

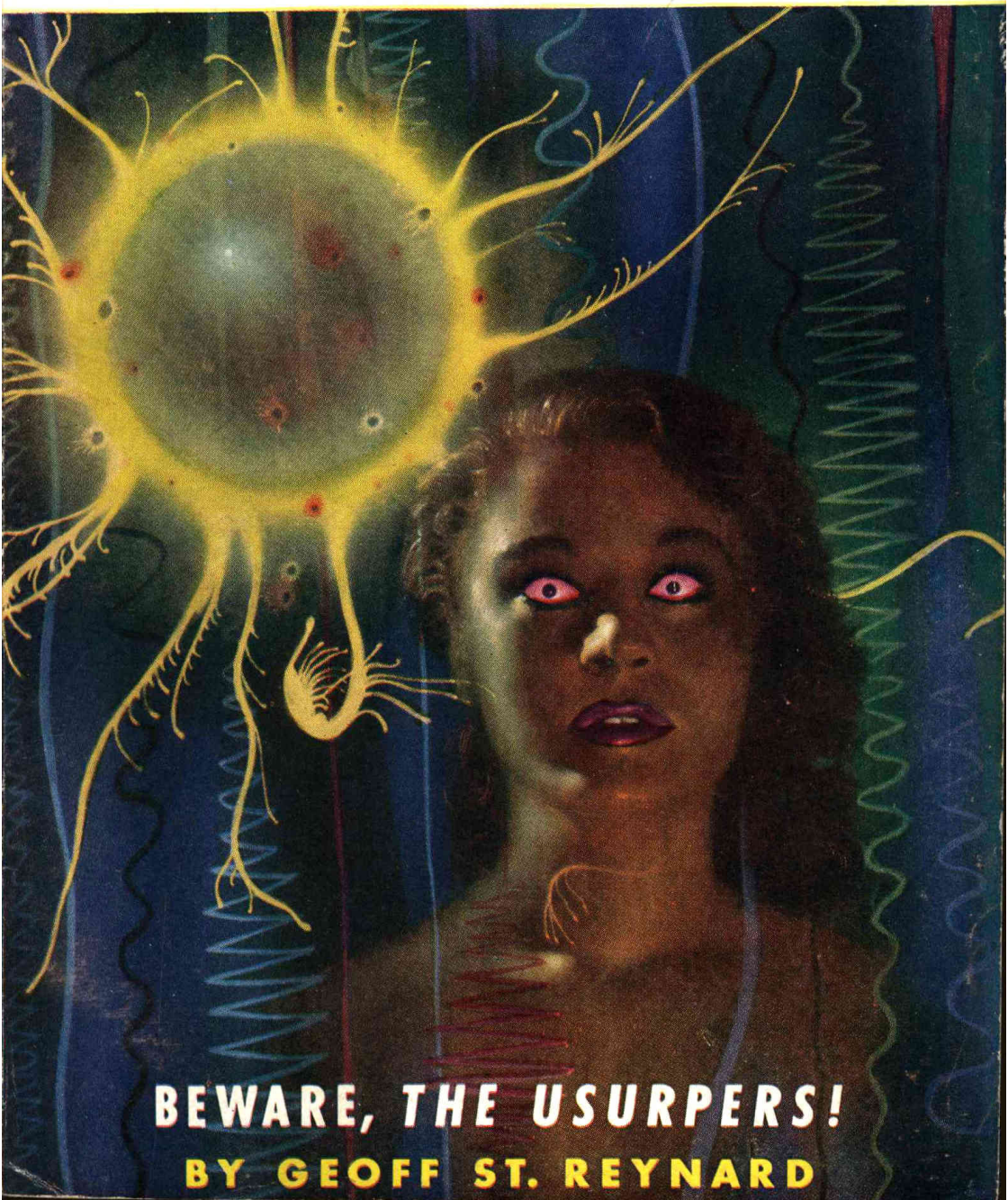
ANC

IMAGINATION

NOVEMBER 1951

35c

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY



BEWARE, THE USURPERS!

BY GEOFF ST. REYNARD

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Playmate

Date of first publication: 1951

Author: Leslie A. Croutch (1915-1969)

Date first posted: Feb. 26, 2022

Date last updated: Feb. 26, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220272

This eBook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Greg Weeks, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

PLAYMATE

By Leslie A. Croutch

Dickie was a swell playmate. But there was something unusual about him—like the way he needed oil sometimes—and pounded nails with his fists . . .

