

# “To Serve Man”

By Damon Knight

## Radical Introduction by Peter Dudink

“To Serve Man” was written in the capitalist stronghold of the world, the U.S., and it was deeply influenced by the Cold War hysteria about communism and socialism (com-socs). It satirizes the Cold War paranoia about com-socs. While that paranoia was founded on the false idea that com-socs were all plotting to rule the world and eliminate religion and God, Damon Knight’s story satirizes this by focusing on the truth – the fact that com-socs are people who are, primarily, interested in sharing and helping. The main character welcomes the com-soc Kanamit aliens, but Grigori can’t overcome his capitalist ideology or indoctrination bias; he insists that the Kanamit must have a selfish profit motive for wanting to share and help. He is so certain in his assumption that he even twists the English meaning of “to serve” to mean “to cook” and even “to eat.”

But capitalism is not an American invention, at least not insofar as capitalism represents an economic system characterized by competition among people for maximum wealth. This competition is as old as civilization. As such, “To Serve Man” is not merely a satire of post-WW2 America, it is a satire of civilization.

The limit of “To Serve Man” is best revealed by an examination of the three gifts offered by the Kanamit, each of which is a form of technology. One gift is a device that produces energy, another improves harvests, another prevents war. These gifts serve to create a paradise on Earth. However, none of them are realistic or even necessary. Human life would not improve if it were given more non-human energy to fuel its machines, and technology will never stop war – it has always served to intensify violence – even defensive violence. As for improving soil fertility and harvests, the Green Revolution accomplished that in the 1960s, but population growth has already devoured the gains. This isn’t to say that humans cannot create a paradise on Earth; I only suggest that it will not be created in the manner envisioned by Damon Knight.

## Assignment:

Study the Cold War anti-com-soc hysteria and policies that swept America and explain, with historical references, how “To Serve Man” was influenced by it and by the economic and political actions of the Soviet Union.

# “To Serve Man”

The Kanamit were not very pretty, it’s true. They looked something like pigs and something like people, and that is not an attractive combination. Seeing them for the first time shocked you; that was

their handicap. When a thing with the countenance of a fiend comes from the stars and offers a gift, you are disinclined to accept.

I don't know what we expected interstellar visitors to look like -- those who thought about it at all, that is. Angels, perhaps, or something too alien to be really awful. Maybe that's why we were all so horrified and repelled when they landed in their great ships and we saw what they really were like.

The Kanamit were short and very hairy -- thick, bristly brown-gray hair all over their abominably plump bodies. Their noses were snoutlike and their eyes small, and they had thick hands of three fingers each. They wore green leather harnesses and green shorts, but I think the shorts were a concession to our notions of public decency. The garments were quite modishly cut, with slash pockets and half-belts in the back. The Kanamit had a sense of humor, anyhow.

There were three of them at this session of the U.N., and, lord, I can't tell you how queer it looked to see them there in the middle of a solemn plenary session -- three fat piglike creatures in green harnesses and shorts, sitting at the long table below the podium, surrounded by the packed arcs of delegates from every nation. They sat correctly upright, politely watching each speaker. Their flat ears drooped over the earphones. Later on, I believe, they learned every human language, but at this time they knew only French and English.

They seemed perfectly at ease -- and that, along with their humor, was a thing that tended to make me like them. I was in the minority; I didn't think they were trying to put anything over.

The delegate from Argentina got up and said that his government was interested in the demonstration of a new cheap power source, which the Kanamit had made at the previous session, but that the Argentine government could not commit itself as to its future policy without a much more thorough examination.

It was what all the delegates were saying, but I had to pay particular attention to Señor Valdes, because he tended to sputter and his diction was bad. I got through the translation all right, with only one or two momentary hesitations, and then switched to the Polish-English line to hear how Grigori was doing with Janciewicz. Janciewicz was the cross Grigori had to bear, just as Valdes was mine.

Janciewicz repeated the previous remarks with a few ideological variations, and then the Secretary-General recognized the delegate from France, who introduced Dr. Denis Lévêque, the criminologist, and a great deal of complicated equipment was wheeled in. Dr. Lévêque remarked that the question in many people's minds had been aptly expressed by the delegate from the U.S.S.R. at the preceding session, when he demanded, "What is the motive of the Kanamit? What is their purpose in offering us these unprecedented gifts, while asking nothing in return?"

The doctor then said, "At the request of several delegates and with the full consent of our guests, the Kanamit, my associates and I have made a series of tests upon the Kanamit with the equipment which you see before you. These tests will now be repeated."

A murmur ran through the chamber. There was a fusillade of flashbulbs, and one of the TV cameras moved up to focus on the instrument board of the doctor's equipment. At the same time, the huge television screen behind the podium lighted up, and we saw the blank faces of two dials, each with its pointer resting at zero, and a strip of paper tape with a stylus point resting against it.

The doctor's assistants were fastening wires to the temples of one of the Kanamit, wrapping a canvas-covered rubber tube around his forearm, and taping something to the palm of his right hand.

In the screen, we saw the paper tape begin to move while the stylus traced a slow zigzag pattern along it. One of the needles began to jump rhythmically; the other flipped halfway over and stayed there, wavering slightly.

