

# **Fine Feathers**

**By GEORGE O. SMITH**

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*Ara, the crow, was aware of the fact that he was a crow. This and this alone made him different from his fellow crows. Because he recognized the fact, it made him aware of the things that separated the crows from the pheasants that abounded across the meadow—and he admired their fine plumage and elegant ways.*

*He began to scorn the idea of being a crow, and resented the attitude of his fellows. They were satisfied to be crows, and could not understand his resentment nor his desires, and they even scorned the idea that he was above them because he wanted to be other than a crow. In fact, they did not even understand his concept of being anything else. They did not look up to him for thinking over their heads.*

*He should have left them and made his way alone. But he wanted to show them how much more he was than they, and so he decked himself in the plumage of one of the pheasants and then started to lord it over the rest of the crows....*

—ÆSOP

Wanniston fixed the other man with a piercing gaze. "Sorry," he said. "Quite sorry. But it can not be done that way, you know. The whole proposition was your idea."

"I know," said the other man. He inspected Wanniston's large, well-proportioned frame, his strong features, and his absolute poise and wondered how any man, with all to recommend him, could be so utterly unsympathetic. The coldness in his face set him apart

from one of the Galactic Ones. "The proposition was sensible enough—yet I failed. Even though I failed, my manipulations were properly done, you will agree."

Wanniston nodded.

"Where did I fail?"

"You struck a snag."

"It was not my fault."

"Are you crawling?" snapped Wanniston.

"Perhaps," said the other man bitterly. "I want to know how I failed."

Wanniston smiled deprecatorily. "Lincoln, you failed because you neglected to take everything into account. Before you succeed—before you can hope to plan without failure, you must learn to take everything into account."

"One cannot take everything into account."

"Yes, one can. It is quite possible—if you know how."

"Everything's easy," said Lincoln sourly, "once you know how."

"Certainly," laughed Wanniston.

"And because I made a mistake, I failed."

"Had you taken everything into account, you would have known that you could never succeed. You wouldn't have started, and now you wouldn't be a complete and broken failure."

"You may well gloat."

"I'm not gloating."

"I believe that," admitted Lincoln. "But that changes nothing."

"You understand our position, Lincoln. If we prevented you from trying, well, you might have succeeded, and we'd never know the benefits of your success. It was your idea, and you wanted to try. But don't feel too broken. Others have tried."

"Small consolation. Knowing that another man is starving will not put food in my *belly*." Lincoln stood up, dusted off his jacket, and left the office.

The report of a pistol echoed and re-echoed up and down the corridor, reverberating and hushing until it could be mistaken for a wild cackle of laughter.

Wanniston went into the small office beside his own, through an interconnecting door. The key to the outer door hung in the lock by the tongue, and the office was a sharp contrast to his spotless business office. Here was no clean desk, no bookcase bulging with erudition, no deep-pile carpet. Instead, the place was a litter of complicated equipment. Not messy, in the dirty sense of the word, but the standard neglect of any laboratory. Delicate instruments stood on the floor, a box was partly filled with discarded parts, and several pieces of partly disassembled apparatus lined the walls. On the desk, which was the cleanest spot in the room, there stood a small cabinet. It was not the precisely finished cabinet that comes with commercial equipment, but strictly functional. There was no pattern to the dials—at least there had been no attempt to arrange the controls in sensible pattern. They stuck out wherever they were needed—and the sides and top each had a knob or two.

Wanniston slid the headpiece over his temples and snapped the main switch. A split-second timer kicked in for less than one-tenth of a second, waited for ten seconds, and then repeated the dose. Four times it followed the sequence of keying the machine for a period of less than a tenth of a second, following with a ten-second pause. Finally it gave Wanniston a full one-second charge and then ceased.



The financier removed the temple set and sat thinking for a moment. There was a bit of resentment at the machine—not resentment, exactly, but a slight feeling of annoyance that he must take such microscopic doses of the machine.

He knew the story of Andrew Tremaine and how the publisher's attempts to use the machine had resulted in self-destruction because it had been too good. But, smiled Wanniston, he really had

no intention of trying to lift the whole race to the level of the Ambassador of the Galactic Ones, the emissary Gerd Lel Rayne. Rayne had told him.

Not the complete story, of course. Rayne could never tell that. Nor if he did, Wanniston could not have understood it. But he did know that Tremaine had developed such a machine and had energized his mind with disastrous results.

