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and other short stories

Henry Kuttner

Beggars in Velvet

Published in Astounding Science Fiction, Vol. 36, No. 4 (December 1945).

Night had fallen again. I lay looking up at the coldly sparkling stars and felt my mind toppling into that endless void of infinity.

I felt very clear-headed.

I had been lying here for a long time without moving, looking up at the stars. The snow had stopped some while ago, and the starlight glittered on its blue-shadowed mounds.

There was no use waiting any longer. I reached into my belt and took out my knife. I laid its blade across my left wrist and considered. That might take too long. There were quicker ways, in places where the body was more vulnerable.

But I was too tired to move. In a moment I would draw the blade back, with a heavy, pressing motion. Then it would be over, for there was no use waiting for rescue now, and I was blind and deaf and mute here behind the mountain barrier. Life had gone out of the world completely. The little sparks of glowing warmth which even insects possess, the strange, pulsing beat of life that flows like a tidal current through the universe--perhaps emanating from the microscopic organisms which exist everywhere--the light and warmth had gone out. It seemed as though the soul had been drained from everything.

Unconsciously I must have sent out a thought asking for help, because I heard a response within my mind. I almost shouted before I realized that the response had come from my own mind, some

memory summoned up by associations.

You're one of us, the thought had said.

Why should I remember that? It reminded me of... Hobson. Hobson and the Beggars in Velvet. For McNey had not solved the ultimate problem.

The next battle in the war had been fought in Sequoia.

Should I remember?

The blade of the knife lay wire-cold across my wrist. It would be very easy to die. Much easier than to keep on living, blind and deaf and alone.

You're one of us, my thought said again.

And my mind went back to a bright morning in a town near the old Canadian border, and the smell of cold, pine-sharp air, and the rhythmic beat of a man's footsteps along Redwood Street--a hundred years ago.

It was like stepping on a snake. The thing, concealed in fresh, green grass, squirmed underfoot and turned and struck venomously. But the thought was not that of reptile or beast; only man was capable of the malignance that was, really, a perversion of intellect.

Burkhalter's dark face did not change; his easy stride did not alter. But his mind had instantly drawn back from that blind malevolence, alert and ready, while all through the village Baldies paused imperceptibly in their work or conversation as their minds touched Burkhalter's.

No human noticed.

Under bright morning sunlight Redwood Street curved cheerful and friendly before Burkhalter. But a breath of uneasiness slipped along it, the same cool, dangerous wind that had been blowing for days through the thoughts of every telepath in Sequoia. Ahead were a few early shoppers, some children on their way to school, a group gathered outside the barber shop, one of the doctors from the hospital.

Where is he?

The answer came swiftly. Can't locate him. Near you, though--

Someone--a woman, the overtones of her thought showed--sent a message tinged with emotional confusion, almost hysterical. One of the patients from the hospital--

Instantly the thoughts of the others closed reassuringly around her, warm with friendliness and comfort. Even Burkhalter took time to send a clear thought of unity. He recognized among the others the cool, competent personality of Duke Heath, the Baldy priest-medic, with its subtle psychological shadings that only another telepath could sense.

It's Selfridge, Heath told the woman, while the other Baldies listened. He's just drunk. I think I'm nearest, Burkhalter. I'm coming.

A helicopter curved overhead, its freight-gliders swinging behind it, stabilized by their gyroscopes. It swept over the western ridge and was gone toward the Pacific. As its humming died, Burkhalter could hear the muffled roar of the cataract up the valley. He was vividly conscious of the waterfall's feathery whiteness plunging down the cliff, of the slopes of pine and fir and redwood around Sequoia, of the distant noise of the cellulose mills. He focused on these clean, familiar things to shut out the sickly foulness that blew from

Selfridge's mind to his own. Sensibility and sensitivity had gone hand in hand with the Baldies, and Burkhalter had wondered more than once how Duke Heath managed to maintain his balance in view of the man's work among the psychiatric patients at the hospital. The race of Baldies had come too soon; they were not aggressive; but race-survival depended on competition.

