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# **Schizophrenic**

**By NOEL LOOMIS**

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Tommie Bassford was concerned over the steady frown on his father's forehead and a little bit hurt because his father hadn't noticed him for at least an hour. At the age of three, Tommie didn't understand a lot of things, although sometimes he felt them very keenly. Sometimes a person's unpleasant mood would be more painful to him than a spanking — well, that is to say, an ordinary spanking.

He had heard his father say only last night, "It's a chance to make a million—if I can trust him. And it won't take but a month," he had said wistfully. "We could move up to the mountains or down to the seashore. You wouldn't have to worry about Tommie getting picked on by the big boys next door, and you wouldn't have to quit playing bridge to come home when you lose your five dollars." His father had looked at mother fondly. Then he had sobered. "The only thing is—if Pickens isn't on the level, then we can lose what little business we have, just as fast."

Tommie thought maybe he could help his father. He gathered up his whole sun-energy set from the center of the big front window where he liked best to play. He pulled it across the floor in quantum jerks, moving backward in a sitting position, pushing himself by digging his heels into the floor and then straightening his legs. That way he could make it all in one trip, hugging the sun-energy set to his stomach until he jammed his back against his father's chair.

He was disappointed that his father did not look down at him and perhaps pat him on the head. It was most unusual. But Tommie set up his blocks and then pressed the button and

watched the reactions start all over again. He watched carbon 12 go into nitrogen and then into oxygen and then into nitrogen 15. Up to that point it went very well, but when those four hydrogen nuclei, represented by four glowing green balls, were supposed to combine into one helium nucleus, something went wrong. They didn't combine right. They smacked into each other with a violent report and disappeared.

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At this moment Tommie's father came to life with a startled jump. He said a word that Tommie, at his age, had never yet dared to say except to himself, because even though he was a prodigy, his mother didn't allow him to say da—he caught it just in time.

Tommie was glad, anyway, that his father had quit staring at the paper. Tommie stood up to receive the gentle pat on the head that he usually got from his father's big hand, but as he turned around, astonishingly enough, his father smacked him on the seat, and, through his red linen shorts, it stung.

“Will you please take those confounded atom blocks and your one-seventy I.Q. into the back yard or somewhere, so a man can have some peace?” His father tried to sound exasperated, but Tommie didn't think he really meant it.

But Tommie got on his knees and gathered the whole set to his stomach and hoped there wasn't any dirt on them to get on his white waist. Then he went out, very disappointed and even a little hurt—in fact, his eyes felt a little watery—

because he thought if dad would tell him what was the trouble, he could help dad figure out something.

Mother was showing talky Mrs. Jones the new disintichute that disposed of everything that was waste — soiled clothes, dirty dishes, used silverware. Tommie wondered why they called it silver. Certainly there wasn't any silver in it, as everything was plastic now. Everything, that is, but very special things, like his red linen pants.

Mother smiled at him vaguely, and Mrs. Jones smiled too, but Mrs. Jones had a sharp, searching look in her eyes that made it seem as if she was trying to find something wrong so she could punish him. Tommie didn't care for her. She wouldn't have any right to send him into scrub his hands again.

“Come here, Tommie,” she said in a high cooing voice, and made a move for him. But Tommie felt a strange, almost violent repugnance toward her. He backed away and went sideward toward the kitchen door. It opened, and he lifted his feet high to get over the sill and very nearly lost his balance doing so.

That annoyed him, too. Being a prodigy was all right if one had a body to go with it. When a boy had a ten-year-old mind it was irritating to have a three-year-old body as clumsy as the body of a baby.

He lost an orange-colored electron just outside of the door, but he let it lie there for a moment. Mrs. Jones was too close to the door. Maybe Mrs. Jones would go back into the front room where dad was worrying so much. Secretly Tommie

chuckled. Dad didn't like Mrs. Jones any more than Tommie did. He'd send her home in a hurry.

Tommie set up his blocks and got some spare nuclei out of the box and started the reaction going again. It puzzled him a lot, why the hydrogen nuclei didn't combine properly. There must have been some unusual influence somewhere. In the two days he had had it, he hadn't been able to complete the carbon cycle once.

Bennie, next door, had a set, and when Bennie tried it, it always worked fine. Bennie never had lost a nucleus by explosion. Maybe there was something wrong with Tommie's set. He'd get Bennie to try it—and maybe Bennie would let Tommie try his set.

Tommie sat there in the white sand, watching the interlaced orange-glowing orbits of the electrons and the broad green paths of the hydrogen nuclei. The sun was warm on Tommie's back and the Baltimore orioles were singing in the elm tree almost over his head. Across the high electronic fence he could hear the bigger boys playing ball in Bennie's yard.