Published November 1951
in IMAGINATION: STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY
Greenland Publishing Company

I was in the kitchen hunting for matches to light my pipe when Bobby came bouncing through the door, letting the screen shut with a shattering bang. Without seeming to even pause in his rush he got out all in one long breath: “Hey, Mom, can I have Dickie for supper tonight?”

Betts paused at her task of trimming a pie before popping it in the oven.

“Who’s Dickie, dear?” she asked.

Bobby snuffled, slyly helping himself to a cookie. “He’s the new boy who moved in next door, Mom.”

“Is he a nice little boy?”

I snorted a bit to myself at this. I don’t cross Betts; it doesn’t complement the happiness and tranquility of a home to tell a woman how to raise your son. You just let ’em go their own way, and watch the offspring go his.

“Sure he’s a nice boy.” I sensed the disdain in his voice.

“What’s he like, son?” I asked.

“Oh—I dunno—he’s well, he’s jus’ diff’rent.”

We let it go at that. Betts would have carried the matter further, but, catching her eye, I shook my head. She desisted, smiling a little.

t was comfortable on the veranda. There was a little breeze blowing and I was sitting there, feet cocked up on the rail, half asleep. Betts came out and picked up a magazine. Only the slight sound of her flipping the pages disturbed the tranquility of a hot summer afternoon.

“Hey, Mom! Where’s the oil can?”

Our small son came tearing around the side of the house, yelling his request in that impatient tone all small boys seem to have some sort of a proprietary interest in. He mounted the steps and asked again before we had had a chance to answer.

“I think there’s one in the cupboard under the kitchen sink,” I supplied the information.

“Gotta be thin oil,” he stipulated.

I grinned. “Three-in-one there. That thin enough?”

He rumped his hair with a grimy hand. “I guess so. Dickie needs it.”

Betts smiled. “What does Dickie need it for, dear?” she asked.

“Don’t call me ‘dear’!” he scowled. “That’s baby talk.”

“I’m sorry.” She sounded hurt. “What do you need the oil for, Bobby?”

His voice came back to us as he vanished into the house.

“It’s for Dickie. *He squeaks!*”

I frowned about the garage. I’d got tired of sitting about, doing nothing, so I’d wandered down here to the combined garage and work shop, thinking maybe there might be something I could putter a little time away on.

It was pretty messy. Various items that collect about any home, no matter how well managed, had collected in a hodgepodge that was without rhyme or reason. I thought I might tidy up a little.

I was well into things, shirt sleeves rolled up, when I heard voices. Unconsciously, as one will do when busy, I listened. It was Bobby, and apparently he had brought the other boy with him.

“Pop’s got a bench back here. We can fix you there, maybe,” I heard him say.

I grinned, thinking how funny the ungrammatical speech errors of small children are at times. I wondered, briefly, what might be broken that needed

fixing.

I had hung up a basket, and was bending down for a rake when a definite denial from the direction of the bench broke in on my wandering thoughts.

“Heck, no,” I heard this new voice exclaim. “Not that one. It’s too large.”

“No it ain’t,” Bobby’s voice replied.

“It is, too. It’ll stick way out and get in the way.”

“Pop uses bolts too long. He cuts ’em off and polishes the end.”

“Well—maybe—all right. Be careful though. I won’t be able to pick anything up if it isn’t just right.”

Then I heard the various tiny clickings denoting tools in use, to be followed by the thin rasp of a hacksaw.

Not believing in interfering with the activities of boys at play, I went on with my work, and quickly forgot the incident.

The roast certainly smelled good. But then, Betts is a wonderful cook. She teases me sometimes about that being the only reason I married her.

I helped her bring it in: she carried the platter, and I carried the carving utensils.

“Where’s Bobby?” she asked, setting it down.

“Oh, somewhere about. Down in the basement, I think.”

“Will you call him, dear?”

I did this and I could hear his footsteps and those of his new friend, clattering up the stairs. The faucet went on splatteringly.

“Get another towel, Bobby,” Betts called.

“Phooey!” Bobby answered. “Only need one. Dickie doesn’t wash!”

I almost laughed at the horrified look on my wife’s face. I turned to the window, thrusting hands into pockets. Cleanliness is almost a fetish with her and I knew how Bobby’s remark must have needled her. She marched, that is the only word, toward the kitchen.

“Oh dear,” I heard, a second later.

When I turned, she was standing behind her chair at the table, a funny look on her face. It wasn't a frightened one. It was sort of, well, amazed, dumbfounded, perhaps. I couldn't place it, and I can't yet when I think back. She looked at me, and gave the queerest little shrug, helpless like.

