

Avram Davidson: Love Called This Thing

Nan Peter Baker Four This Is Nan Peter Baker How do You Receive Me Over and now a word from Our Sponsor interviewed in his office the Commissioner said but Ruth I can explain everything there is nothing to explain David it's all too obvious I'm Bert Peel Officer and this is my brother Harry a cold front coming down from Canada and we've got to get word to the Fort colon congestion is absolutely unnecessary in men and women over forty at any one of the ninety-one offices of the Clinton National Bank and Trust...

"Embarasse de richesse," the French count had said when he looked at all the pretty girls on the high school swim team, and explained what it meant in English. Penny wasn't really in love with him; she only thought she was, after pretending she was, to make David jealous, which she certainly did. But after the count gently explained to her, she and David made up just in time for the Spring From, which made the distant observer very happy.

At least he thought it did. "What is happy?" he often asked himself. Maybe just pretend. You never really loved me Rick it was just a pretense wasn't it? Like the distant observer thinking of himself as "him" when, really, he knew nowhad known longhe was only an "it." it's about time we faced up to reality, Alison. Yes. It was about time. We can't go on like this. No, certainly not. It was time. In the beginning, there was no time. There was sight here dark, there bright. He did not know then, of course and how long had "then" lasted? Memory did not tell that the bright was stars. And there was soundwhispering, crackling, shrilling. What do you mean. Professor, when you say that outer space is not a place of silence? And then (he knew now that this "then" was about fifty years ago) there had begun a new kind of sound. Not steady, but interrupted, and interrupted according to patterns. Awareness had stirred, gradually, and wonder. He knew later that this was "wireless." CQ, CQ, CQ . . . SOS, SOS, SOS ...

And then the other kinds of sounds, oh, very different. These were voices. This was "radio." And music. It was too different; the distant observer knew distress without even knowing that it was distress. But he grew used to itthat is, distress ceased: but not wonder. Urgency came with the voices. What? What? He groped for meaning, not even knowing what meaning was.

Presently there was another kind of sight, not just the dark and the stars any longer, but picturesflickering, fading, dancing, clear, pictures upon pictures. Gradually he learned selectivityhow to concentrate upon one, how to not-see, not-hear the others. Still later: how to see and hear all without confusion. How to match sound and sight. That things had names. What people were, who made the voices and the music. What meaning was.

Abboat himself, he learned nothing directly. For a while, he had tried to speak to them, but it was apparent that nothing of him reached Earth. He had learned Earth, yes. And knew what this place was, where he was. An asteroid. How had he come to be there? This was in space. There were spaceshipshe saw the scenes on television. Meteors were dangerous to spaceships. He knew meteors. Some-

times spaceships crashed. He scanned all his little world, but there was no spaceship, crashed or otherwise. You've got to help me! I don't know who I am! But that was more easy, oh, so much more so that one was a man, and there were many men. The sponsors (in this case, Muls, the creamy-smooth deodorant) were men, too. Everybody was very kind to this man. He had amnesia. What was odor? This the observer could not understand. But to have no memory, this he understood very well. This he shared with men.

Gradually he had come to share many things with men. They spoke different languages, but the one which came with the first pictures was English, English from America. Later on, there was English from England, there was French, Russian, Spanish, Japanese but American was first and best. So much more interesting than the Red Army and the hydroelectric dams, these stories of real life. Of love and sadness and of happiness.

Kid, there ain't no problem in all this world you can't lick if you really try. Very well, the observer would try. You never know what you can do till you try. His first attempt at taking shape wasn't good. It didn't look much like a man. So he tried again and again. Each time he grew better at it. It was true, what the people said. It was all true, every word and picture of it. There ain't no problem. And so when it came time for his favorite Wednesday evening program, the distant observer was ready. Summoning all his effort, husbanding all his energy, he passed along the wave length as a man walks down a street. There was a slight jar, a click. He realized that he could never undo what had just been done. There was a new body now, a new metabolism. The past is dead, David. We have to live for the future.