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Suddenly the four hydrogen nuclei, flashing at half light-speed in their four orbits, went together and disappeared in the usual green flash and with the customary loud report. Tommie was thankful the explosion didn't sound as loud out in the yard as it had in the front room under dad's chair, although secretly Tommie liked it better in the house because of that very fact.

The only thing was that dad wasn't in a very good mood today.

Tommie watched the orioles sweeping around the tree-top, and the papa oriole's orange plumage, flashing in the sunlight, reminded him of the orbit of an electron. Then he remembered that he had dropped an electron just outside the kitchen door.

He got up laboriously—he was so solid his legs had a hard time holding him up, sometimes. He went to the door and leaned over to pick up the electron. He heard the swish of the door as it opened and then the high cooing of Mrs. Jones' voice as she bore down on him.

“Oh, that dear little boy, I simply must squeeze him.”

Tommie stood up suddenly, so suddenly he lost his balance and sat down on the grass. Mrs. Jones reached for him, and that strange feeling of repugnance he had for her grew so powerful that it almost smothered him. He squirmed to get away from her, but he was trapped. She touched him, and his body quit squirming because mother wouldn't like it, but in his mind he writhed. It almost seemed that he could tear himself away from his body.

Then he did! Just how he didn't know, but suddenly he was standing a couple of feet to one side, watching Mrs. Jones holding the arms of his first body. He looked down at himself. Yes, he was in a body, too, and he was wearing red linen pants. This body didn't seem quite as solid as his first, but solid enough. He looked up at Mrs. Jones triumphantly.

He was surprised to see her drawing back with her mouth open like the hole in the disintichute. Her eyes were sticking



out and her eyebrows were almost up to her hair.

“Oh! He-he split!” she shrieked. “He-he’s got two bodies!”

Tommie was very amused at her antics. He looked over and smiled at his mother but she too was staring at him with something like horror.

Then Mrs. Jones did something Tommie couldn’t understand. She went to his mother and put her arms around her and cried and said, “Oh, my dear, I’m so sorry for you. I didn’t know you had this burden. All of us have our crosses to bear—the atomic age has left such dreadful marks on civilization—but, oh my dear!” She let out a hearty bawl, and Tommie quit being amused and began to be very disgusted. She looked at him from under one arm, half afraid, he thought, and then she turned back to Tommie’s mother. “My dear! A schizo—schizo—”

“Schizophrenic,” said Tommie Number One helpfully.

“Split personality,” Mrs. Jones sputtered. “But physically! Oh, my da—”

Tommie’s mother was disengaging herself. “Why don’t you go home and make yourself a nice cup of hot tea, with maybe just a touch of—” She hesitated.

“Arsenic,” Tommie thought promptly. He became one little boy again.

“Ar—” She caught herself and looked at Tommie, horrified. “Just a touch of brandy,” she said.

Mrs. Jones looked bewildered. Oh, this was fun, thought Tommie. He’d known for some time that he could mentally suggest things for his parents to say, but he’d never tried it so

openly before. He knew one thing, though. He'd better be plenty careful with this power, or he'd get walloped. In fact as he thought about it, he didn't feel too sure about the arsenic deal.

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Mrs. Jones retired in confusion, and Tommie went back to the sun-energy set. But when his father and mother were both outside, and mother was saying as if she were shocked, "Yes, he definitely split in two. I saw him with my own eyes."

His father looked serious—then he chuckled. "No doubt you would have done the same thing, if you could have. But I wonder why." He took Tommie's arm, somewhat gingerly. "Hm." He took the other arm. "He doesn't do it when we touch him. It must be her repellent personality, or some phase of it. Insincerity, do you suppose?"

Tommie himself guessed that was it. Mrs. Jones never said what she meant, and never meant what she said. That was what made Tommie writhe.

His mother and father talked it over, and in the end they didn't seem too worried about him. "We'll see," said his father, "what develops." Then his father began to walk around the yard, stretching and sunning like an orange oriole. He finally sat down in the lawn-chair, and Tommie's mother sat beside him, and that worried look came back on his father's face.

"I wish I knew what to say," he murmured absently. "It might be the chance of a lifetime. The man claims he's got a tube

that will make it possible to send television around the earth. It's worth a lot of millions if it works."

"Can't you test it?"

Dad shook his head. "It would take twenty-five thousand to test it. We'd need a lot of equipment. And you can't take it to any of the big manufacturers, because you'd lose it fast if they discovered it would work. That's where the gamble comes in. I'd have to back it, sight unseen."

"There are lots of gyp artists going around," his mother suggested.

"Yes, but darn it, Gwynne, once in a while there's the real thing drops in your lap, too. Remember Clarence Fisher? He ran into the same kind of deal—a naive fellow from the country somewhere, had a new idea for automatic heat control in an electric circuit that did away with contacts. Something brand new. Clarence took a chance, and look at him now. Winters in Florida, summers in Acapulco. No worries about anything. Gosh!"

