*Brilliance and ingenuity in attacking a problem aren't always enough.*

# PROJECT FLATTY

## by IRVING COX, Jr.

*illustrated by EMSH*

REX FELT vaguely annoyed—without knowing exactly why. There was no reason why he had to do this job; Rex had more important work to finish, though for the moment he had forgotten what that was. They had sent him to stop the Flatties: that much he was sure of. But why? It was almost too easy; any moron could have done it.

Rex shifted his position to ease the strain on his cramped legs, and he was able to see a long stretch of dirt road which curved past his hiding place. In the distance the lights of the village were reflected from the low-moving clouds in the night sky. The icy mist was thickening. In another ten minutes visibility would be reduced to near zero, but long before that the Flatties would begin their drive against Freeport.

He knew the exact time when they would come; he knew they had to use this road. How he had come by the information he couldn't remember; the two factors were simply limiting elements in the problem.

Flatties? Abruptly that word bothered him. Rex didn't know who they were or what they were. He had a hazy idea that he had invented the word himself, in a totally different context. Now it was like the symbol of an equation; Rex was using *Flatty* to stand for something he couldn't otherwise define.

He was suddenly aware that he had forgotten a great deal; yet that didn't seem to worry him. After the Flatties

were disposed of, everything would straighten itself out when he went back to—to what? To the project? Somehow his phrasing wasn't right.

The idea of the Flatties should have frightened him; he knew he was supposed to be terrified. Yet he was deliberately ruling emotion out of his thinking, as if he were ashamed of it.

SUDDENLY, from the direction of the village, Rex heard the throb of many high speed motors. The Flatties were coming; in another three minutes it would all be over. The icy mist began to close down over the country road. Indistinctly Rex saw the huge, t e a r-s h a p e d trucks. Made of a metal that might have been silver or aluminum. they gleamed with a peculiar iridescence. A wide panel at the front of each vehicle was transparent, but it was too dark for Rex to see any of the drivers. He still did not know who or what the Flatties were.

When the vans were fifty feet away, Rex cried out "Everything all right on your side, Marge?"

"Yes, Dr. Bannard; the lead car's almost over the trigger mine," she answered.

As soon as he had asked the question, Rex remembered that Marge Laird was hiding across the road. She was his assistant. (On the project? The word still seemed incorrect.) Marge had, naturally been assigned to help him stop the Flatties. But until she spoke to him, Rex had forgotten she was there. More of that annoying amnesia! They must have given him a hypnotic drug so his mind couldn't function normally if he fell into the hands of the Flatties. (*They*?—and whom, exactly, did he mean by that?)

But Rex was sure the precautions were unnecessary; nothing could go wrong now. The first Flatty truck was about to cross the trigger mine and detonate the explosives which Rex and Marge had buried under the gravel surface of the road.

THEN IT happened. The motor of the lead truck roared a little louder, and the glow of the metal brightened. The truck rose three feet in the air, skimmed slowly over the trigger mine, and floated gently back to the road again. As calmly and as matter-of-factly as that, the Flatties ignored the law of gravity.

The crisp, precise, emotionless voice hammered relentlessly at Bannard's mind, ***you can't use the familiar tech-***

*niques to solve the problem. Think, Bannard!*

For the first time Rex felt real terror, as each tear-shaped vehicle played leap frog over the detonator mine.

A mathematical impossibility; a logical absurdity—yet Rex saw it happen, and saw it with his own eyes.

Across the road Marge Laird was standing and shouting something at him. He couldn't hear what it was, because of the thunder of the Flatty engines, but he saw her face clearly in the glare. Marge wasn't afraid; her expression was unmistakably one of pure triumph. There was only one possible explanation: Marge had become a Flatty. Rex didn't know how it was done—but he knew that was how it always happened—suddenly and without warning.

The only thing he could do now was save himself. He sprang up from his hiding place and began to run blindly through the cold mist away from the road. The sky was pitch dark. He could not be sure of his footing and behind him he could hear Marge giving the alarm. The column of Flatty vans came to a halt; the whine of the big engines died away. For a moment there was silence. The universe was muffled in thick, cold fog.