Then Bobby and his friend came in.

We all sat down and I had carved the roast and was passing the plates around before I got a chance to look at the new boy closely. I'd thought there was something a little out of the ordinary about him when he had come in. His walk had been rather stiff, as though his knees wouldn't bend properly.

When I saw his face I was astounded. Never had I seen one like it before.

It had human lines, yes. The texture of the skin, if skin it was, appeared normal, outside of a certain hard appearance, a harshness, that was altogether alien. That is the only term I can use—alien. The mouth opened, but it wasn't pliable like a human mouth. It was supposed to be that, I know, but it still was something else.

I watched him as we ate. He drank his milk as Bobby did, only differently. That is, he didn't seem to swallow it, he just appeared to pour it down. He'd place the glass to his lips, tip it, and the fluid would pour down, steadily, quickly, and the whole glassful would disappear in one smooth flow, without halt or apparent discomfort.

Exactly as though he didn't have to swallow, but just poured it straight down, I thought to myself. As though he had no gullet!

And the way he ate. This was something even stranger. He didn't place the food in his mouth and chew it, with pauses now and then. He fed himself like an automaton. Each piece was cut from the meat, each forkful of potatoes, each bite of bread, was an evenly spaced motion as though controlled by a mechanism. Each portion was of the same size. And this went on until his plate was empty, without the slightest sign of hesitation, except to take another glass of milk, which was poured down the same way as the first.

He didn't chew his food, either, as far as I could see. I know it must sound as though I am a very imperfect host, to watch a guest in such a fashion. But I think that if you were in the same position, you would have done the same. As I have said, he didn't appear to chew his food. His

mouth would open, receive the portion brought up by his fork, close—and that was all. Absolutely no motion of working jaws; no sign of swallowing.

When the main courses were finished, we had ice cream, a favorite of Bobby's. This is something I have to eat with some circumspection, as it bothers my teeth at times. Betts can eat it without a thought in the world. But she still doesn't take it the way Dickie did. He shovelled it in the way I'd stoke my furnace on a cold night. I could picture the inside of his mouth becoming iced up and needing some sort of defrosting. But it didn't seem to bother him a bit. He held out his plate for a second helping, which went the same way as its predecessor.

Finally the meal was over. Bobby, as is his wont, was impatient to get away. His friend seemed just as eager. As they left the room I again noted the stiff, rather awkward, yet albeit, somehow graceful, stride of his.

I looked at Betts. She was staring at me with eyes big and round.

“What's the matter, dear?” I asked.

“That boy, Al. He isn't normal.”

That was an understatement, I told her.

“Oh, I know what you mean. The way he eats. But that isn't all.”

I lifted my eyebrows.

“When I went to the kitchen to see about him not washing, what do you think I saw?”

I stuffed my pipe and eyed the bowl appreciatively.

“I saw him oiling himself!”

I lit up. The pipe drew swell. After a full meal, the good rich tobacco tasted wonderful.

“Al, did you hear me? I said he was oiling himself!”

“Oh sure, he was oiling himself. What's wrong with that?”

I got up, pushing the chair back with a muted rasp. I stretched. Feeling like a short siesta, I started for the front porch. Then it was that the intelligence of her words struck me. I did a quick double-take.

“He was doing—WHAT?”

She smiled, smugly. “Oiling himself, Al.”

I leaned on the table. “Easy now, Betts, old girl. Easy now. Maybe you ate too much—maybe the heat—”

“Heat nothing. He was leaning against the table and he had a can of oil and he was squirting it in his hands and rubbing it on his neck and wrists.”

I sat down. Looking at her, I wondered.

“No, I’m not crazy,” she said. “And I’m not cracking up. I’m just telling you what I saw.”

I thought it over. I was pretty sure she was mistaken. She had seen something, but to her it had looked entirely different. Betts is a highly imaginative person, what with reading those science fiction magazines and stuff. But I looked at her closely, as it still didn’t sound like her.

I rose. “C’mon. We’ll look up Dickie and get to the bottom of this.”

They were building something in the back yard. It looked like a house, or maybe it was supposed to be a boat. They had two or three old piano crates, and with some scrap lumber from the loft over the garage, were nailing it all together.

Bobby was busily banging away with a hammer. I imagined the nails he was using, with his habit of using ten where one or two would do. I could hear his friend hammering away on the other side, out of sight.

“How ya doin’, Dickie?” Bobby yelled as we came up.