He's in the tavern, a woman's thought said. Burkhalter automatically jerked away from the message; he knew the mind from which it came. Logic told him instantly that the source didn't matter—in this instance. Barbara Pell was a paranoid; therefore an enemy. But both paranoids and Baldies were desperately anxious to avoid any open break. Though their ultimate goals lay worlds apart, yet their paths sometimes paralleled.

But already it was too late. Fred Selfridge came out of the tavern, blinked against the sunlight, and saw Burkhalter. The trader's thin, hollow-cheeked face twisted into a sour grin. The blurred malignance of his thought drove before him as he walked toward Burkhalter, and one hand kept making little darts toward the misericordia swung at his belt. He stopped before Burkhalter, blocking the Baldy's progress. His grin broadened.

Burkhalter had paused. A dry panic tightened his throat. He was afraid, not for himself, but for his race, and every Baldy in Sequoia knew that—and watched. He said, "Morning, Fred."

Selfridge hadn't shaved that morning. Now he rubbed his stubbled chin and let his eyelids droop. "Mr. Burkhalter," he said. "Consul Burkhalter. Good thing you remembered to wear a cap this morning. Skinheads catch cold pretty easy."

Play for time, Duke Heath ordered. I'm coming. I'll fix it.

"I didn't pull any wires to get this job, Fred," Burkhalter said. "The Towns made me consul. Why blame me for it?"

"You pulled wires, all right," Selfridge said. "I know graft when I see it. You were a schoolteacher from Modoc or some hick town. What the devil do you know about Hedgehounds?"

"Not as much as you do," Burkhalter admitted. "You've had the experience."

"Sure. Sure I have. So they take a half-baked teacher and make him consul to the Hedgehounds. A greenhorn who doesn't even know those bichos have got cannibal tribes. I traded with the woodsmen for thirty years, and I know how to handle 'em. Are you going to read 'em pretty little stories out of books?"

"I'll do what I'm told. I'm not the boss."

"No. But maybe your friends are. Connections! If I'd had the same connections you've got, I'd be sitting on my tail like you, pulling in credits for the same work. Only I'd do that work better--a lot better."

"I'm not interfering with your business," Burkhalter said. "You're still trading, aren't you? I'm minding my own affairs."

"Are you? How do I know what you tell the Hedgehounds?"

"My records are open to anybody."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. My job's just to promote peaceful relations with the Hedgehounds. Not to do any trading, except what they want--and then I refer 'em to you."

"It sounds fine," Selfridge said. "Except for one thing. You can read my mind and tell the Hedgehounds all about my private business."

Burkhalter's guard slipped; he couldn't have helped it. He had stood the man's mental nearness as long as he could, though it was like breathing foul air. "Afraid of that?" he asked, and regretted the words instantly. The voices in his mind cried: Careful!

Selfridge flushed. "So you do it after all, eh? All that fine talk about you skinheads respecting people's privacy--sure! No wonder you got the consulate! Reading minds--"

"Hold on," Burkhalter said. "I've never read a non-Baldy's mind in my life. That's the truth."

"Is it?" the trader sneered. "How the devil do I know if you're lying? But you can look inside my head and see if I'm telling the truth. What you Baldies need is to be taught your place, and for two coins I'd--"

Burkhalter's mouth felt stiff. "I don't duel," he said, with an effort. "I won't duel."

"Yellow," Selfridge said, and waited, his hand hovering over the misericordia's hilt.

And there was the usual quandary. No telepath could possibly lose a duel with a non-Baldy, unless he wanted to commit suicide. But he dared not win, either. The Baldies baked their own humble pie; a minority that lives on sufferance must not reveal its superiority, or it won't survive. One such incident might have breached the dyke the telepaths had painfully erected against the rising tide of intolerance.

For the dyke was too long. It embraced all of mankind. And it was impossible to watch every inch of that incredible levee of custom, orientation and propaganda, though the basic tenets were instilled in

each Baldy from infancy. Some day the dyke would collapse, but each hour of postponement meant the gathering of a little more strength--

Duke Heath's voice said, "A guy like you, Selfridge, would be better off dead."