HE HEARD steady footsteps, the crunch of heavy bodies pushing through the underbrush. The Flatties were after him; Rex tried to run faster. Stubborn branches ripped at his clothing and lacerated his face and hands. Repeatedly he fell. The ground underfoot turned wet and swampy. The Flatties came closer. Once or twice Rex saw their search beams knifing through the mist; their s o u n d l e s s, efficient weapons tore savagely at the brush. Several times the death blast missed Rex by inches.

Ahead of him he saw the clear, ploughed field of a farm. He staggered toward the drier ground. His heart was pounding and his breath came in painful, burning gasps. Somewhere in the subconscious depths of his mind the voice whispered,

*You're too old for this; you didn't think about that part of it, did you?*

Think about it? What difference would that make? Did he have any choice?"

His vision dimmed in a red haze. He fell. Beneath his clawing hands he felt the ploughed furrows of the farm. The Flatties burst out of the forest. Rex heard

Marge Laird's voice, but he couldn't make out what she was saying.

Vaguely he remembered the Flatties passing him by while he hugged the wet earth. The search clattered away in the darkness and shortly Rex was engulfed again in the thick, timeless fog of silence. He tried to get up, but the strain had exhausted him; his legs refused to move. Half an hour passed, or perhaps longer. Rex lay in a stupor; he remembered the farmer finding him and lugging him to a bedroom in the farmhouse. Rex tried to talk, to gasp out a cry for help, but his voice died in his throat. When his body touched the mattress he slid into unconsciousness...

THERE WAS unconsciousness and the fragmentary awareness of the past, a self that was like the scattered pieces of a puzzle. A disembodied voice said to him, you're our ideal choice, Dr. Bannard. You meet every qualification in training, intelligence, and creative genius; you have none of the inhibitions of tradition which so often hamper other men."

"I don't understand how you can say that."

"This Flatty idea, for one example—pure brilliance!"

"And it means nothing, except maybe an overactive imagination."

"We're the judges of that, Bannard. Now remember the conditions: no one knows the enemy is here; you are required to work alone—with Miss Laird's help, of course, if you find a need for it. At the moment, the enemy is isolated in a village near the coast. Your specific problem is to stop them before—"

"I'm allowed to use any facility of science?"

"Anything. It's up to you, Dr. Bannard. Solve the problem any way you can."

"It should be easy. Very easy. That's why I don't see why you picked me—"

"Later on, your self-confidence will prove invaluable. Are you ready, Dr. Bannard?"

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

"None."

And then the dream was gone. Rex Bannard opened his eyes. He was lying on a high bed in a white-walled room, sterile and clean. Somehow it wasn't the sort of room Rex would have expected to find in a farmhouse, and that made him feel a little uneasy. Rex tried to get out of bed, but he was too weak to move. On his arm he saw four small wounds —punctures made by a hypodermic, sealed with a scrap of adhesive—and he realized that

his feeling of euphoria was drug-induced.

IT MIGHT be an acceptable, medical treatment, or the farmer could have become a Flatty—like Marge Laird. How was Rex to know? The Flatties—or, rather, the enemy which he symbolized with that term—were invaders of some type. Rex remembered that much out of his jumbled past. The Flatties apparently had a technique for taking over human beings against their will—killing off the human personality and using the body as a shield for themselves. That was what they had done with Marge, of course. He was entirely sure of his reasoning—yet he didn't know where or when he had come by the information.

Abruptly he remembered the job he had to do. It was up to him to stop the Flatties—to prevent the invasion. And it no longer seemed easy. The knife edge of fear stabbed deep into his mind. He realized that the more obvious weapons he might have used were valueless against the technology of the Flatties. Hadn't Rex seen their machines totally ignore the familiar principle of gravity? What else could the enemy do?