“Fine,” Dickie replied.

“Ya usin’ the hammer?”

“Nope. Do it faster without.”

“Don’t it hurt your hand?”

“Naw!”

“I wisht I could drive nails with my hand.”

“It’s easy. Ya just double up your fist and give the nail a whack on the head—”

We didn’t hear the rest. We moved around the packing cases and stared.

Dickie was standing there, nails sticking out of his mouth. He’d take one in his left hand, hold it to the wood, and bang! bring his fist down on it and drive it home. No hammer—no nothing. Just his bare hand, doubled into a

fist, and he was driving those nails home with the regularity of a slow trip-hammer.

Betts, fainting, knocked the pipe from my mouth. I carried her into the house and started fussing over her.

After she had recovered, we held a consultation. Then we went over to our new neighbor and rapped on the door. When it opened we faced, not some strange creature, as I think we half expected, but a perfectly normal woman, somewhat harassed looking, wiping her hands on a flowered apron.

“I’m Al Hason,” I introduced myself. “We live next door—”

“Oh!” She seemed to be expecting us, by the look on her face. “Please come in.”

She ushered us into a nicely furnished parlor and called to someone named John. Her husband, I suspected.

“This is Mr. Robeson,” she introduced us. To her husband: “They live next door.”

He drew in his breath and lines of weariness grew about his mouth.

“We’ve been sort of expecting you,” he said, sitting down. “But not so soon.”

My eyebrows raised.

“I guess,” he patted his wife’s hand where it rested on his shoulder, “I guess you’ve met our son.”

“Yes,” Betts answered. “Our little boy had him at our place for supper.”

Mrs. Robeson sat down and started to wring her hands.

“Oh dear. So now you know! We have had to move so often—people just can’t understand.”

I started feeling uncomfortable. I ran my finger around inside my collar and wished we had left well enough alone.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Betts said. “But really, he seems such a nice boy. He is so quiet and well mannered. We—er—” she stumbled.

“Yes, I know just what you mean, Mrs. Hason.” Robeson rose to his feet, started pacing up and down the small room. “You can imagine what we feel like, living with him for almost seven years. We know even less about him than you do.”

“Perhaps a doctor—” I muttered and was sorry immediately. He heard me.

“A doctor?” He smiled slightly. “I had the same idea a long time ago. We took him to the best and found out nothing. After looking him over for a time, they wanted to put him on display before other men of science. They wanted to experiment on him. We couldn’t allow that. After all, he *is* our son.”

I agreed, mentally, and verbally.

“He was born to us in a normal way, as far as we know, and as far as the records show,” Mrs. Robeson took up. “He seems to grow but from what we were told, we cannot understand how. Nothing seems to hurt him. He never gets cut, or has slivers, or gets colds. He’s never been ill, and he eats anything he desires.”

Robeson laughed, somewhat bitterly, I thought. “Don’t forget the oil, my dear.”

She smiled. “Oh yes, the oil. I forgot—if he doesn’t oil himself quite frequently, especially during wet weather, he stiffens up so he can hardly move. He doesn’t require as much as he used to, though.”

“No, not since he started eating more fats and oily foods,” her husband added.

“What did the doctor say?” I asked.

“Oh, they used a lot of long words that meant nothing to us. What it all boiled down to, was that they didn’t know either. We were as much in the dark after leaving as we had been before.”

“But haven’t you any kind of an idea of what he might—er—be, or what might be the matter with him?”

He shook his head. “There is nothing wrong with him, Mr. Hason. He is just too perfect. Consider that he has never been ill. He never has a cold, or has any pains. He apparently can’t be easily hurt. He can’t be shocked, I know that. I’ve seen him do things around electricity that would kill an ordinary man. He doesn’t even seem to feel the juice. If he does, he doesn’t let on. He is strong. His flesh seems too hard to give. Why, I’ve seen him

drive nails with his fists. He is smart. He's a regular prodigy. So you tell me what is wrong with him!"

I didn't answer that. There wasn't any need. Any remark I might have made would have been superfluous to say the least.

"Did you ever try other doctors?" I suggested.

"No, and I'm not going to. And why? Because they'll be the same as the first. They wanted to x-ray him, stick needles in him, even operate on him. I don't want that. After all, queer as he might be, he *is* our son. We can never have any more children, so he's all we got, and by God man, for better or worse, I'm going to keep him!