"these are the standard instruments for testing the truth of a statement," said Dr. Lévêque. "Our first object, since the physiology of the Kanamit is unknown to us, was to determine whether or not they react to these tests as human beings do. We will now repeat one of the many experiments which were made in the endeavor to discover this."

He pointed to the first dial. 'this instrument registers the subject's heartbeat. This shows the electrical conductivity of the skin in the palm of his hand, a measure of perspiration, which increases under stress. And this --' pointing to the tape-and-stylus device -- 'shows the pattern and intensity of the electrical waves emanating from his brain. It has been shown, with human subjects, that all these readings vary markedly depending upon whether the subject is speaking the truth.'

He picked up two large pieces of cardboard, one red and one black. The red one was a square about three feet on a side; the black was a rectangle three and a half feet long. He addressed himself to the Kanama.

"Which of these is longer than the other?"

'the red,' said the Kanama.

Both needles leaped wildly, and so did the line on the unrolling tape.

"I shall repeat the question," said the doctor. "Which of these is longer than the other?"

'the black,' said the creature.

This time the instruments continued in their normal rhythm.

"How did you come to this planet?" asked the doctor.

"Walked," replied the Kanama.

Again the instruments responded, and there was a subdued ripple of laughter in the chamber.

"Once more," said the doctor. "How did you come to this planet?"

"In a spaceship," said the Kanama, and the instruments did not jump.

The doctor again faced the delegation. "Many such experiments were made," he said, "and my colleagues and myself are satisfied that the mechanisms are effective. Now --" he turned to the Kanama -- "I shall ask our distinguished guest to reply to the question put at the last session by the delegate of the U.S.S.R. -- namely, what is the motive of the Kanamit people in offering these great gifts to the people of Earth?"

The Kanama rose. Speaking this time in English, he said, "On my planet there is a saying, 'There are more riddles in a stone than in a philosopher's head.' The motives of intelligent beings, though they may at times appear obscure, are simple things compared to the complex workings of the natural universe. Therefore I hope that the people of Earth will understand, and believe, when I tell you that our mission upon your planet is simply this -- to bring you the peace and plenty which we ourselves enjoy, and which we have in the past brought to other races throughout the galaxy. When your world has no more hunger, no more war, no more needless suffering, that will be our reward."

And the needles had not jumped once.

The delegate from the Ukraine jumped to his feet, asking to be recognized, but the time was up and the Secretary-General closed the session.

I met Grigori as we were leaving the chamber. His face was red with excitement. "Who promoted that circus?" he demanded.

'The tests looked genuine to me,' I told him.

"A circus!" he said vehemently. "A second-rate farce! If they were genuine, Peter, why was debate stifled?"

'there'll be time for debate tomorrow, surely.'

'tomorrow the doctor and his instruments will be back in Paris. Plenty of things can happen before tomorrow. In the name of sanity, man, how can anybody trust a thing that looks as if it ate a baby?'

I was a little annoyed. I said, "Are you sure you're not more worried about their politics than their appearance?"

He said, "Bah," and went away.

The next day reports began to come in from government laboratories all over the world where the Kanamit's power source was being tested. They were wildly enthusiastic. I don't understand such things myself, but it seemed that those little metal boxes would give more electrical power than an

atomic pile, for next to nothing and nearly forever. And it was said that they were so cheap to manufacture that everybody in the world could have one of his own. In the early afternoon there were reports that seventeen countries had already begun to set up factories to turn them out.

The next day the Kanamit turned up with plans and specimens of a gadget that would increase the fertility of any arable land by 60 to 100 per cent. It speeded the formation of nitrates in the soil, or something. There was nothing in the newscasts any more but stories about the Kanamit. The day after that, they dropped their bombshell.

“You now have potentially unlimited power and increased food supply,” said one of them. He pointed with his three-fingered hand to an instrument that stood on the table before him. It was a box on a tripod, with a parabolic reflector on the front of it. “We offer you today a third gift which is at least as important as the first two.”

He beckoned to the TV men to roll their cameras into closeup position. Then he picked up a large sheet of cardboard covered with drawings and English lettering. We saw it on the large screen above the podium; it was clearly legible.

“We are informed that this broadcast is being relayed throughout your world,” said the Kanama. “I wish that everyone who has equipment for taking photographs from television screens would use it now.”

The Secretary-General leaned forward and asked a question sharply, but the Kanama ignored him.

“this device,” he said, “generates a field in which no explosive, of whatever nature, can detonate.”

There was uncomprehending silence.

The Kanama said, “It cannot now be suppressed. If one nation has it, all must have it.” When nobody seemed to understand, he explained bluntly, “there will be no more war.”

That was the biggest news of the millennium, and it was perfectly true. It turned out that the explosions the Kanama was talking about even included gasoline and Diesel explosions. They had simply made it impossible for anybody to mount or equip a modern army.

We could have gone back to bows and arrows, of course, but that wouldn’t have satisfied the military. Besides, there wouldn’t be any reason to make war. Every nation would soon have everything.