Obviously, Tremaine could not have gone on living after that. Tremaine was pretty much of an extrovert who loved people and wanted them all to advance rapidly. Wanniston was self-centered and introverted and wanted nothing more than to run the show himself. Tremaine could not live in a world alone—and with his energized brain, he was in a world alone. Gerd Lel Rayne could be his only friend, he and Gaya, and their friendship must necessarily be one kept under cover. But Wanniston could, did, and liked a world alone. He had no intention of letting the world know.

That would be disastrous.

The world would rush to the machine, to partake of its offerings, in order to gain the benefit of the increased intelligence. They would not count the cost—and the cost was great.

The machine produced sterility.

So much for general usage.

But for individual usage? That was another matter. He would use it for himself alone and forget progeny. Wanniston wanted to run the show. He felt entitled to have a hand in it, for he knew that he was better equipped, mentally, to handle the complex problems of running the world than many others. He was aware of man's

weaknesses. They were all glad to be just human, but it took a higher intellect to understand that there was something better than just being human.

Wanniston knew that, and Wanniston was going to do something about it. Wanniston, by knowing that there was something higher, and by being just that slight bit higher himself, was going to go all the way and make himself Gerd Lel Rayne's mental equal. He believed that he might even surpass the 260-odd I.Q. possessed by the emissary of the Galactic Ones, for he knew that Rayne was merely the lowest link in a long chain that led right up to the Grand Galactic Council.

"Wait until you see me kid brudder," grinned Wanniston. His lips were thin as he grinned, and there was more sardonicism than genuine humor in the situation.

Gerd Lel Rayne smiled amicably as Wanniston entered. "Good morning," he said with a booming, easy voice. The emissary was a large man, a living embodiment of poise and good will. "I sent for you, John. You're heading for trouble."

"It's my trouble," answered Wanniston.

Rayne shook his massive head slowly. "Not entirely. I'm concerned."

"It's my trouble and, if it blows up in my face, it's my grief."

Again there came that shake of the head. "No, Wanniston, you cannot shake yourself loose like that. You are not alone. I failed my superiors when I told you the tale of Andy Tremaine. I thought that the knowledge of what had happened to another who tried the same thing would deter you. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember. I asked you why it wouldn't be possible to energize the human brain so that it could use the whole thing instead of the usual ten percent. You countered with the yarn about Tremaine."

"Time alone will fill the brain, John. No machine will do it properly. It is forced."

"So?"

"John, you have been using a modification of Tremaine's gadget on yourself. I can only say that you are ambitious to the foolhardy stage. No good will come of it."

"Where is the danger? I care nothing for sterility. I only hope to become as intelligent as you are."

"If that were all," smiled Gerd, "I would look the other way. But again—I could not. For I am responsible for every Terran in the eyes of my superiors. I must try to protect even those who attempt mental suicide. Along that line lies oblivion, Wanniston."

"You do all right," snapped the financier.

"I," smiled Gerd Lel Rayne, "was ... born to this. I used nothing to enhance my ... native intellect."

"What's wrong with it, though? I can do without progeny."

"Civilization can not."

"Civilization will know nothing—"



"They will find out. I regret that I tried to dissuade you. In showing you the error of continuing this line of research, I gave you the hint that opened the corridor to you. That was a mistake.

"Be that as it may," continued Gerd, "I must now try to show you more of the future. You are slowly gaining in power, Wanniston, and you will eventually become the most hated man on Terra."

"A shame, I'm sure," snorted Wanniston.

"That attitude will cause you grief," admonished Gerd Lel Rayne. "You should use power wisely, not use it in sharpening your associates out of their rights."

"I've never cheated—"

"Not legally. But is it right for a man to set up traps? Is it good and moral for one of your present mental ability to figure the tertiary causes and effects and apply them to time limits? Not only do you make profit, Wanniston, but you set up your contracts so that you inevitably get forfeit-money as well. You think deeper and plan better—"

"And to the winner goes the spoils," laughed Wanniston. "I should lower myself to their level for the sake of helping them? Not I, Gerd Lel Rayne. I am your equal, and you know it."

"I know it. Yet I am not overly avaricious. I am comfortable, doing my job as best I can. I am unique, perhaps, but I do that which I am best fitted for, and I am helping civilization."

Wanniston smiled. "Tremaine wanted galactic power for Terra. Tremaine wanted the ultimate for mankind. He was a complete

altruist, I believe. He wanted to raise the whole world to your level."

"An admirable idea, lacking in certain phases of which he could know nothing. Certain phases, Wanniston, of which you are equally ignorant!"

"I shall find out. I shall, if necessary, surpass you, Gerd."