Sudden shock touched Burkhalter. He shifted his gaze to the priest-medic, remembering the subtle tension he had recently sensed under Heath's deep calm, and wondering if this was the blowoff. Then he caught the thought in Heath's mind and relaxed, though warily.

Beside the Baldy was Ralph Selfridge, a smaller, slighter edition of Fred. He was smiling rather sheepishly.

Fred Selfridge showed his teeth. "Listen, Heath," he snapped. "Don't try to stand on your position. You haven't got one. You're a surrogate. No skinhead can be a real priest or a medic."

"Sure they can," Heath said. "But they don't." His round, youthful face twisted into a scowl. "Listen to me--"

"I'm not listening to--"

"Shut up!"

Selfridge gasped in surprise. He was caught flat-footed, undecided whether to use his misericordia or his fists, and while he hesitated, Heath went on angrily.

"I said you'd be better off dead and I meant it! This kid brother of yours thinks you're such a hotshot he imitates everything you do. Now look at him! If the epidemic hits Sequoia, he won't have enough resistance to work up antibodies, and the young idiot won't let me

give him preventive shots. I suppose he thinks he can live on whiskey like you!"

Fred Selfridge frowned at Heath, stared at his younger brother, and looked back at the priest-medic. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Leave Ralph alone. He's all right."

"Well, start saving for his funeral expenses," Heath said callously. "As a surrogate medic, I'll make a prognosis right now--rigor mortis?"

Selfridge licked his lips. "Wait a minute. The kid isn't sick, is he?"

"There's an epidemic down toward Columbia Crossing," Heath said. "One of the new virus mutations. If it hits us here, there'll be trouble. It's a bit like tetanus, but avertin's no good. Once the nerve centers are hit, nothing can be done. Preventive shots will help a lot, especially when a man's got the susceptible blood-type--as Ralph has."

Burkhalter caught a command from Heath's mind.

"You could use some shots yourself, Fred," the priest-medic went on. "Still, your blood type is b, isn't it? And you're tough enough to throw off an infection. This virus is something new, a mutation of the old flu bug--"

He went on. Across the street someone called Burkhalter's name and the consul slipped away, unnoticed except for a parting glare from Selfridge.

A slim, red-haired girl was waiting under a tree at the corner. Burkhalter grimaced inwardly as he saw he could not avoid her. He was never quite able to control the turmoil of feeling which the very

sight or thought of Barbara Pell stirred up within him. He met her bright narrow eyes, full of pinpoints of light. He saw her round slimness that looked so soft and would, he thought, be as hard to the touch as her mind was hard to the thought's touch. Her bright red wig, almost too luxuriant, spilled heavy curls down about the square, alert face to move like red Medusa-locks upon her shoulders when she turned her head. Curiously, she had a redhead's typical face, high-cheekboned, dangerously alive. There is a quality of the red-haired that goes deeper than the hair, for Barbara Pell had, of course, been born as hairless as any Baldy.

"You're a fool," she said softly as he came up beside her. "Why don't you get rid of Selfridge?"

Burkhalter shook his head. "No. And don't you try anything."

"I tipped you off that he was in the tavern. And I got here before anybody else, except Heath. If we could work together--"

"We can't."

"Dozens of times we've saved you traitors," the woman said bitterly. "Will you wait until the humans stamp out your lives--"

Burkhalter walked past her and turned toward the pathway that climbed the steep ascent leading out of Sequoia. He was vividly aware of Barbara Pell looking after him. He could see her as clearly as if he had eyes in the back of his head, her bright, dangerous face, her beautiful body, her bright, beautiful, insane thoughts--

For behind all their hatefulness, the paranoids' vision was as beautiful and tempting as the beauty of Barbara Pell. Perilously tempting. A free world, where Baldies could walk and live and think in safety, no longer bending the scope of their minds into artificial, cramping limits

as once men bent their backs in subservience to their masters. A bent back is a humiliating thing, but even a serf's mind is free to range. To cramp the mind is to cramp the soul, and no humiliation could surpass the humiliation of that.