For a moment the nagging fear made Rex feel that he was losing faith in every law of science. And he couldn't let that happen. It was madnes He had to hold fast to what he knew, without that; he was utterly lost.

FEAR DROVE him to action. After half a dozen failures, Rex was able to claw aside the white sheet and pull himself up against the headboard of the bed. His head swam when he swung his feet to the floor, but after a time the dizziness passed and he was able to stand.

He heard voices outside. Slowly he crept to the window. It was dawn. Mist lay in ribbons over the fields; the sky blazed red with the light of the rising sun. Directly below his bedroom window Rex saw the farmer and Marge Laird talking together

"Tell them he's ready any time they want him," the farmer was saying. "Bannard can't get away from here."

"I imagine they'll see him tonight," Marge replied.

Rex heard the farmer chuckle softly. "I dare say they'll be to busy today, Miss Laird—taking over Freeport."

"The infiltration begins at ten."

"Fine. I wish I could see it."

Freeport was the Flatty

target—but Rex remembered that he had known that before. The name was familiar, at least in a vague way. He wasn't quite sure where he had heard it, but that wasn't important. Only one thing mattered: he still had time to save Freeport. He found his clothing in a tiny, white-walled closet and dressed with trembling fingers. The drug the farmer had given him made him feel light-headed, but the throbbing, mounting terror slowly dissipated the sense of giddiness.

It was easy for Rex to escape from the farmhouse—amazingly easy. Did they really want him to get away? Had Marge and the farmer deliberately let him hear what they were saying? It seemed to be so—and that made no sense.

WHEN HE came to the country road, he stopped running. He couldn't go any farther, just then. He leaned against a tree trunk; his legs went limp beneath him and he slid weakly to the ground.

In a tiny puddle left by the morning dew he saw his face—thin, haggard, sallow. His hair was crew cut; but lines of worry, etched deep around his eyes, made him look very old. Like a man in his sixties: and Rex knew he was only thirty-one. He stared hard at the reflection. It was the face of a stranger, the twisted distortion of a nightmare.

Nightmare? Dream? He clutched frantically at what that word implied. It seemed tremendously significant—until a shattering blast of fear washed all rational thought from his mind.

He sprang up and began to run again. The country road, twisting through the forest, suggested a painting by a nineteenth century romantic, moody and sullenly lit with gloom. It had the same museum silence, the same subtle lack of reality. No wind stirred the trees; no bird moved in the branches; no forest animal scurried through the underbrush; and the road was utterly deserted.

Nearly breathless, his heart hammering, Rex forced himself to walk again. He couldn't run any longer, and he realized it was foolish to give way to such headlong terror. He had to conserve his energy; he had plenty of time to work something out before the Flatties attacked Freeport.

HE TRIED to evaluate logically everything he knew about the Flatties. First, he was sure they represented an enemy of some

kind. Not a human enemy, either, because their technology derived from no human science. What a non-human enemy might be, however, he refused to visualize, even in the quiet of his own mind. He knew, too, that the Flatties represented something so terrible that military action against them was pointless; all news of the attack had been suppressed. He remembered a phrase he had heard somewhere, "...and you alone can help, Bannard; no other scientist has a chance..." The rest of it was lost in the chaos of his forgotten past.

Scientist! That term clamored for attention. His mind leaped with hope, for he had stumbled upon more of his own identity. He remembered that he was Dr. Rex Bannard, an international authority in his field, the author of a dozen books, the director of a fabulous project in—in what? He fumbled desperately for the pushbutton words, the clues that would unwind the dark thread farther, but he had lost it again.

Then, abruptly, the voice came again, *Apply all the science you know, Bannard. The point is, you need a new science, a new technique, a totally new method...*

He refused to listen because he refused to accept what the words implied. Rex found himself running again. He didn't know how long he had been streaking down the deserted road. Ahead he saw the church spires of Freeport, and the flowing hills, shimmering like gold in the sunlight. He reached out for the village, as if he could take it in his hands and drag it free from danger. And the muscles in his chest and arms exploded in an agony of exhaustion. The pain lashed at him, dragging him down. Then he was f l o a t i n g, motionless, paralyzed and helpless. He realized, with a kind of detached surprise, that he had collapsed at the side of the road. He felt the fatigue creep through his body. Nothing mattered—not really. He closed his eyes.