"Quite possible," smiled the emissary. "Quite possible. The capacity of the brain is almost limitless. My race uses more than yours, Wanniston. Eventually we will fill ours more and more as the centuries pass. But remember that we are as much on the way up as your race is. No one should move too fast."

"Why?"

"Because, that way leads to—oblivion."

"Again, why?"

"Nature has her safeguards. She knows the dangers of becoming too wise too soon. Therefore she causes sterility. Strange thing, Wanniston, but there is absolutely no way in which to energize the brain without it. One must permit evolution to take its course. One must hope that his song will have greater native intelligence. Look, Wanniston. Your father, when a boy, played with toys of a technical nature not even known ten centuries before. You as a boy scorned making your construction toy operate as a prime mover, with anything so archaic as an atomic converter. You demanded the prime, the ultimate; the Solar Phoenix in miniature. Nowadays, the kids insist upon using miniature directive-generators.

"Directive power," continued Gerd, "is the daily work. Years ago it took men most of their lives to study it, today the kids play with it in toys. Tomorrow—perhaps one of your race will discover interstellar power—Galactic Power—and your sons and grandsons will demand minute galactic generators to run their gadgets. Ten centuries ago, children were toying with electricity—today they are playing with directives. That, Wanniston, is wisdom gained in the proper way."

"And what should I do?"

"Instead of using your power to gain the world, you might use that intellect to better mankind." Gerd stretched and stood up. "But you will not," he finished. "Your type will not."

"No, I will not."

Gerd led Wanniston to the door, and courteously showed him out. "I hope to see you again," he said honestly. Wanniston nodded; the financier understood. Despite a difference in attitude between the emissary and himself, he knew that having another with an equal intelligence was desirable. Wanniston did not require it, but the emissary was a friend to all, an extrovert, and required friendship.

Wanniston would return. Gerd Lel Rayne was covering something. There was more to Gerd Lel Rayne than met the eye, and he knew it. He understood, with Gerd, all that Gerd said regarding help for Terra in scientific matters. Rayne could advise, could occasionally point out minor errors or make suggestions, but could not openly state facts. Well, Wanniston wanted to know the secret. He'd be back.

Gaya Lel Rayne entered the room and caught her husband's mental distress, slight as it was. She came over beside him and added to the impact of her presence with him the powerful attraction of her. Gerd put a hand on her shoulder and they flowed together momentarily. Powerful were their minds, and powerful was the feeling between them; no Terran could have entertained a bitter thought within several hundred feet of their embrace.

"What is it, Gerd?" she asked.

"Wanniston."

"Still trying?"

"Succeeded."

"Dangerous." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes—and no," replied Gerd. "He will not willingly pass on his illegal knowledge. Terra would skin him alive if they knew that he was extracting their resources by foul means. Wanniston, on the other hand, knows that he could drag the temple down over all of Terra by merely announcing the machine."

"But isn't sterility enough of a deterrent?" asked Gaya.

"I don't know. Look, Gaya. Those who cared nothing for the future would indulge in mental energizing. They would outstrip those who cared for the future; those with the proper attitude would become slaves, practically. Within a century, every worthwhile thing would be in the hands of those who cared nothing for progeny."

"There is a saving factor," objected Gaya. "The new ones would come from the ranks of those who cared—"

"Of course," laughed Gerd. "But the optimistic philosophy of the Terran would die. One could take his choice. Either he has children or he fits in with those who have forsaken the future."

Gerd dropped his glance and worried visibly for a moment. "It is a gloomy philosophy, Gaya. Slavery or sterility. No future either way. Depressive philosophy—which would lead to planetary suicide."

"Couldn't one have children first and try the machine afterwards?" asked Gaya brightly.

"Uh-huh—but why? Those who wait will be behind those who did not. Of course there will be a place for all, just as there is now. I fear that the race would die out anyway, Gaya. The machine can not be circumvented; its effects may not be counteracted once it is used. Schoolboys and schoolgirls would try it once, throwing away their futures with the youthful willingness to take chances. They would stand above the others in their classes—until their fellows tried it. Forbid it? Like sin, Gaya, you can legislate against it but you can not make it unpopular. Ban it and you will have its effects smuggled in to the youth of Terra—who will try it if only because their folks forbid it. They will see the effects. They will see their parents in slavery.... Slavery, Gaya, entered into willingly—for the children themselves!"

He faced Gaya with a powerful gesture. "The children will see it. They will decide that slavery is no compensation for parenthood. Why waste time? Why sit in slavery for years while you indulge in the duty of bearing children, and then go to take up the job of making a financial start? No, once this is released, Terra may die."

"Destroy him—and his machine."