"And what is your name, you got up here but quick!" burred Keith Kane, the M.C. of Cash or Credit. "I've never known a volunteer from our happy studio audience to manage it quite so suddenly. This is just the warmup, sir, so you needn't be nervous. Not that you need the reassurance cool as a cucumber, isn't he, folks? Say, did you folks ever hear the story about the little Sunday School boy who said that King Solomon had three hundred wives and six hundred cucumbers? Wow! I'm really naughty! You other folks who volunteered just take seats right there"

The first lady volunteer was old and pretty. Well, maybe not so old. But maybe like Mary Clay who realized that she was too old for young David Webster and after she cried she accepted the fact and sent him back to Madge Barkley whom he really loved all the while, only they had this silly quarrel.

The lady smiled at him. He smiled back. I-feel-GREAT!
"So that's the way the rules work, and now, folks, in just five seconds we'll be on the air! Fivefourthreetwo one Good evening, all you lovely people out there in TV Land! This is Keith Kane, bringing you the great the greater the GREATEST quiz program ever: Cash or Credit?"

Now he felt his heart beating very fast. So that was what it was like! And now he knew what was odor. But the lovely lady volunteer next to him smelled, yes, that was sweet. But if it was Muls or Van Art Number Three, this he

would learn later.

"just rinse and dry, folks, that's all there is to it: Clear-o, the all-purpose vegetable detergent. And now whom have we here? What is your name, sir?"

Here it was. And how terrible if he should break down and press his hands to his head and sob, "I don't know!" But he did know; he had it all ready. "David. My name is David Taylor." All the ones named David were good. Oh, they had their troubles, but in the end everyone loved them. And see: nice Keith Kane beaming. The lady, too. "Well, David, what'll it be? Cash-or-Credit? You know the rules: If you pick Cash, we spin this little wheel. If it comes up with a number, you go on to answer if you can, hah-haa question worth however many thousand dollars follow that number. If it comes up blank you're out. Whereas, if you pick Credit, you take your place among the volunteers and if any contestant makes a boo-boo, why, you step into his shoes and he is out. Soooo?"

"Take the cash and let the credit go," said David. Grinning from lobe to lobe, Keith Kane asked the same questions of the lady, whose name was Mrs. Conar, Mrs. Ethel-Mae Conar, a widow: and received the same answer. The audience applauded, the wheel was spun, and it came up io.

"TenthousandDOLLARS!" screamed Keith Kane.

"That's what your first question is worth and here it is: What former President of the United States is associated with this tune, and what is the name of the tune, which refers to his State? Remember, you have thirty seconds to think it over . . ."

David and Mrs. Conar won two hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars in cash before the program was over, as well as a year's supply of Clear-o, and fifty shares of stock in a mink ranch; and the band played "The Stars and Stripes Forever" as Keith Kane counted out the money. Mrs. Conar had kissed him and kissed David and was now clasping his hands and sobbing that she didn't really believe it.

"Oh, it's true," David assured her. "It's all true; that's the funny part of it." (David Mackay said that, in Matm6e, when he admitted his wife was an alcoholic.) Sight and sound and touch (kissing was pleasant; no wonder it was so much done) and smell and what was the other?

Taste. Keith Kane bawled at him the question of what he was going to do with all his money David deliberated. What was it that Clem Clooten, on Saddle-Galled, had said, the time he broke the faro bank in Dogie City? Taste . . . yes: "I'm goin' out'n buy m'self a cup o' java . . ." The audience went wild.

Java tasted. Taste was as exciting as the other four sensations. And sitting next to him on the counter-stool was Mrs. Ethel-Mae Conar, gazing at his distinguished profile. It was clean-cut. He gazed down at her. He was tall, of course. He searched for the right words. It turned out to be singular. "Happy?" he asked.

She sighed, nodded. Then "You're a rather strange young man," she said. "Do you know that?"

Certainly he knew it.

