

Author! Author!

JEROME BIXBY Better known as an editor than a writer, Jerome Bixby is remembered for his yeoman work in raising the standards of the science fiction adventure story. His stories, though few, are much sought after by discriminating editors, since they first started to appear in 1949.

SCIENCE FICTION

STORIES

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The main trouble is that you'd never suspect anything was wrong; you'd enjoy associating with slizzers, so long as you didn't know...

The Slizzers

by JEROME BIXBY



THEY'RE all around us. I'll call them the *slizzers*, because they *sliz* people. Lord only knows how long they've been on Earth, and how many of them there are

They're all around us, living with us. We are hardly ever aware of their existence, because they can *make* themselves look like us, and do most of the time; and if they can look like us, there's really no need for them to think like us, is there? People think and behave in so many cockeyed ways, anyhow. Whenever a *slizzer* fumbles a little in his impersonation of a human being, and comes up with a puzzling response, I suppose we just shrug and think. *He could use a good psychiatrist.*

So you might be one. Or your best friend, or your wife or husband, or that nice lady next door.

They aren't killers, or rampaging monsters; quite the contrary. They need us, something like the way we'd need maple trees if it came to the point where maple syrup was our only food. That's why we're in no comic-book danger of being destroyed, any more than maple trees

would be, in the circumstances I just mentioned — or are, as things go. In a sense, we're rather well-treated and helped along a bit . . . the way we care for maple trees.

But, sometimes a man here and there will be careless, or ignorant, or greedy . . . and a maple tree will be hurt . . .

Think about that the next time someone is real nice to you. He may be a *slizzer* . . . and a careless one . . .

How long do we live?

Right. About sixty, seventy years.

You probably don't think much about that, because that's just the way things are. That's life. And what the hell, the doctors are increasing our lifespan every day with new drugs and things, aren't they?

Sure.

But perhaps we'd live to be about a *thousand*, if the *slizzers* left us alone.

Ever stop to think how little we know about why we live? . . . what it is that takes our structure of bones and coldcuts and gives it the function we call "life?"

Some mysterious life-substance or force the doctors haven't pinned down yet, you say — and that's as good a definition as any.

Well, we're maple trees to the *slizzers*, and that life-stuff is the sap we supply them. They do it mostly when we're feeling good — feeling really terrific. It's easier to tap us that way, and there's more to be had. (Maybe that's what makes so-called manic-depressives . . . they attract *slizzers* when they feel tip-top; the *slizzers* feed; and floo-o-m . . . depressive.)

Like I say, think about all this next time someone treats you just ginger-peachy, and makes you feel all warm inside.

So see how long that feeling lasts . . . and who is hanging around you at the time. Experiment. See if it doesn't happen again and again with the same people, and if you don't usually end up wondering where in hell your nice warm feeling went off to . . .

I FOUND out about the *slizzers* when I went up to Joe Arnold's apartment last Friday night.

Joe opened the door and let me in. He flashed me his big junior-exec's grin and said, "Sit, Jerry. I'll mix you a gin and. The others'll be along in awhile and we can get the action started."

I sat down in my usual chair. Joe had already fixed up the table . . . green felt top, ashtrays, coasters, cards, chips. I said, "If Mel — that's his

name, isn't it, the new guy? — if he starts calling wild games again when it comes his deal, I'll walk out. I don't like 'em." I looked at the drink Joe was mixing. "More gin."

Joe crimped half a lime into the glass. "He won't call any crazy stuff tonight. I told him that if he did, we wouldn't invite him back. He nearly ruined the whole session, didn't he?"

I nodded and took the drink. Joe mixes them right — just the way I like them. They make me feel good inside. "How about a little blackjack while we're waiting?"

"Sure. They're late, anyway."

I got first ace, and dealt. We traded a few chips back and forth — nothing exciting — and on the ninth deal Joe got blackjack.

He shuffled, buried a trey, and gave me an ace-down, duck-up.

"Hit me," I said contentedly.

Joe gave me another ace.

"Mama! . . . hit me again."

A four.

"Son," I told him, "you're in for a royal beating. Again."

A deuce.

Joe winced.

I turned up my hole ace and said, "Give me a sixth, you poor son. I can't lose."

A nine.

"Nineteen in six," I crowed. I counted up my bets: five dollars. "You owe me fifteen bucks!"

Then I looked up at him.

I'll repeat myself. You know that hot flush of pure delight, of high triumph, even of mild avarice that possesses you from tingling scalp to tingling toe when you've pulled off a doozy? If you play cards, you've been there. If you don't play cards, just think back to the last time someone complimented the pants off you, or the last time you clinched a big deal, or the last time a sweet kid you'd been hot after said, "Yes."

That's the feeling I mean . . . the feeling I had.

And Joe Arnold was eating it.