WHEN he regained consciousness, he was again in the small, white-walled room, so antiseptically clean. For a moment Rex thought the Flatties had taken him back to the farm. But he raised himself on his elbow and he saw that he was in Freeport—an emergency hospital, probably. Someone had found him by the road and brought him here.

Through the open window he could see the village courthouse and the main street, crowded with shoppers. The

church clock was clearly etched against the blue sky; the hands stood at nine-fifty. In ten minutes the Flatties would make their attack.

Ten minutes! Rex heard, far away, the high whine of the Flatty vans and he tried to drag himself out of bed. Dizziness overcame him and he collasped, panting, on the floor. He opened his mouth to call for help, and no sound came through his cracked, parched lips.

And if anyone heard him, what could he say? How would he make them believe him, before it was too late? He had been sent alone to stop the Flatties. No one else knew about the invasion. If Rex failed, mankind was lost.

Failed? How could he succeed? What was he supposed to do?

He heard the church clock begin the stately tolling of the hour. The throb of the enemy motors was so much closer the floor beneath Rex began to vibrate. Desperately he reached for the bedside table —reached and missed. When he made a grab for it a second time, the table overturned, spilling the contents of two drawers on the floor.

AND AMONG the litter, Rex saw a pistol. He took it in his fingers; he saw that the gun was loaded. Painfully he dragged himself toward the open window. He reached for the sill and began to pull himself up. On the walls of his room he saw the darting patterns of blazing light, and he knew the Flatties were using their efficient, silent weapons.

Then the bedroom door swung open. He saw Marge Laird standing in the hall. Marge, a Flatty prisoner, with no surviving trace of her own human personality: she was the full symbol of Bannard's terror. Like a robot she moved toward him. He pointed the pistol at her and pulled the trigger—pulled it twice.

In her forehead and in her neck he saw the two death wounds; for a moment the blood welled out—and that was all. The wounds ejected the lead slugs and became whole again.

Thus Rex saw the second physical impossibility. Like the first, he knew it had to be an illusion, a trick of hypnotic drugs. To save his sanity, Rex held firmly to one conviction: no one could do what he had seen the Flatties do. It was the only logic he believed in. Since what he had seen was impossible, then it followed that he had not seen it. By the same reasoning, it

hadn't really happened; nor did the Flatties exist.

Bannard's fear dissolved. He could no longer resist the clawing waves of emotional exhaustion. And now it didn't matter. He knew the truth; he had found his way out of the labyrinth of terror. Who was the invader?—who were the Flatties? The flimsiest dream shadows. Abstract symbols from an academic pipedream. Rex was entirely certain of that, for he had invented the Flatties himself.

HE REMEMBERED exactly when it had happened. He was at the university club with half a dozen colleagues. From the project? (What project? That word still did not ring true, but he convinced himself that was because there were a few minor details he still couldn't remember.)

Like many brilliant thinkers, Rex Bannard had always been impatient with the slow-moving methods of science. "From our earliest infancy," he said, "we're shackled by an orientation which we inherit from the past. Euclidian geometry, Aristotelean logic, Roman law hobble our thinking and limit the area where we permit ourselves to be creative."

"The limitations of Aristotle's either-or logic are obvious," someone answered. "But Euclid? How can an elementary and obvious theorem of geometry restrict the creative imagination?"

"By arbitrarily setting up value standards for both architecture and art. Even the most modernistic and non-objective painters fill their introspective canvases with squares, and circles, and triangles. They revolt against what they define as reality but they never think of revolting against Euclidian lines. Because of Euclid, we think exclusively in terms of three dimensions."