But there was no such world as the paranoids dreamed of. The price would be too high. What shall it profit a man, thought Burkhalter wryly, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? The words might first have been spoken in this connection and no other, so perfectly did they apply to it. The price must be murder, and whoever paid that price would automatically sully the world he bought with it until, if he were a normal creature, he could never enjoy what he had paid so high to earn. Burkhalter called up a bit of verse into his mind and savored again the bitter melancholy of the poet who wrote it, perhaps more completely than the poet himself ever dreamed. I see the country, far away, Where I shall never stand. The heart goes where no footstep may, Into the promised land.

Barbara Pell's mind shot after him an angry, evil shaft of scorn and hatred. "You're a fool, you're all fools, you don't deserve telepathy if you degrade it. If you'd only join us in--" The thought ceased to be articulate and ran suddenly, gloatingly red with spilled blood, reeking saltily of it, as if her whole mind bathed deliciously in the blood of all humans.

Burkhalter jerked his thoughts away from contact with hers, sickened. It isn't the end of free living they want any more, he told himself in sudden realization—it's the means they're lusting after now. They've lost sight of a free world. All they want is killing.

"Fool, fool, fool!" Barbara Pell's thoughts screamed after him. "Wait and see! Wait until—one times two is two, two times two is four, three times two--"

Burkhalter thought grimly, "They're up to something," and sent his mind probing gingerly past the sudden artificial barrier with which she had sought to blank out a thought even she realized was indiscreet. She fought the probing viciously. He sensed only vague, bloody visions stirring behind the barrier. Then she laughed without a sound and hurled a clear, terrible, paranoid thought at him, a picture of sickening clarity that all but splashed in his face with its overrunning redness.

He drew his mind back with swiftness that was pure reflex. As safe to touch fire as thoughts like hers. It was one way any paranoid could shut out the inquisitive thoughts of a non-paranoid when need arose. And of course, normally no Baldy would dream of probing uninvited into another mind. Burkhalter shuddered.

They were up to something, certainly. He must pass the episode on to those whose business it was to know about the paranoids. Barbara Pell's mind was not, in any case, likely to yield much information on secret plans. She was an executioner, not a planner. He withdrew his thoughts from her, fastidiously, shaking off the contamination as a cat shakes water from its feet.

He climbed the steep slope that led out of Sequoia to his home, deliberately shutting his mind from all things behind him. Fifteen minutes' walk brought him to the rustic log-and-plastic house built near the shadow of the West Canadian Forest. This was his consulate, and only the cabin of the Selfridge brothers lay farther out in the wilderness that stretched north to the Beaufort Sea that mingles with the Arctic Ocean.

By his desk a glowing red light indicated a message in the terminal of the pneumatic that stretched for six miles into the forest. He read it carefully. A delegation of Hedgehounds would arrive soon, representatives from three tribal groups. Well-- He checked supplies,

televised the general store, and sat down behind his desk to wait. Heath would be along soon. Meanwhile he closed his eyes and concentrated on the fresh smell of pine that blew through the open windows. But the fresh, clean scent was sullied by vagrant thought currents that tainted the air. Burkhalter shivered.

II

Sequoia lay near the border of old Canada, now an immense wilderness that the forest had largely reclaimed. Cellulose byproducts were its industry, and there was an immense psychiatric hospital, which accounted for the high percentage of Baldies in the village. Otherwise Sequoia was distinguished from the hundreds of thousands of other towns that dotted America by the recent establishment of a diplomatic station there, the consulate that would be a means of official contact with the wandering tribes that retreated into the forests as civilization encroached. It was a valley town, bordered by steep slopes, with their enormous conifers and the white-water cataracts racing down from snowy summits. Not far westward, beyond the Strait of Georgia and Vancouver Island, lay the Pacific. But there were few highways; transport was aerial. And communication was chiefly by teleradio.

