal. "But look, Tinker. This is no place to propose. But why not have me around all the time?"

"Nice idea," said Tinker dreamily. "You'll come along with us on the next expedition, of course?"

"You'll not go," said Cal.

"Now we're at the same old impasse. We've come up against it for three years, Cal."

"But why?"

"Tony and I promised ourselves that we'd solve this mystery before we quit."

Cal snorted. "You've been following in the footsteps of medical men who haven't solved Makin's Disease in the last hundred years. You might never solve it."

"Then you'll have to play my way, Cal."

"You know my opinion on that."

"You persist in putting me over a barrel, Cal. I think a lot of you. Enough—and forgive me for thinking it—to ignore the fact that you are a twin. But I'll not marry you unless we can be together—somehow. I love surgery and medical research. I like adventuring into strange places and seeking the answer to strange things. Tony is my ideal and he loves this life too, as did our father. It's in our blood, Tony's and mine, and saying so isn't going to remove it."

Cal nodded glumly. "Don't change," he said firmly. "Not willingly. I'm not going to be the guy to send someone to a psychiatrist to have his identity worked over. I've been hoping that you'd get your fill of roistering all over the Solar System, looking for rare bugs and viruses. I've almost been willing to get some conditioning myself so that I could join you—but you know what that would mean."

"Poor Cal," said Tinker softly. "You do love me. But Cal, don't you change either! Understand? If you change your identity, you'll

not be the Cal I love. If the change comes normally, good and well, but I'll not have an altered personality for my husband. You love your ciphers and your codes and your cryptograms. You are a romanticist, Cal, and you stick to the rapier and the foil."

"Excepting that I get accused of cowardice every now and then," snorted Blair.

"Cowardice?"

"I've a rather quiet nature, you know. Nothing really roils me except Benj and his tricks. So I don't go around insulting people. I've been able to talk a lot of fights away by sheer reasoning, and when the battle is thrust upon me, I choose the rapier. There's been criticism, Tink, because some have backed out rather than cross rapiers with me, and those that do usually get pinked. I've been accused of fighting my own game."

"That's smart. That's your identity, Cal, and don't let them ridicule you into trying drillers."

"I won't. I can't shoot the side of a wall with a needle beam."

"Stay as you are, Cal."

"But that's no answer. You like space flying. I hate space flying. You love medicine and neurosurgery. I hate the smell of neoform. I hate space and I hate surgery—and you love 'em both. To combine them? To call them Life? No man in his right mind would do that. No, Tinker, I'll have nothing to do with either!"

*The ghost of Hellion Murdoch, pirate, adventurer, and neurosurgeon stirred in his long, long sleep. Pirates never die, they merely join their fellows in legend and in myth, and through*



*their minions—the historians and novelists—their heinous crimes are smoothed over, and they become uninhibited souls that fought against the fool restrictions placed upon them by a rotten society.*

*Hellion Murdoch had joined his fellows, Captain Kidd, Henry Morgan, Dick Turpin, and Robin Hood three hundred and fifty years ago. And like them, he went leaving a fabulous treasure buried somewhere. This came to be known to all as Murdoch's Hoard, and men sought up and down the Solar System for it, but it was never found.*

*But the words of Cal Blair aroused the ghost of Hellion Murdoch. He listened again as the words echoed and re-echoed through the halls of his pirate's citadel in the hereafter. The same halls rang with his roaring laughter as he heard Calvin Blair's words. He sprang to his feet, and raced with the speed of thought to a mail chute.*

*With his toe, the ghost of Hellion Murdoch dislodged a small package from where it had lain for years. With his ghostly pencil, he strengthened certain marks, plying the pencil with the skill of a master-counterfeiter. The stamp was almost obliterated by the smudged and unreadable cancellation. The addressee was scrawled and illegible, but the address was still readable. Water had done its job of work on the almost imperishable wrapper and ink of the original, and when the ghostly fingers of Hellion Murdoch were through, the package looked like a well-battered bundle, treated roughly by today's mail.*

*With his toe, he kicked it, and watched it run through the automatic carrier along the way to an operating post office. It came to light,*

*and the delivery chute in Cal Blair's apartment received the package in the due course of time.*

Cal Blair looked at the package curiously. He hadn't ordered anything. He was expecting nothing by mail. The postmark—completely smudged. He paid no attention to the stamp, which might have given him to think. The address? The numbers were fairly plain and they were his, Cal Blair's. The name was scrawled, and the wrapping was scratched across the name. Obviously some sharp corner of another package had scratched it off.

