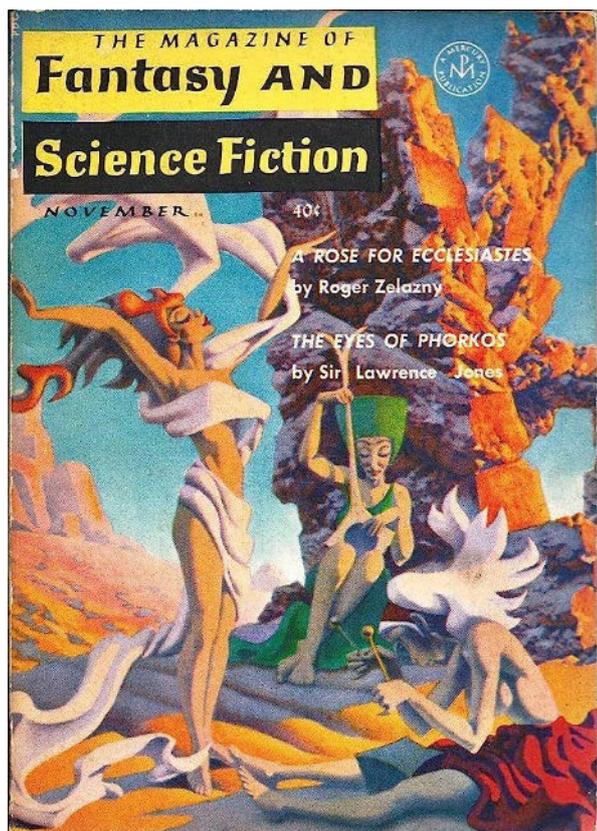

EIGHT O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING (RAY NELSON, 1963)

La nouvelle est publiée pour la première fois dans l'édition de novembre 1963 de The Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction.



At the end of the show the hypnotist told his subjects, "Awake."
Something unusual happened.

One of the subjects awoke all the way. This had never happened before. His name was George Nada and he blinked out at the sea of faces in the theatre, at first unaware of anything out of the ordinary. Then he noticed, spotted here and there in the crowd, the non-human faces, the faces of the Fascinators. They had been there all along, of course, but only George was really awake, so only George recognized them for what they were. He understood everything in a flash, including the fact that if he were to give any outward sign, the Fascinators would instantly command him to return to his former state, and he would obey.

He left the theatre, pushing out into the neon night, carefully avoiding any indication that he saw the green, reptilian flesh or the multiple yellow eyes of the rulers of the earth. One of them asked him, "Got a light buddy?" George gave him a light, then moved on.

At intervals along the street George saw the posters hanging with photographs of the Fascinators' multiple eyes and various commands printed under them, such as, "Work eight hours, play eight hours, slept eight hours," and "Marry and Reproduce." A TV set in the window of a store caught George's eye, but he looked away in the nick of time. When he didn't look at the Fascinator in the screen, he could resist the command, "Stay tuned to this station."

George lived alone in a little sleeping room, and as soon as he got home, the first thing he did was to disconnect the TV set. In other rooms he could hear the TV sets of his neighbors, though. Most of the time the voices were human, but now and then he heard the arrogant, strangely bird-like croaks of the aliens. "Obey the government," said one croak. "We are the government," said another. "We are your friends, you'd do anything for a friend, wouldn't you?"

"Obey!"

"Work!"

Suddenly the phone rang.

George picked it up. It was one of the Fascinators.

"Hello," it squawked. "This is your control, Chief of Police Robinson. You are an old man, George Nada. Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, your heart will stop. Please repeat."

"I am an old man," said George. "Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, my heart will stop."

The control hung up.

"No, it won't," whispered George. He wondered why they wanted him dead. Did they suspect that he was awake? Probably. Someone might have spotted him, noticed that he didn't respond the way the others did. If George were alive at one minute after eight tomorrow morning, then they would be sure.

"No use waiting here for the end," he thought.

He went out again. The posters, the TV, the occasional commands from passing aliens did not seem to have absolute power over him, though he still felt strongly tempted to obey, to see things the way his master wanted him to see them. He passed an alley and stopped. One of the aliens was alone there, leaning against the wall. George walked up to him.

"Move on," grunted the thing, focusing his deadly eyes on George.

George felt his grasp on awareness waver. For a moment the reptilian head dissolved into the face of a lovable old drunk. Of course the drunk would be lovable. George picked up a brick and smashed it down on the old drunk's head with all his strength. For a moment the image blurred, then the blue-green blood oozed out of the face and the lizard fell, twitching and writhing. After a moment it was dead.

George dragged the body into the shadows and searched it. There was a tiny radio in its pocket and a uriously shaped knife and fork in another. The tiny radio said something in an incomprehensible language.

George put it down beside the body, but kept the eating utensils.

"I can't possibly escape," thought George. "Why fight them?"

But maybe he could.

What if he could awaken others? That might be worth a try.

He walked twelve blocks to the apartment of his girl friend, Lil, and knocked on her door. She came to the door in her bathrobe.

"I want you to wake up," he said.