Four hundred people, more or less, lived in Sequoia, a tight little semi-independent settlement, bartering its specialized products for shrimps and pompano from Lafitte; books from Modoc; beryllium-steel daggers and motor-plows from American Gun; clothing from Dempsey and Gee Eye. The Boston textile mills were gone with Boston; that smoking, gray desolation had not changed since the year of the Blowup. But there was still plenty of room in America, no matter how much the population might increase; war had thinned the population. And as technology advanced so did improvements in reclamation of arid and unfertile land, and the harder strains of the

kudzu plant had already opened vast new tracts for farming. But agriculture was not the only industry. The towns specialized, never expanding into cities, but sending out spores that would grow into new villages--or, rather, reaching out like raspberry canes, to take root whenever they touched earth.

Burkhalter was deliberately not thinking of the red-haired woman when Duke Heath came in. The priest-medic caught the strained, negative mental picture, and nodded.

"Barbara Pell," he said. "I saw her." Both men blurred the surface of their minds. That couldn't mask their thoughts, but if any other brain began probing, there would be an instant's warning, during which they could take precautions. Necessarily, however, the conversation stayed oral rather than telepathic.

"They can smell trouble coming," Burkhalter said. "They've been infiltrating Sequoia lately, haven't they?"

"Yes. The minute you copped this consulate, they started to come in." Heath nibbled his knuckles. "In forty years the paranoids have built up quite an organization."

"Sixty years," Burkhalter said. "My grandfather saw it coming back in '82. There was a paranoid in Modoc--a lone wolf at the time, but it was one of the first symptoms. And since then--"

"Well, they've grown qualitatively, not quantitatively. There are more true Baldies now than paranoids. Psychologically they're handicapped. They hate to intermarry with non-Baldies. Whereas we do, and the dominant strain goes on--spreads out."

"For a while," Burkhalter said.

Heath frowned. "There's no epidemic at Columbia Crossing. I had to

get Selfridge off your neck somehow, and he's got a strongly paternal instinct toward his brother. That did it--but not permanently. With that so-and-so, the part equals the whole. You got the consulate; he had a nice little racket gypping the Hedgehounds; he hates you--so he jumps on your most vulnerable point. Also, he rationalizes. He tells himself that if you didn't have the unfair advantage of being a Baldy, you'd never have landed the consulate."

"It was unfair."

"We had to do it," Heath said. "Non-Baldies mustn't find out what we're building up among the Hedgehounds. Some day the woods folk may be our only safety. If a non-Baldy had got the consulate--"

"I'm working in the dark," Burkhalter said. "All I know is that I've got to do what the Mutes tell me."

"I don't know any more than you do. The paranoids have their Power--that secret band of communication we can't tap--and only the Mutes have a method of fighting that weapon. Don't forget that, while we can't read a Mute's mind, the paranoids can't either. If you knew their secrets, your mind would be an open book--any telepath could read it."

Burkhalter didn't answer. Heath sighed and watched pine needles glittering in the sunlight outside the windows.

"It's not easy for me either," he said. "To be a surrogate. No non-Baldy has to be a priest as well as a medic. But I have to. The doctors up at the hospital feel more strongly about it than I do. They know how many psychotic cases have been cured because we can read minds. Meanwhile--" He shrugged.

Burkhalter was staring northward. "A new land is what we need," he

said.

"We need a new world. Some day we'll get it."

A shadow fell across the door. Both men turned. A small figure was standing there, a fat little man with close-curling hair and mild blue eyes. The misericordia at his belt seemed incongruous, as though those pudgy fingers would fumble ludicrously with the hilt.

No Baldy will purposely read a nontelepath's mind, but there is an instinctive recognition between Baldies. So Burkhalter and Heath knew instantly that the stranger was a telepath--and then, on the heels of that thought, came sudden, startled recognition of the emptiness where thought should be. It was like stepping on clear ice and finding it clear water instead. Only a few men could guard their minds completely thus. They were the Mutes.

"Hello," said the stranger, coming in and perching himself on the desk's edge. "I see you know me. We'll stay oral, if you don't mind. I can read your thoughts, but you can't read mine." He grinned. "No use wondering why, Burkhalter. If you knew, the paranoids would find out too. Now. My name's Ben Hobson." He paused. "Trouble, eh? Well, we'll kick that around later. First let me get this off my chest."