He inspected the package with the interest of a master cryptologist, and then decided that opening the package was the only way to discover the identity of the owner. Perhaps inside would be a packing slip or something that might be traced—

Paper hadn't changed much in the last five hundred years, he thought ruefully. At least, not the kind of paper this was wrapped in. No store, of course. Someone sending something almost worthless, no doubt, and wrapping it in the first piece of paper that was handy. He tore the wrapping carefully, and set it aside for future study.

Inside the package was a tin box, and inside the box was a small cross standing on a toroidal base. The whole trinket stood two inches tall, and the crossarms were proportional—though they were cylindrical in cross-section instead of rectangular.

It would have made a nice ornament for an altar, or a religious person's desk except for the tiny screw-stud that projected out of the center of the bottom. That prevented it from standing. Other taped holes in this flat base aroused his attention.

"This is no ornament," said Cal Blair, aloud. "No mere ornament would require that rugged mounting."

There seemed to be some microscopic engravings around the surface of the toroid. Cal set up the microscope and looked. Characters in the solarian were there, micro-engraved to perfection. But they were in no order. They had a randomness that would have made no sense to any but a master cryptologist—a specialist. To Cal Blair they took on a vague pattern that might be wishful thinking, and yet his reason told him that men do not microengrave things just to ornament them. A cipher it must be by all logic.

He was about to take it into the matter-converter and enlarge it mechanically, when he decided that it might spoil the things for the owner if he did and was not able to return it to the exact size. He decided on photographs.

Fully three hours later, Cal Blair had a complete set of photographic enlargements of the microengravings.

Then with the patience and skill of the specialist cryptologist, Cal Blair started to work on the characters.

The hours passed laboriously. The wastebasket filled with scrawled sheets of paper, and mathematical sequences. Letters and patterns grew beneath his pencil, and were discarded. Night passed, and the dawn grayed in the east. The sun rose, and cast its rays over Cal's desk, and still he worked on, completely lost in his work.

And then he looked startled, snapped his fingers, and headed across the room for an old book. It was a worthless antique, made by the reproducer in quantity. It was a Latin dictionary.

Latin. A dead and forgotten language.

Only his acquaintance with the folks at the Solarian Medical Association could have given him the key to recognition. He saw one word there, and it clicked. And then for four solid hours he cross checked and fought the Latin like a man working a crossword puzzle in an unknown language, matching the characters with those in the dictionary.

But finally the message was there before him in characters that he could read. It was clear and startling.

"The Key to Murdoch's Hoard!" breathed Cal Blair. "The fabulous treasure of the past! This trinket is the Key to Murdoch's Hoard!"

A cavity resonator and antenna system, it was. The toroid base was the cavity resonator, and the cross was the feedline and dipole antenna. Fitted into the proper parabolic reflector and shock excited periodically, it would excite a similar antenna at the site of Murdoch's Hoard. This would continue to oscillate for many milliseconds after the shock-excitation. If the Key were switched to a receiving system—a detector—the answering oscillation of the sympathetic system would act as a radiator. Directive operation—scanning—of the parabolic reflector would give directive response, leading the user to the site of Murdoch's Hoard.

How men must have fought to find Murdoch's Hoard in the days long past!

Cal Blair considered the Key. It would lead him to nothing but roistering and space travel and the result would be no gain. Yet there was a certain scientific curiosity in seeing whether his deciphering had been correct. Not that he doubted it, but the idea sort of intrigued him.

The project was at least *unique*.

He looked up the history of the gadget in an ancient issue of the Interplanetary Encyclopedia and came up with the following description:

Murdoch's Hoard: An unknown treasure said to be cached by the pirate Hellion Murdoch. This treasure is supposed to have been collected by Murdoch during his years as an illegal neurosurgeon. For listings of Murdoch's better known contributions to medicine, see.... (A list of items filled half a page at this point, which Cal Blair skipped.)

Murdoch's Hoard is concealed well, and has never been found. The Key to Murdoch's Hoard was a minute cavity resonator and antenna system which would lead the user to the cache. No one has been able to make the Key function properly, and no one was ever able to break the code, which was engraved around the base.

The value of the Key is doubtful. Though thousands of identical Keys were made on the Franks-Channing matter reproducer, no scientist has ever succeeded in getting a response. Engravings on the base are obviously a code of some sort giving instructions as to the use of the Key, but the secret of the code is no less obscure than the use of the Key itself. The original may be identified by a threaded stud protruding from the bottom. This stud was eliminated in the reproduction since it interfered with the upright position of the Key when used as an ornament. The original was turned over to the Interplanetary Museum at the time of Channing's death from which place it has disappeared and has been rediscovered several times. At the present time, the original Key to

Murdoch's Hoard is again missing, it having been stolen out of the Museum for the seventeenth time in three hundred years.