He leaned closer. "This is bigger than both of us," he said huskily. "Let me take you away from all this . . ."

"I certainly will," she said briskly, "right over to my place

in the Surrey-Regis on Park Avenue"that meant she was unhappy despite her money"where we can have a decent cup of coffee."

The counterman scowled at the bill David offered him. "Whatsis? Play-money? A five-hunnerd-doUa bill? Whud-dya, wise guy?"

David arose slowly, buttoning his jacket, and leaned over. "If you're looking for trouble, buddy . . ." he said. But the guy chickened out. Anyway, Ethel-Mae had some change in her purse. "Taxil" David called happily. He helped her in, sank back in the seat, and when the driver asked Where To, David said crisply, "Follow that cabi"

The driver (Herman Bogancz, the license read) half-turned, half-growled. Ethel-Mae laughed. "Oh, if you aren't never mind, driver: the Surrey-Regis, on Park near" But H. Bogancz muttered that he knew where the place was. David gazed out the window excitedly. Everywhere, men and lights and women and automobiles. "Little Old New York," he murmured.

Suddenly she yelped, dug her fingers into his arm.

"Darlingi" he exclaimed. "Are you all right? Is anything wrong?"

"No," she said. "Oh, no"

"Something must be wrong," he insisted. "You can tell me, dear. I trust you. No matter what you've done"

"What I've done?" she screamed. "I've just won a half-share in \$285,000 is what"

He seized her, turned her facing him. "Are you out of your mind?" he gritted. And then, memory returning, he released her. "Yeah . . . Gee . . . that's right. Yeah . . . , how about that? Do you know what this means? Ethel-Mac, we're rich! WE'HE IUCH!"

The driver twisted his chin slightly to the right. "Do y' mind. mister? Not so loud with the decibels. I gotta near condition."

David said, shocked, "If there's anything I can doanything at allif you need moneywe'll get the best surgeon there is"

Herman Bogancz shrugged. "My cousin Sidney is the best surgeon there is, and he says an operation wouldn't help."

"Then," said David, "there's nothing more that any of us can doexcept waitand pray"

"and wash it out three times a day with a boric acid solution," said Herman Bogancz.

David didn't quite understand why Mrs. Conar made him apply for a room at the Surrey-Regis by himself while she went up to her room through the side entrance. In fact, he didn't understand at ali The clerk looked at him rather oddly when he explained this to him, and asked for a room near hers. He looked even odder when he saw the \$500 bill. Once again David buttoned his jacket (it had been necessary to unbutton it first) and leaned over. "I hope," he said, "that I'm not going to have any trouble with you."

"Oh, dear me, no," said the clerk. "Not at all . . . my goodness, Mr. Taylor, but you really are tall, aren't you? Suite 516. Mrs. Conar's is Suite 521that's the best I can do right just this very minule. and"

Another gentleman materialized at David's elbow.

"Good evening, sir," he said suavely. "I am Mr. Feltz, the manager. Is everything all right?"

"The boy's not to blame," David said, gesturing toward the clerk. "Society is to blame we're all to blame. It's these crazy, mixed-up times we live in."

Behind David's back, the clerk spread open the \$500 bill for Mr. Feltz's inspection.

"How right you are, sir," said Mr. Feltz.

"About the gentleman's Mr. Taylors change, Mr. Feltz-?"

David turned, put his hand on the clerk's shoulder. The man flushed, sucked in his lower lip. "That's for you, sonny. There is no such thing as a bad boy. I never met a man I didn't like."

"Front!" said the clerk, his voice tremulous.

Mr. Feltz handed the keys to 516 to the bellboy himself, urged Mr. Taylor to make his wants known immediately.

As David walked toward the elevator, the manager turned to his subordinate. "The Rich," he said simply. The clerk nodded solemnly. "We know their ways," said Mr. Feltz.

"Eh? Well, that's very generous of you, Robert but, no, sixty-four is good enough. He seems to have taken a liking to you. Send up flowers, the morning papers, a split of champagne. And include my card, Robert."