"I'm awake," she said. "Come on in."

He went in. The TV was playing. He turned it off.

"No," he said. "I mean really wake up." She looked at him without comprehension, so he snapped his fingers and shouted, "Wake up! The master's command that you wake up!"

"Are you off your rocker, George?" she asked suspiciously. "You sure are acting funny." He slapped her face. "Cut that out!" she cried, "What the hell are you up to anyway?"

"Nothing," said George, defeated. "I was just kidding around."

"Slapping my face wasn't just kidding around!" she cried.

There was a knock at the door.

George opened it.

It was one of the aliens.

"Can't you keep the noise down to a dull roar?" it said.

The eyes and reptilian flesh faded a little and George saw the flickering image of a fat middle-aged man in shirtsleeves. It was still a man when George slashed its throat with the eating knife, but it was an alien before it hit the floor. He dragged it into the apartment and kicked the door shut. "What do you see there?" he asked Lil, pointing to the many-eyed snake thing on the floor.

"Mister...Mister Coney," she whispered, her eyes wide with horror. "You...just killed him, like it was nothing at all."

"Don't scream," warned George, advancing on her.

"I won't George. I swear I won't, only please, for the love of God, put down that knife." She backed away until she had her shoulder blades pressed to the wall.

George saw that it was no use.

"I'm going to tie you up," said George. "First tell me which room Mister Coney lived in."

"The first door on your left as you go toward the stairs," she said. "Georgie...Georgie. Don't torture me. If you're going to kill me, do it clean. Please, Georgie, please."

He tied her up with bedsheets and gagged her, then searched the body of the Fascinator. There was another one of the little radios that talked a foreign language, another set of eating utensils, and nothing else.

George went next door.

When he knocked, one of the snake-things answered, "Who is it?"

"Friend of Mister Coney. I wanna see him," said George.

"He went out for a second, but he'll be right back." The door opened a crack, and four yellow eyes peeped out. "You wanna come in and wait?"

"Okay," said George, not looking at the eyes.

"You alone here?" he asked as it closed the door, its back to George.

"Yeah, why?"

He slit its throat from behind, then searched the apartment.

He found human bones and skulls, a half-eaten hand.

He found tanks with huge fat slugs floating in them.

"The children," he thought, and killed them all.

There were guns too, of a sort he had never seen before. He discharged one by accident, but fortunately it was noiseless. It seemed to fire little poisoned darts.

He pocketed the gun and as many boxes of darts he could and went back to Lil's place. When she saw him she writhed in helpless terror.

"Relax, honey" he said, opening her purse, "I just want to borrow your car keys."

He took the keys and went downstairs to the street.

Her care was still parked in the same general area in which she always parked it. He recognized it by the dent in the right fender. He got in, started it, and began driving aimlessly. He drove for hours, thinking – desperately searching for some way out. He turned on the car radio to see if he could get some music, but here was nothing but news and it was all about him, George Nada, the homicidal maniac. The announcer was one of the masters, but he sounded a little scared. Why should he be? What could one man do?

George wasn't surprised when he saw the road block, and he turned off on a side street before he reached it. No little trip to the country for you, Georgie boy, he thought to himself.

They had just discovered what he had done back at Lil's place, so they would probably be looking for Lil's car. He parked it in an alley and took the subway. There were no aliens on the subway, for some reason. Maybe they were too good for such things, or maybe it was just because it was so late at night.

When one finally did get on, George got off.

He went up to the street and went into a bar. One of the Fascinators was on the TV, saying over and over again, "We are your friends. We are your friends. We are your friends." The stupid lizard sounded scared. Why? What could one man do against all of them?

George ordered a beer, the it suddenly struck him that the Fascinator on the TV no longer seemed to have any power over him. He looked at it again and thought, "It has to believe it can master me to do it. The lightest hint of fear on its part and the power to hypnotize is lost." They flashed George's picture on the TV screen and George retreated to the phone booth. He called his control, the Chief of Police.

"Hello, Robinson?" he asked.

"Speaking."

"This is George Nada. I've figured out how to wake people up."

"What? George, hang on. Where are you?" Robinson sounded almost hysterical.

He hung up and paid and left the bar. They would probably trace his call.

He caught another subway and went downtown.

It was dawn when he entered the building housing the biggest of the city's TV studios. He consulted the building director and then went up in the elevator. The cop in front of the studio recognized him. "Why, you're Nada!" he gasped.

George didn't like to shoot him with the poison dart gun, but he had to.

He had to kill several more before he got into the studio itself, including all the engineers on duty. There were a lot of police sirens outside, excited shouts, and running footsteps on the stairs. The alien was sitting before the the TV camera saying, "We are your friends. We are your friends," and didn't see George come on. When George shot him with the needle gun he simply stopped in mid-sentence and sat there, dead. George stood near him and said, imitating the alien croak, "Wake up. Wake up. See us as we are and kill us!"

It was George's voice the city heard that morning, but it was the Fascinator's image, and the city did awake for the very first time and the war began.

George did not live to see the victory that finally came. He died of a heart attack at exactly eight o'clock.