Cal smiled at the directions again. He envisioned the years of experimentation that had gone on with no results. The directions told why. Without them, its operation was impossible. And yet it was so simple.

The idea of owning contraband bothered Cal. It belonged to the Interplanetary Museum, by rights. It would be returned. Of that, Cal was definite. But some little spark of curiosity urged him not to return it right away. He would return it, but it had been gone for several years and a few days more would make no difference. He was far from the brilliant scientist—any of the engineers of the long-gone Venus Equilateral Relay Station would have shone like a supernova against his own dim light. But he, Cal Blair, had the answer and they did not.

But it was more to prove the correctness of his own ability as cryptographer that he took on the job of making the little Key work.

The job took him six weeks. An expert electronics engineer would have done it in three days, but Cal had no laboratory filled with equipment. He had neither laboratory technique nor instruments nor a great store of experience. He studied books. He extracted a mite of information here and a smidgin there, and when he completed the job, his equipment was a mad scramble of parts. Precision rubbed elbows with sloppiness, for unlike the trained technician, Cal did not know which circuits to let fly and which circuits needed the precise placing. He found out by sheer out-and-try and by finally placing everything with care. The latter did not work too good, but continuous delving into the apparatus disrupted

some of the lesser important lines to the point where their randomness did not cause coupling. The more important lines complained in squeals of oscillation when displaced, and Cal was continually probing into the gear to find out which wire was out of place.

He snapped the main switch one evening six weeks later. With childlike enthusiasm he watched the meters register, compared notes and decided that everything was working properly. His testing equipment indicated that he was operating the thing properly—at least in accordance with the minute engravings on the side.

But with that discovery—that his rig functioned—there came a let-down. It was singularly unexciting. Meters indicated, the filaments of the driver tubes cast a ruddy glow behind the cabinet panel, a few ill-positioned pilot lamps winked, and the meter at the far end of the room registered the fact that he was transmitting and was being detected. It was a healthy signal, too, according to the meter, but it was both invisible and inaudible as well as not affecting the other senses in any way.

Now that he had it, what could he use it for?

Treasure? Of what use could treasure be in this day and age? With the Channing-Franks matter reproducer, gold or any rare element could be synthesized by merely introducing the proper heterodyning signal. Money was not metal any more. Gold was in extensive use in electrical works and platinum came in standard bars at a solarian credit each. Stable elements up to atomic weights of six or seven hundred had been made and investigated. A treasure trove was ridiculous. Of absolutely no value.

The day of the Channing-Franks development was after the demise of Hellion Murdoch. And it was after the forty years known as the Period of Duplication that Identium was synthesized and became the medium of exchange. Since identium came after Murdoch's demise by years, obviously Murdoch's Hoard could only be a matter of worthless coin, worthless jewels, or equally worthless securities.

Money had become a real medium of exchange. Now it was something that did away with going to the store for an egg's worth of mustard.

So Cal Blair felt a let-down. With his problem solved, there was no more to it, and that was that. He smiled. He'd send the Key to Murdoch's Hoard to the museum.

And, furthermore, let them seek Murdoch's Hoard if they wanted to. Doubtless they would find some uniques there. A pile of ancient coins would be uniques, all right. But the ancient papers and coins and jewels would not be detectable from any of the duplicates of other jewels and coins of that period that glutted the almost-abandoned museum.

Benj Blair snarled at the man in front of him. "You slinking dupe! You can't get away with that!"

The man addressed blanched at the epithet and hurled himself headlong at Benj. Cal's twin brother callously slipped a knife out of his belt and stabbed down on the back of his attacker. It was brutal and bloody, and Benj kicked the dead man back with a lifted knee and addressed the rest of the mob.





"Now look," he snarled, "it is not smart. This loke thought he could counterfeit. He's a dead idiot now. And anybody that tries to make identium in this station or any place that can be traced to any one of us will be treated likewise. Get me?"

There was a growl of absolute assent from the rest.

"Is there anyone who doesn't know why?"

"I'm dumb," grinned a man in the rear. "Make talk, Benj."

"O.K.," answered Benj. "Identium is a synthetic element. It is composed of a strictly unstable atom that is stabilized electronically. It starts off all right, but at the first touch of the scanning beam in the matter-converter, it becomes unstable and blows in a fission-reaction. Limpy, there, tried it once and it took

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