Tommie thought he'd rather live in the mountains, where he could smell the pine-trees.

"Can't you check up on Mr. Franklin?"

"I've checked. Not really much background. Claims he's been roaming a lot. Could be, too. The whole deal is, I guess, we've got a good little business making ordinary television tubes, and it's a question whether we want to be sure of a decent living or take a chance on a fortune."

"Maybe it's better to be safe," said Tommie's mother.

"Well—"

Tommie had never seen dad squirm before, but certainly he was squirming now—mentally, that is. Tommie felt sorry for him, but he went ahead making a solar system in the sand, because he wanted to hear more. He felt sure he could help dad if he could find out more about it.

“The worst of it is,” his dad went on, “if our competitor should get hold of a tube like this, it might even put us out of business.”

His mother sighed. “It’s a problem,” she remarked sadly.

“It sure as h—it sure is. It all adds up to this: I have nothing against him, although he’s not very solid from a standpoint of background. It could be the real thing. Clarence Fisher’s was. Maybe I’m just too conservative—too scared.”

“You’ve checked his blueprints?”

“Yes, and I can’t find anything wrong. It looks sound. That’s the worst of it.”

“When do you have to let him know?”

“He’s coming here at eight o’clock tonight.”

Tommie’s mother got up from the grass. “Do what you think best, Howard.” She went inside.

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Little Tommie was glad the man was coming at eight o’clock, so he could be in on it. He didn’t have to go to bed until eight-thirty, and maybe if they got interested he could get by until nine o’clock, by keeping quiet.

He got up and went to his dad's chair, but dad didn't notice him. Dad got up and followed his mother into the house. Tommie went back to gather up his toys. It would soon be time for the sun to go down, anyway.

He got the sun-energy set in his arms, and then he had an idea. He went through the back and over to Bennie's. Bennie was four.

"Will you try my set and let me try yours?" asked Tommie.

Bennie looked down from his half a head of tallness. "I guess so."

They traded. Bennie started up the cycle in Tommie's set. When he was halfway through, Tommie sat down and started Bennie's set. But he watched as the four hydrogen nuclei of his own set went together and formed a glowing blue helium nucleus.

Then he watched Bennie's set between his chubby legs. Presently the hydrogen nuclei, swirling in their orbits, ran together—and there was a flash of green light and an explosion. The four nuclei disappeared.

Tommie felt bad. Bennie was indignant. "What's the big idea—making them explode?" he demanded.

Tommie didn't understand.

"You must have some kind of electricity in you," said Bennie, "that makes 'em explode."

Tommie thought about that. Yes, there must be something about him. Maybe the same strange force that enabled him to suggest words to his mother and that had made it possible

this afternoon for him to split—maybe that did something to the delicately balanced nuclei.

“Look,” said Tommie. “I owe you four hydrogens, but I can’t pay now, because then I won’t have any left. I’ll pay you tomorrow. Is that okay?”

Bennie was dubious at first, but he thought about it and decided that would be all right. Tommie went back home with plenty to think about—so much, in fact, that through dinner he was quite silent as his father and mother worried about Mr. Franklin and his new television tube.

Mr. Franklin came promptly at eight, and they all went into the front room as soon as mother threw the dishes down the chute. Then they had coffee, and Tommie began to worry. Nobody said anything about business for a long time.

Tommie went and got his sun-energy set and settled himself under the arm of his dad’s chair. Then he looked up expectantly for a pat on the head, but instead of that his father was staring at him. Tommie remembered how the hydrogen nuclei had misbehaved, so he got to his feet again and went for his chlorophyll kit. He set that up and turned on the little artificial sun and then just watched. It was fun to see the sunlight soak into the green liquid in the test tubes, and come out at the bottom as bubbles of carbon dioxide. It was quiet, too.

“So you think,” his father was saying, “that we should have fifty thousand to start with.”

“We should have about twenty-five cash, and twenty-five in reserve,” Mr. Franklin said. He was a very handsome man.

“How long will it take us to get into production?”

“That all depends on you,” said Mr. Franklin. “The only thing we have to worry about is getting the germanium. That stuff is scarce, but I think if we take the cash, I know where we can lay hands on a couple of hundred pounds. It will take about ten thousand to swing that end of the deal.”

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Just about then Tommie felt his father was beginning to squirm. “What do you think?” he asked Tommie’s mother.

She shook her head. “You’re the business man, Howard. That is for you to decide.”

Mr. Franklin laughed pleasantly, “That is a very wise observation, madam. Too many women try to run their husbands’ affairs. I say you are very wise.”