Burkhalter sent a swift glance at Heath. "There are paranoids in town. Don't tell me too much, unless--"

"Don't worry. I won't," Hobson chuckled. "What do you know about the Hedgehounds?"

"Descendants of the nomad tribes that didn't join the villages after the Blowup. Gypsies. Woods folk. Friendly enough."

"That's right," Hobson said. "Now what I'm telling you is common knowledge, even among the paranoids. You should know it. We've

spotted a few cells among the Hedgehounds--Baldies. It started by accident, forty years ago, when a Baldy named Line Cody was adopted by Hedgehounds and reared without knowing his heritage. Later he found out. He's still living with the Hedgehounds, and so are his sons."

"Cody?" Burkhalter said slowly. "I've heard stories of the Cody--"

"Psychological propaganda. The Hedgehounds are barbarians. But we want 'em friendly and we want to clear the way, for joining them, if that ever becomes necessary. Twenty years ago we started building up a figurehead in the forests, a living symbol who'd be overtly a shaman and really a delegate for us. We used mumbo-jumbo. Line Cody dressed up in a trick suit, we gave him gadgets, and the Hedgehounds finally developed the legend of the Cody--a sort of benevolent woods spirit who acts as supernatural monitor. They like him, they obey him, and they're afraid of him. Especially since he can appear in four places at the same time."

"Eh?" Burkhalter said.

"Cody had three sons," Hobson smiled. "It's one of them you'll see today. Your friend Selfridge has fixed up a little plot. You're due to be murdered by one of the Hedgehound chiefs when that delegation gets here. I can't interfere personally, but the Cody will. It's necessary for you to play along. Don't give any sign that you expect trouble. When the Cody steps in, the chiefs will be plenty impressed."

Heath said, "Wouldn't it have been better not to tell Burkhalter what to expect?"

"No. For two reasons. He can read the Hedgehounds'minds--I give him carte blanche on that--and he must string along with the Cody. o.k., Burkhalter?"

"o.k." the consul nodded.

"Then I'll push off." Hobson stood up, still smiling. "Good luck."

"Wait a minute," Heath said "What about Selfridge?"

"Don't kill him. Either of you. You know no Baldy must ever duel a non-Baldy."

Burkhalter was scarcely listening. He knew he must mention the thought he had surprised in Barbara Pell's mind, and he had been putting off the moment when he must speak her hateful name, open the gates of his thoughts wide enough to let her image slip back in, beautiful image, beautiful slender body, bright and dangerous and insane mind--

"I saw one of the paranoids in town a while ago," he said. "Barbara Pell. A nasty job, that woman. She let slip something about their plans. Covered up too fast for me to get much, but you might think about it. They're up to something planned for fairly soon, I gathered."

Hobson smiled at him. "Thanks. We're watching them. We'll keep an eye on the woman too. All right, then. Good luck."

He went out. Burkhalter and Heath looked at one another.

The Mute walked slowly down the path toward the village. His mouth was pursed as he whistled; his plump cheeks vibrated. As he passed a tall pine he abruptly unsheathed his dagger and sprang around the tree. The man lurking there was caught by surprise. Steel found its mark unerringly. The paranoid had time for only one desperate mental cry before he died.

Hobson wiped his dagger and resumed his journey. Under the close-

cropped brown wig a mechanism, shaped like a skull-cap, began functioning. Neither Baldy nor telepath could receive the signals Hobson was sending and receiving now.

"They know I'm here."

"Sometimes they do," a soundless voice came back. "They can't catch these modulated frequencies the helmets use, but they can notice the shield. Still, as long as none of 'em know why--"

"I just killed one."

"One less of the bichos," came the coldly satisfied response.

"I think I'd better stay here for a while. Paranoids have been infiltrating. Both Heath and Burkhalter think so. There's some contingent plan I can't read yet; the paranoids are thinking about it only on their own band."

"Then stay. Keep in touch. What about Burkhalter?"