Gerd shook his head. "That I can no longer do," he said sadly. "He is our equal now. Tomorrow he will be our superiors, by a minute bit. Yet today he is powerful enough of mind to tell by my actions that I intend to destroy him. I can not—for once I try, I will lose, the Galactic Ones will lose, and Terra will lose. I can call for no help from Terra. I can ask the field representative when he arrives. I might even call for help—"

"It would be justified," said Gaya, earnestly.

"I have done nothing yet. I should try—"

"Try what?"

"I don't know."

Gaya nodded. "Call Yord Tan Verde. He will understand."

Into the penthouse went Gerd and Gaya, to call the field representative of the Galactic Ones. Verde answered at length, and listened to the entire story. He asked a number of questions that Gerd thought to have no connection, but Gerd answered. Then Yord Tan Verde laughed a bit and told Gerd Lel Rayne not to worry.

It was very unsatisfactory.

Will Conan stood up and faced the others at the table. "I won't kill myself," he shouted, banging his fist on the table. "I'll kill him first!"

"I tried that," remarked a tall man at the other end of the table.

Conan smiled wryly. "Peter Wilks tried it, all right," he told the rest. "Tell us what happened, Pete."

"I tried four times. Each time he stopped me in a bold way that seemed to be effortless. It was as though he knew—"

"Well, what else can we do? Can we ignore him?"

"Why not?"

"Is there a man here that does not have his finger in your business?"

Seventeen men shook their heads.

"Is there a man among us that has one microscopic shred of evidence to the fact that Wanniston is dishonest?"

There was not.

"O.K.—so how do we go about it?"

No one knew.

Conan sat down. "We can't squeeze him out, is that it?"

"We can not do anything at all," snarled another man. "No matter what we try, he betters us. He's a sharper. If we try something legal, he's our better. If we get dirty, he cleans us anyway—but the devil does it legally. You can't win."

"There were once twenty-three of us," said Peter Wilks. "Three are in jail—for crimes they did not commit. One is in jail for a crime that he did commit, the crime of trying to frame Wanniston. Two are dead—suicides because they could no longer take defeat after defeat at Wanniston's fine Machiavellian hand. He's a menace."

"We're like the mice that decided to hang a bell on the cat," laughed Conan bitterly. "Six of us have tried and failed. Must we try separately? Can he read minds?"

Wilks jumped to his feet. "I say he can!"

"Then he's more than a menace. He's a devil!"

"So what? We've appealed to Gerd Lel Rayne. And what did he say? He said that we should hang tight because Wanniston was headed for trouble."

"Do we wait until we are all dead before it happens?" snapped Wilks.

"I'm no prophet," growled Conan. "I know this. We're licked. Or is this any good. Can we run him out?"

"How?"

"Superman he may be. Superior to even Gerd Lel Rayne—Sorry, Lel Rayne," he said, seeing the emissary as Gerd opened the door. "You heard?"

Gerd nodded pleasantly. "Wanniston's intellect has increased. A fatal illness. He does not recognize it, nor would he believe it if he were told. Yet it is so; Wanniston's illness has caused an increase in the acuity of the brain, a definite increase in the intelligence quotient. He is quite capable of out-thinking any of you—of us, pardon me. I feel no self-reproach, though. I," and Gerd Lel Rayne laughed heartily—too heartily, though the Terrans did not know it, "have known men of my race who were superior to me, and have no animosity as long as I am well fitted to my position, and can do my job well, better than many others. I may not advance above my



present level, yet I can be emissary to Terra where the bulk of my race would find it against their liking."

"Well, suppose you tell us what to do?"

"I don't know," admitted Gerd. "Isolate him. Can you do that?"

"No. He has a finger in every man's business here. We can do nothing unless he is permitted to pass on it. Furthermore, he will find it out in time to circumvent us if we try to operate without his approval. We do that and we land in jail, our life's ambitions stripped from us and dropped into his hands like a ripe plum."

"I know," said Gerd. "I know."

"He's your mental superior too?" asked Wilks uncertainly.

Gerd nodded. "I can try, though. My mental superior he may be, but I am possessed of the knowledge of certain arts of which he knows nothing. That is the heritage of my race: the things I played with as a child. I still ... occasionally ... like to play—"

Wanniston entered the basement workshop of Gerd Lel Rayne and watched while the emissary made adjustments on a bit of complex apparatus.

"Tricky gadget," said Wanniston.

"It is that."

"Energy collector—director, converter," said Wanniston. "You're about to release the secret of galactic power?"

"No, I was just tinkering," said Gerd. "I have no intention of telling Terra about it."

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