But Tommie felt something else. His mother was troubled, too. Tommie slowed the chlorophyll cycle so he could watch the light reflect from the nitrogen molecules at the bottom. He wondered why his mother was troubled. Tommie frowned.

Then Mr. Franklin took some papers from his inside coat pocket. “I have the contract, the way your attorney approved it,” he said casually. “We might as well get that part of it settled. You don’t need to put up any money till tomorrow.” He laughed, and Tommie’s ears pricked up. That laugh sounded strange. “I’ll take you on faith,” Mr. Franklin said, and handed the papers to his father.

Mr. Bassford frowned and began to read. Tommie got up and stood against one knee. There were a lot of typewritten

pages, mostly with 'whereases' and 'parties of the second part.' Tommie squeezed close, looking at Mr. Franklin, but his father didn't put his arms around him. "Go away, Tommie. Go play," he said.

Tommie was hurt. He stared at Mr. Franklin and he was puzzled at the strange look in Mr. Franklin's eyes as Mr. Franklin stared at him.

Presently Tommie's father looked up. "I guess that's it," he said.

Mr. Franklin was already handing him a pen. It was one of those new eternity pens with a built-in radiant light. Tommie edged closer. His father took it. He laid the papers on the writing-arm of the chair and poised the pen for an instant, made a flourish in the air, and started to write.

Tommie was bending over to watch the little light. His dad stared at him in that contemplative way and said, "You're jiggling me, Tommie. Why don't you go over and sit on Mr. Franklin's lap while I sign the papers?" Tommie didn't want to sit on Mr. Franklin's lap, but from the look in his dad's eyes he knew it was a command. He turned around.

Mr. Franklin was reaching for him. "Here, little man, come here to me," he said. "I'll hold you while your father signs the paper that will make us all millionaires." He reached out to pat Tommie on the head.

Tommie wasn't very clear as to what a millionaire was, but he knew one thing—he didn't want Mr. Franklin patting him on the head. He squirmed away, toward his dad. Mr. Franklin reached for him surprisingly fast. In fact, his movement was so quick you could hardly see it. Tommie dodged again, and



this time he was in a little panic. He felt that same repugnance he had felt for Mrs. Jones. He didn't want Mr. Franklin to touch him.

But Mr. Franklin got him by the arm. He held hard, and it hurt, while Mr. Franklin was smiling with a sort of stiff mouth. "Now, now, come and sit on my lap, little man."

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Tommie tried to twist away. Mr. Franklin held hard. Tommie squirmed. He couldn't get loose from Mr. Franklin's grip. He squirmed harder. He broke free. That is, he projected himself to one side and looked at Mr. Franklin holding what was really his shell.

[Illustration: The boy looked at Mr. Franklin, who was holding what was really his shell.]

Mr. Franklin was startled, but he didn't hesitate. "Oh, a schizo," he said, and something came into his face that was frightening. He snatched at Tommie's second self with one arm. He caught Tommie by the belt on his red linen pants and pulled the second one toward him.

Tommie split again. Now he stood off to one side and watched, a little fearfully. Mr. Franklin was getting pretty angry. But Tommie's father spoke up. "Why not just let him go?" he said, and the way he said it, it was a command that he expected to be obeyed. Mr. Franklin looked up and slowly turned Tommie loose. Tommie straightened his belt and his three selves went back together.

His father was handing the papers back to Mr. Franklin. “I’ve changed my mind,” he said. “I’ll take a chance on being a small business man.”

It was rather unpleasant for a few minutes, but Mr. Franklin left, with his papers in his pocket.

Tommie’s father was sitting back in the big chair with a half smile on his face. “So a phony makes Tommie split, eh.” He chuckled. “Tommie’s right. Not that I would blame any man for not particularly caring for children. That’s a man’s privilege. But I didn’t like that ugly gleam in Franklin’s eyes when he thought Tommie was going to interfere.”

Tommie was pretty much unstrung. He sat down under the arm of his father’s chair and pressed the button that started the carbon cycle.

“I’m glad we found out in time, Howard,” said his mother. “But what about Tommie?” She sounded worried. “Do you think—”

“It’s probably nothing serious, and probably nothing that we can do anything about. If he wants to split when un-nice people come around, that’s his business. Anyway, he’ll probably outgrow it in a few years. Most of them do.”

Tommie watched the four hydrogen nuclei go together, and instinctively he drew back for the explosion. But there wasn’t any. The four went together into the blue ball that meant a helium nucleus. Tommie clapped his hands. They had worked right this time. Maybe his body energy had been drained by the double split until it didn’t affect them any more.

Tommie's mother looked at him softly. Tommie looked back softly. Then he sidled up against his father's leg. His father reached down and caught him around the chest and squeezed him hard.

It made Tommie very happy. "Dad," he said, "what's a phony?"

[The end of *Schizophrenic* by Noel Loomis]