As soon as the bellboy had gone (rather like a satisfied customer on his way out of a high-class opium den, with a \$500 bill clutched in his hot hand), David went down the corridor and knocked on the door of Suite 521. "Ethel-Mac?" he asked, his face close to the door. "Dearest? This is David. Please open. I can explain everything."

And, sure enough, her words as she opened the door and fell into his arms were, "There is nothing to explain!" Then she said, "It's just that you're so sweet and naive. But that nasty little nance down at the desk wouldn't understand."

Since David didn't understand either, he made no comment, but covered her face with kisses. "Darling, I love you," he said. "Please believe me." And she said, "But she did she did. "Do you know what it's like to be alone always alone never to know love? Do you? Do you? No. Of course you don't"

Her answer was exactly correct. "Hush, darling," she said. "Everything's going to be all right." He sighed, kissed her again. Then

"Ethel-Mac? Ethel-Mac? Mrs. Conar? What-? Why are you" But she didn't seem to hear him. Nothing he had ever heard on radio or seen on television prepared him for what was happening now. But he decided after a moment or so what was happening now was though strange not unpleasant. "This is wrong," he groaned happily. "It's all wrong. But I don't care. Do you hear, I don't care" It was two in the morning before he stumbled back to his own room, and bed. At half-past two, he was awakened by the bellboy's father and mother (smuggled up on the service elevator) who had come all the way from Mulberry Street to kiss his hands. At three, he was half-awakened by a scratching noise at his door. After a few minutes, he got up and after approaching it as cautiously as the Sheriff of Hangtown on the program of the same name threw it suddenly open.

A pretty girl with her red hair in a pony-tail uttered a little scream. Pencil and notebook fell to the floor. "Why you're only a child!" he said, in a hushed voice.

"Mr. T-Taylor" she began very nervously. "I saw you at the studio and I fol-followed you"she gulped"over here. But it took till now for me to get up nerve"
"Why, you're frightened," he said, looking down at her.
"Don't be frightened. You don't ever have to be frightened of me. Come in," he urged. "Please come in."
She picked up her notebook and followed him in obediently. Then, taking the seat he gestured to, she said, "And I'm not such a child, either. I'm a senior at Bamard. Journalism major. And I want a story from you, Mr. Taylor, before all the other reporters get here. Please, Mr. Taylor, please."
He looked at her admiringly. "That took guts," he said.
"Where I come from, the men get separated from the boys mighty young. Butdon't call me 'Mr. Taylor'Mr. Taylor has gray hair at the temples. Call me David."
She called him David. And she told him that her name was Pamela Novack. And he said that Pamela was a lovely name. She told him that she'd hated it as a child, but that latelyin fact, just this very minuteshe'd gotten to like it a whole lot more. And they laughed. They laughed a whole lot.

Before they knew it, it was getting light.

"Oh, golly," Pamela sighed. "Oh, gee, have I got a story! In a way, it's so sad, and you having such an unhappy childhood, I mean: your mother dying from the brain tumor and your father being an alcoholic"

He said that was all in the past. He said they had to start looking toward the future. She nodded soberly. Then she stretched and said she was hungry.

"Hey, how about thati" David laughed, catching sight of his face in the mirror. It was a nice face. He had done well in making it; it looked like all the Davids he had ever seen.

"You know something? I'm hungry, too! I haven't had a bite to eat since that cup of coffee after the show. Would you like to have some breakfast? You would. Hot diggetyl . . . Hello! I want Room Service, please."

The narcoleptic tones of the operator said. Not till ha'-pas'six. And then suddenly were clear and alert and saying, "Oh, Mr. TaylorP Pardon meof course, Mr. Taylorwhat would you like? Scrambled eggs and coffee and toast and gallons of orange juice. Yes, sir, Mr. Taylor."