I knew it, somehow, the moment I saw his eyes and hands. His eyes weren't Joe Arnold's blue eyes any longer. They were wet balls of shining black that took up half his face, and they looked hungry. His arms were straight out in front of him; his hands were splayed tensely about a foot from my face. The fingers were thinner and much longer than I could recall Joe's being, and they just looked like

antennae or electrodes or something, stretched wide-open that way and quivering, and I just *knew* that they were picking up and draining off into Joe's body all the elation, the excitement, the warmth that I felt.

I looked at him and wondered why I couldn't scream or move a muscle.

"Guess I made a boo-boo," he said. He blinked his big black globes of eyes. "No harm done, though."

His head had thinned down, just like his fingers, and now came to a peak on top.

He had practically no shoulders. He smiled at me, and I saw long black hair growing on the insides of his lips.

What are you? I screamed at him to myself.

Joe licked his hairy lips and folded those long inhuman hands in front of him.

"It hurts like hell," he said in a not-human voice, "to be *slizzing* you and then have you chill off on me that way, Jerry. But it's my own fault, I guess."

THE door-bell rang — two soft tones. Joe got up and let in the other members of our Friday night poker group. I tried to move and couldn't.

Fred raised his eyebrows when he saw Joe's face and hands. "Jerry isn't here yet? Relaxing a little?" Then he saw me sitting there and whistled. "Oh, you slipped up, eh?"

Joe nodded. "You were late, and I was hungry, so I thought I'd go ahead and take my share. I gave him a big kick, and he really poured it out . . . radiated like all hell. I took it in so fast that I *fluhped* and lost my plasmic control."

"We might as well eat now, then," Ray said, "before we get down to playing cards." He sat down across the table, his eyes — now suddenly enormous and black — eagerly on me. "I hate like hell waiting until you deal him a big pot —"

"No," Joe said sharply. "Too much at one time, and he'd wonder what hit him. We'll do it just like always . . . one of us at a time, and only a little at a time. Get him when he rakes in the loot. They never miss it when they feel like that."

"He's right," Fred said. "Take it easy, Ray." He went over to the sideboard and began mixing drinks.

Joe looked down at me with his black end-of-eggplant eyes.

"Now to fix things," he said.

... I blinked and shook my head. "You owe me fifteen bucks!" I said. "Lord," Joe wailed, "did this gonif just take me!"

Ray groaned sympathetically from the chair across the table, where he'd been watching the slaughter. "And how!"

Joe pushed fifteen blue chips at me. I began stacking them. "Well, that's life," I grinned. Then I shook my head again. "It's the damnedest thing . . ."

"What?" Fred asked. He'd been over at the sideboard mixing drinks for the gang while I'd taken Joe over the bumps. Now he brought the tray over and shoved a tall one into Joe's hand. "Don't cry, Joe. What's the damnedest thing, Jerry?"

"You know that funny feeling that you've been some place before — the same place, the same people, saying the same things — but you can't remember where the hell or when, for the life of you. Had it just a moment ago, when I told Joe he owed me fifteen bucks. What do they call it again?"

"*Deja vu*," said Allen, who's sort of the scholarly type. "Means 'seen before' in French, I think. Or something like that."

"That's right," I said. "*Deja vu* . . . it's the damnedest funniest feeling. I guess people have it all the time, don't they?"

"Yes," Allen said.

Then he paused. "People do."

"Wonder what causes it?"

Joe's blue eyes were twinkling. "Dunno. The psychologists have an explanation for it, but it's probably wrong."

"Wrong why?" Knowing Joe, I expected a gag. I got it.

"Well," Joe said. "Let me make up a theory. H'm . . . hoo, hah . . . well, it's like *this*: there are monsters all around us, see, but we don't know they're monsters except that every once in a while one of them slips up in his disguise and shows himself for what he really is. But this doesn't bother our monsters. They simply reach into our minds and twiddle around and — zoop! — you're right back where you were before the slip was —"

"Very funny," Fred said boredly. "Maybe losing fifteen bucks made you lose a little sense, Joe. You wouldn't want to lose more than fifteen bucks, would you? You need some caution in the games we play, no? So cut the nonsense and let's run 'em."

Ray licked his lips. "Yeah. Let's play, huh, fellows?"

Ray's always eager to get started.

WE PLAYED until 3 A.M. I won forty-six dollars. (I usually do win . . . I guess over a period of six months or so I'm about five-hundred bucks ahead of the game. Which is why I like to play over at Joe's, even though I am always so damned tired when I leave. Guess I'm not as young as I was.)

Sometimes I wonder why the odds go my way, right down the line. I almost never lose. But, hell, it *must* be an honest game . . . and if they're willing to go on losing to "Lucky" Bixby, I'm perfectly willing to go on winning.

After all, can you think of any reason that makes any sense for someone to rig a game week after week to let you win?

Frederik Boles, Author's Agent

Oct. 20

2200 Fifth Avenue

New York, N. Y.

Dear Fred,

Well, here's a new story. I've cleared it with Joe . . . he says it's okay to use his name; you know his sense of humor. I've used your name, too, but you can change it if you want to, being the shy retiring sort you are.