Nobody ever gave another thought to those lie-detector experiments, or asked the Kanamit what their politics were. Grigori was put out; he had nothing to prove his suspicions.

I quit my job at the U.N. a few months later, because I foresaw that it was going to die under me anyhow. U.N. business was booming at the time, but after a year or so there was going to be nothing for it to do. Every nation on Earth was well on the way to being completely self-supporting; they weren’t going to need much arbitration.

I accepted a position as translator with the Kanamit Embassy, and it was there I ran into Grigori again. I was glad to see him, but I couldn’t imagine what he was doing there.

“I thought you were on the opposition,” I said. “Don’t tell me you’re convinced the Kanamit are all right.”

He looked rather shamefaced. “they’re not what they look, anyhow,” he said.

It was as much of a concession as he could decently make, and I invited him down to the embassy lounge for a drink. It was an intimate kind of place, and he grew confidential over the second daiquiri.

“They fascinate me,” he said. “I hate them instinctively still -- that hasn’t changed -- but I can evaluate it. You were right, obviously; they mean us nothing but good. But do you know -- ” he leaned across the table -- “the question of the Soviet delegate was never answered.”

I am afraid I snorted.

“No, really,” he said. “They told us what they wanted to do -- „to bring to you the peace and plenty which we ourselves enjoy.“ But they didn’t say *why*.”

“Why do missionaries -- ”

“Missionaries be damned!” he said angrily. “Missionaries have a religious motive. If these creatures have a religion, they haven’t once mentioned it. What’s more, they didn’t send a missionary group; they sent a diplomatic delegation -- a group representing the will and policy of their whole people. Now just what have the Kanamit, as a people or a nation, got to gain from our welfare?”

I said, “Cultural -- ”

“Cultural cabbage soup! No, it’s something less obvious than that, something obscure that belongs to their psychology and not to ours. But trust me, Peter, there is no such thing as a completely disinterested altruism. In one way or another, they have something to gain.”

“And that’s why you’re here,” I said. ‘to try to find out what it is.’”

“Correct. I wanted to get on one of the ten-year exchange groups to their home planet, but I couldn’t; the quota was filled a week after they made the announcement. This is the next best thing. I’m studying their language, and you know that language reflects the basic assumptions of the people who use it. I’ve got a fair command of the spoken lingo already. It’s not hard, really, and there are hints in it. Some of the idioms are quite similar to English. I’m sure I’ll get the answer eventually.”

“More power,” I said, and we went back to work.

I saw Grigori frequently from then on, and he kept me posted about his progress. He was highly excited about a month after that first meeting; he said he’d got hold of a book of the Kanamit’s and was trying to puzzle it out. They wrote in ideographs, worse than Chinese, but he was determined to fathom it if it took him years. He wanted my help.

Well, I was interested in spite of myself, for I knew it would be a long job. We spent some evenings together, working with material from Kanamit bulletin boards and so forth, and with the extremely limited English-Kanamit dictionary they issued to the staff. My conscience bothered me about the stolen book, but gradually I became absorbed by the problem. Languages are my field, after all. I couldn’t help being fascinated.

We got the title worked out in a few weeks. It was *How to Serve Man*, evidently a handbook they were giving out to new Kanamit members of the embassy staff. They had new ones in, all the time now, a shipload about once a month; they were opening all kinds of research laboratories, clinics and so on. If there was anybody on Earth besides Grigori who still distrusted those people, he must have been somewhere in the middle of Tibet.

It was astonishing to see the changes that had been wrought in less than a year. There were no more standing armies, no more shortages, no unemployment. When you picked up a newspaper you didn’t see *H-Bomb* or *Satellite* leaping out at you; the news was always good. It was a hard thing to get used to. The Kanamit were working on human biochemistry, and it was known around the embassy that they were nearly ready to announce methods of making our race taller and stronger and healthier -- practically a race of supermen -- and they had a potential cure for heart disease and cancer.

I didn’t see Grigori for a fortnight after we finished working out the title of the book; I was on a long-overdue vacation in Canada. When I got back, I was shocked by the change in his appearance.

“What on Earth is wrong with you, Grigori?” I asked. “You look like the very devil.”

“Come down to the lounge.”

I went with him, and he gulped a stiff Scotch as if he needed it.

“Come on, man, what’s the matter?” I urged.

‘the Kanamit have put me on the passenger list for the next exchange ship,’ he said. “You, too, otherwise I wouldn’t be talking to you.”

“Well,” I said, “but -- ”

‘They’re not altruists.’”

I tried to reason with him. I pointed out they'd made Earth a paradise compared to what it was before. He only shook his head.

Then I said, "Well, what about those lie-detector tests?"

"A farce," he replied, without heat. "I said so at the time, you fool. They told the truth, though as far as it went."

"And the book?" I demanded, annoyed. "What about that -- *How to Serve Man*? That wasn't put there for you to read. They *mean* it. How do you explain that?"

"I've read the first paragraph of that book," he said. "Why do you suppose I haven't slept for a week?"

I said, "Well?" and he smiled a curious, twisted smile.

"It's a cookbook," he said.