Then, suddenly, the smile was gone from David's face. Anxiously, Pamela asked what the matter was. Scowling, he mimicked, "'Yes, Mr. Taylor, certainly, Mr. Taylor-it isn't me they likenobody likes meit's the money. Once you been in reform school, nobody has any use for you, the cops are always watching you, the nice girls don't want to have anything to do with you"

Pamela was troubled. "Oh, you mustn't say that. Il well, I think I'm a nice girl" she blushed suddenly, looked down"and Ilike youDavid."

He got up and walked back and forth, rubbing his left arm with his right hand. He swung around and faced her.

"Youl" he jeered. "Whadda you know? You're just a fresh young kid"

"I am noti" she snapped.

"A senior at Barnard! Whadda you know about life? You-"

He stopped. He had been enjoying the experience of emoting so much that the significance of the scene had es-

caped him. They were quarreling! That meant they were in love. Of course Davids always quarreled with the girls they were really in love with.

He dropped down on one knee beside her and looked into her flushed, pretty face.

"Darling," he said, brokenly, taking her hands. "Trust me I can't explain now but just trust me"

There was a sound from the door. They looked up. Ethel-Mac Conar stood there, holding her throat with both hands. After a moment, she said, "I must have hurt you very much, David, for you to have done this to me to have forgotten. So quickly."

Exquisitely miserable, he shouted, "Leave me alone! Can't you leave me alone? Can't you understand that it's all over between us?" And then, his voice dropping, "Oh, Ethel-Mae, forgive me. I didn't mean to say that. I didn't mean it. I can explain."

Letting her hands drop resignedly, she said, "There's nothing to explain, David. I understand. It could never have worked out. I'm just too old for you, David." She walked over, lifted his head (he had hung it, of course), placed her palms on his cheeks and kissed him gently on the forehead. Then she turned to Pamela and said softly, "Be good to him, my dear. And give him lots of love." She went out, her head high, a wistful smile on her lips, and the awareness that she had half of the \$285,000, the year's supply of Clear-o (the vegetable detergent), and the fifty shares of stock in a mink ranch.

There was a moment's silence. Then, "Gosh," said Pamela. "Golly," she said.

David turned to her. "Darling, don't cry any more," he begged. "Everything's going to be all right from now on." "I'm not crying," she said. Her eyes were shining. "The hell with the story and the journalism course and the hell with Bamard, too. With all your money," she said, falling into his welcoming arms, "we can get married and start a family right away. Kiss me," she said, "hold me tight, don't ever leave me!"

Mr. and Mrs. David Taylor live in a fifteen-room house in Westport with two picture windows, three boxers, and three cars. They have two children and a third is on the way. They are as happy as any couple in Westport has a right to be in these crazy, mixed-up days. David is a highly successful writer of television scripts, with an unerring nose for what the public wants. It is perhaps unfortunate that his work brings him into contact with so many clever and attractive women. He is, of course, unfaithful to his wife with one of them at least twice a year (or at least once a year with two of them).

There used to be a time when a David would never do a thing like this to his wife. He would almost do it and then, at the last moment, not. But TV is maturing. The Davids do it all the time. All the damned time.

"But how could you?" Pam Taylor weeps. "David, how could you?"

And young David Taylor, his face twisted with anguish, cries, "Don't you understand? Won't you even try to understand? I'm sick! I need help!"

Well. Naturally Pam is very sad that her husband is sick, sick, sick but, after all, it's the thing to be, isn't it? And so

she's happy she can help him and happily she drives the two of them down to Dr. Naumbourg, David is very sad that he's made his lovely wife unhappy, but he's happy that he's fulfilling his destiny as a David. Dr. Naumbourg always insists on both husbands and wives Going Into Therapy at the same time. Pamela's case is a common enough one, merely a routine phallic envy. Naumbourg gets them every day,

But in all the years since Vienna, Dr. N. has never had another patient whose womb-tantasy takes the form of being a Thing on aii asteroid. And so, while all three of them are very happy. Dr. Naumbourg is perhaps the happiest of all.