"What will those men do? Put him on display like a freak, maybe. Take him all over for people to stare at. I won't have it. It wouldn't be fair to him. Maybe he is a genius. If he is they'll burn his brain out with questions and he'd be just another dumb guy like his old man. No sir, I'm going to give him his chance to grow up and then maybe he'll amount to something."

He stopped. Running his fingers through his hair, he suddenly smiled.

"I'm sorry. Guess you think I'm a little nuts. But we've had to move a lot of times just because people got nosy and started saying things. It gets under a man's skin after awhile."

I figured it was time we were leaving and I suggested it to Betts, tactfully.

"Don't worry about it," I said as I shook hands with him at the door. "We won't say anything. We have a son, too, you know, so we understand. Our boy seems to like him, and that's enough for us."

That night, before retiring, Betts and I went in to say goodnight to Bobby, as was our rule. He was sitting up, looking out of the window at the moon, which, big and silvery, was just coming up out of the east.

He turned as we entered.

"What are you thinking about, son?" I asked, mussing his hair. Kids have the funniest, and sometimes the most astute, philosophies, and I never tire of hearing them.

"I was just thinkin' 'bout Dickie, Pop."

"And what about Dickie?" Betts asked.

He looked at us, his eyes big, his face a little sad.

“I was thinkin’ how Dickie was so lucky. He can’t ever get hurt, or be sick, ’n’ he told me today he won’t die for hunnerds ’n’ hunnerds of years ’cause he’s not like us. He’s got no tonsils to get sore and have to be cut out, ’n’ his teeth won’t ever get bad, ’n’ he knows millions and millions of things I don’t know. Oh, he’s awful lucky ’n’ awful smart, Pop. I wisht I was like him.”

I looked at Betts.

“What is he like, Bobby?” I asked him.

He looked thoughtful. “I guess I can tell you,” he said. “He asked me not to tell people but I guess it’s all right to tell you ’n’ Mom. It *is* all right, ain’t it, Pop?”

“If you think it is, son,” I said. “If you say it’s all right, then it’s all right.”

He thought this over. His fingers picked at the bed clothes. Finally he sighed.

“Well,” he began, “Dickie hasn’t got insides like us, Pop. He’s diff’rent. He says he’s got wires ’n’ glass things ’n’—’n’ water only it ain’t water—’n’ it’s all kinds of colors ’stead of blood. He don’t have to eat but he says he likes to ’cause he likes the taste of things.”

I felt Betts’ hand close over mine and grip tight. Was this another childish game, another bit of make-believe?

“Dickie says he can tell only some kinds of kids ’bout him, ’cause he says mos’ kids are like grown ups: they won’t believe, ’n’ they would only think he was crazy ’n’ try to shut him up. But he says some kids are diff’rent ’n’ those he can tell. He says when they grow up they will be his friends ’n’ then he won’t be alone ’n’ he can do things for people with their help.”

“Are there others like—well, like Dickie?” I heard Betts ask.

“Oh yes. Dickie says there are lots more. He says he knows ten right in this city.”

“How did he meet them?” I asked.

“He didn’t meet them!” was the somewhat surprising response. “Dickie doesn’t have to meet them. He says he jus’ thinks—’n’ one of them thinks back at him ’n’ they talk—inside here,” he touched his foreheads. “He says when he gets bigger ’n’ stronger he can think longer ’n’ meet more like him.

But he says he knows there are lots more like him 'cause sometimes he dreams 'bout them.”

He lay down. Facing the moon, he said, “I wish I was like Dickie, 'cause then I could do all kinds of wonderful things. Dickie says when he gets big he will rule the world 'n' he 'n' his people will not let there be any more war or let people kill each other or be bad. Gee, pop, why can't I be like him?”

His eyes closed. We waited for a few moments, then left the room and closed the door softly behind us.

In the hall we stood silently, looking at each other.

“What do you think, Al?” Betts asked.

“I don't know, Betts. If it's all made up then the answer is simple. If he's right, then, somewhere, a new race is springing up. What is creating it I don't know, and whether it is good or bad is equally uncertain.”

She sighed. “I prefer to think it's just a game he is playing.”

. . . But as I lay in bed that night I wondered. And in the many nights since then I've begun to worry. It's not that I'm afraid, or maybe I am. I don't know. It's the uncertainty. The dread of something you cannot understand—something you know you are powerless to stop.

You see, the neighbor boy continues to play with Bobby. And just the other day I saw them by the garage. They were building something. And Bobby was pounding the nails in with his fist . . .

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Publishing information has been added to title page.

[The end of *Playmate* by Leslie A. Crutch]