This provoked a ripple of academic laughter, which might have been uproarious except for the restraints imposed by scholarship. "Then you're suggesting, Bannard, that our three-dimensional mathematics is not accurate?"

"Nothing of the sort; it is merely limited. Why stop at three dimensions? A fourth or a fifth—"

MORE laughter—far less restrained.

"Was Einstein amusing," Bannard demanded, "when he proposed that time was another dimension? How can we visualize what he meant while we're still shackled to this three dimensional point of

view? What we need is a totally new kind of education, so our young people can learn to think for themselves. I don't mean an isolated college course, but a series of courses, from kindergarten through the graduate school—courses designed to force us out of this absurd three dimensional thought pattern. We must learn to visualize problems from multiple points of view. We can't do that in terms of Aristotelean logic, for Aristotle gives us no inbetween categories separating his logical extremes. In order to achieve the—well, let's call it the l e a r n i n g environment which is necessary to this new kind of education, we would have to use hypnotic drugs and possibly—"

"You'd actually drug a child's mind, just to make him believe a lot of absurd hocus pocus about fourth dimension?"

"No one is now able to teach a fourth dimensional point of view. To make my idea work, I would reduce the field to two dimensions, a flat universe without thickness, a good math teacher could teach that. The point is, the child must learn to think from the orientation of both two and three dimensions; then, on his own, he could break our cultural shackles and learn to handle other dimensional realities."

"Have you gone all the way with this nightmare, Bannard, and invented sham people to fill up your sham world?"

"For a valid learning experience, you have the illusion of reality. Yes, I have thought of people—Flatties, I'd call them. And, to make the problem more acute, I'd picture these Flatties as invaders of..."

FLATTIES; invaders! The voices trailed off and the two words turned, like shrill echoes, through Rex Bannard's mind. He had most of the pieces, now. He could put his shattered memory together and make himself an integrated person again.

He opened his eyes. He lay once more in the antiseptic, white-walled room. Earlier that morning he had imagined it the bedroom of a farm; later it was a hospital room in the little village of Freeport. Now he thought he knew the truth: the room was a university laboratory.

Part of the project, of course. The term still didn't ring any bells, but logically nothing else was possible. This was the project—a drug-induced nightmare—and Rex had been the volunteer. An experiment to discover a new

way of thinking, shock treatment to free the human mind from the Euclidian-Aristotelean heritage. Bannard was sorry the experiment had failed.

And it had, obviously. The terror hadn't forced him to find a new way of thinking; instead he had broken free of the hypnotic spell.

MILDLY curious, he began to examine the sterile, white room. If this was a project he had helped set up, the room should be familiar; and it wasn't. There was a single window. It opened on a village square—and the village he recognized. In his hypnotic trance he had called it Freeport.

But the dream had not been real! Neither the town nor the Flatties existed outside his own mind. He couldn't be seeing it now—

Abruptly, booming inside his mind, he heard the familiar voice, the voice which had created and dominated his nightmare.

"You are a brilliant man, Dr. Bannard; you can contrive magnificent subtleties with semantics. You have made just one small mistake: you didn't quite find the correct reality. True, you were part of a project, but the project was ours—not yours. You were the test case; the fate of mankind was literally in your hands. We reasoned this way: If you could free yourself from your scientific absolutes and solve the problems we created for you, then the earth was too dangerous for us to invade. But instead of solving the problem—or even attempting to solve it—you named us 'Flatties', and then you invented a verbal logic to argue us out of existence. The word, dear doctor, is not the thing it names; but as long as you humans convince yourself that it is, you represent no challenge to us. We can now procede according to our original schedule. You have a nice, clean little world here, Bannard; but unfortunately for you, it's a world we need for ourselves."

Cold with horror—and this was no horror derived from a dream—Rex Bannard jerked upright in the bed. Through the open window he could see the main street of Freeport; and, as he had before, he heard the purr of the approaching enemy machines. He cried out, but no one heard his screams, for the street din was still louder. The soundless, efficient enemy weapons cut ruthlessly into the panicking mob.

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