Frankly, I'm a little dubious about the yarn. It's the result of last Friday's poker-session . . . I actually did have the *deja vu* sensation, as you'll recall. On the way home I stopped in to pick up a chaser, feeling tired as all hell (like I always do — these long grinds are too much for me, I guess, just like the guy in the story) and the idea came to me to slap the old "we are fodder" angle into the thing as it happened and write it up.

But it's still an old plot. And one angle is left unexplained: how is the narrator able to know all about the *slizzers* and write about them after Joe gives him the *deja vu* treatment?

Well, maybe the readers won't mind. I've gotten away with bigger holes than that. Try it on Bob Lowndes . . . I still owe him on that advance. It's up his alley, hope-a-hope.

Jerry

Oct. 22, 1952

Jerome Bixby
862 Union Street
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Dear Jerry,

I don't go for "The Slizzers." It just ain't convincing. As you say, it's

an old idea . . . and besides — again as you say — how does the narrator know what happened?

The manuscript looks good in my wastebasket. Forget about it.
Sympathies.

Fred

Oct. 23, 1952

Frederik Boles, Author's Agent
2200 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y.

Dear Wet Blanket (and aren't you a little old for that?)

Respectfully nuts to you. After proper browbeating I think I'll try the yarn on Lowndes — it's no masterpiece, but I think it's got a chance; he likes an off trail bit, now and then. I made a carbon, natch, so your ditching of the original comes to naught.

Funny thing — every time I read it over I get the doggonedest *deja vu* feeling. Real dynamic thing — almost lifts my hair. Hope it does the same for the readers, them as can read. Maybe Joe didn't quite do the job of making me forget what happened that night, ha, ha. Say! — maybe that could explain the *narrator's* remembering what happened . . . or maybe — hey! A *real* idea!

Remember Joe's kidding us about monsters? — remember, you got a little sore because he was holding up the game, you money-hungry son? I think I'll rewrite the ending to include that! — which oughta take care of the narrator's remembering: Joe can be sort of a dopey *slizzer*, a blat-mouth, and his screwy theory (which is *true* in the story, or will be when I write it in — say, isn't this involved!) can trigger our hero's memory just a bit, shake the block a mite, undiddle the synapses. etc . . . and then I'll have you, platinum-butt, step in to head Joe off, under pretense of a poker itch.

You know, it's wonderful the way there are hot story ideas in plain old everyday things! S'long . . . gonna revise.

Jerry



Oct. 23, 1952

Mr. Robert W. Lowndes
COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, Inc.
241 Church Street,
New York 13, New York
MASTER,

Herewith a story, "The Slizzers," which Fred and I don't quite see eye to eye on. He thinks it stinks on ice. I'm sure you will disagree to the tune of nice money.

J.

ENCL: THE SLIZZERS

1952 OCT 24 AM 9 06

NB168 PD=NEW YORK NY 63 110B=
JEROME BIXBY=
862 UNION ST APT 6H=
BKLYN=
JERRY=

URGE STRONGLY THAT YOU DON'T TRY TO SELL SLIZZERS
STOP IT'S JUST NO DAMN GOOD STOP YOU'VE GOT YOUR
REPUTATION TO THINK OF STOP WHY LOUSE UP YOUR GOOD
NAME WITH A LEMON AT THIS LATE DATE STOP KILL IT
STOP I'VE TALKED IT OVER WITH JOE AND HE ISN'T FEEL-
ING HUMOROUS ANY MORE STOP PREFERS NOT TO HAVE
NAME USED STOP REPEAT KILL THE THING FOR YOUR
OWN GOOD=

FRED

1952 OCT 24 AM 11 14

KL300 PD=NEW YORK NY 12 604B=
JEROME BIXBY=
862 UNION ST APT 6H=
BKLYN=
SON=

LIKE SLIZZERS STOP PREPOSTEROUS BUT CUTE STOP DIS-
AGREE WITH FRED TO THE TUNE OF NICE MONEY BUT
NICE MONEY STAYS IN MY POCKET STOP YOU NOW OWE ME
ONLY FIFTY DOLLARS OF ADVANCE AUGUST 16 STOP DO I
HEAR A SCREAM POOR BOY=

BOB

Oct. 24, 1952

Frederik Boles, Author's Agent
2200 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y.

Dear Fred,

Your telegram came too late, and besides, the hell with it. Sent the yarn to Bob yesterday (groceries and rent wait for no man, you know) and he bought it, like the sensitive and discerning editor he is. What're you and Joe getting your tails in an uproar about? It's only a gag, so relax. Joe'll change his mind when he sees his name in print.

Would like to have included another angle, by the way: if the narrator's amnesia-job *had* been botched, wouldn't the *slizzers* decide pretty damn quick that he was a menace to them and get rid of him? Think I'll send Bob a line or two to stick on the end you know, the old incompleated sentence deal just as if, while the narrator was finishing the story, the *slizzers* came in and