"What we suspected. He's in love with the paranoid Barbara Pell. But he doesn't know it."

Both shocked abhorrence and unwilling sympathy were in the answering thought. "I can't remember anything like this ever happening before. He can read her mind; he knows she's paranoid--"

Hobson smiled. "The realization of his true feelings would upset him plenty, Jerry. Apparently you picked the wrong man for this job."

"Not from Burkhalter's record. He's always lived a pretty secluded life, but his character's above reproach. His empathy standing was high. And he taught sociology for six years at New Yale."

"He taught it, but I think it remained remote. He's known Barbara Pell for six weeks now. He's in love with her."

"But how--even subconsciously? Baldies instinctively hate and distrust the paranoids."

Hobson reached Sequoia's outskirts and kept going, past the terraced square where the blocky, insulated power station sat. "So it's perverse," he told the other Mute. "Some men are attracted only to ugly women. You can't argue with a thing like that. Burkhalter's fallen in love with a paranoid, and I hope to heaven he never realizes it. He might commit suicide. Or anything might happen. This is--" His thought moved with slow emphasis. "This is the most dangerous situation the Baldies have ever faced. Apparently nobody's paid much attention to Selfridge's talk, but the damage has been done. People have listened. And non-Baldies have always mistrusted us. If there's a blowoff, we're automatically the scapegoats."

"Like that, Ben?"

"The pogrom may start in Sequoia."

Once the chess game had started, there was no way to stop it. It was cumulative. The paranoids, the warped twin branch of the parallel telepathic mutation, were not insane; there was a psychoneurotic pathology. They had only one basic delusion. They were the super race. On that foundation they built their edifice of planetary sabotage.

Non-Baldies outnumbered them, and they could not fight the technology that flourished in the days of decentralization. But if the culture of the non-Baldies were weakened, wrecked--

Assassinations, deftly disguised as duels or accidents; secret sabotage in a hundred branches, from engineering to publishing;

propaganda, carefully sowed in the proper places--and civilization would have headed for a crack-up, except for one check.

The Baldies, the true, non-paranoid mutation, were fighting for the older race. They had to. They knew, as the blinded paranoids could not, that eventually the non-Baldies would learn of the chess game, and then nothing could stop a worldwide pogrom.

One advantage the paranoids had, for a while--a specialized band on which they could communicate telepathically, a wave length which could not be tapped. Then a Baldy technician had perfected the scrambler helmets, with a high-frequency modulation that was equally untappable. As long as a Baldy wore such a helmet under his wig, his mind could be read only by another Mute.

So they came to be called, a small, tight group of exterminators, sworn to destroy the paranoids completely--in effect, a police force, working in secret and never doffing the helmets which shut them out from the complete rapport that played so large a part in the psychic life of the Baldy race.

They had willingly given up a great part of their heritage. It was a curious paradox that only by strictly limiting their telepathic power could these few Baldies utilize their weapon against the paranoids. And what they fought for was the time of ultimate unification when the dominant mutation had become so numerically strong that in all the world, there would be no need for mental barriers or psychic embargoes.

Meanwhile the most powerful of the Baldy race, they could never know, except within a limited scope, the subtle gratification of the mental round-robins, when a hundred or a thousand minds would meet and merge into the deep, eternal peace that only telepaths can know.

They, too, were beggars in velvet.



Burkhalter said suddenly, "What's the matter with you, Duke?"

Heath didn't move. "Nothing."

"Don't give me that. Your thoughts are on quicksand."

"Maybe they are," Heath said. "The fact is, I need a rest. I love this work, but it does get me down sometimes."

"Well, take a vacation."

"Can't. We're too busy. Our reputation's so good we're getting cases from all over. We're one of the first mental sanitariums to go in for all-out Baldy psychoanalysis. It's been going on, of course, for years but sub rosa, more or less. People don't like the idea of Baldies prying into the minds of their relatives. However, since we started to show results--" His eyes lit up. "Even with psychosomatic illnesses we can help a lot, and mood disorders are our meat. The big question, you know, is why. Why they've been putting poison in the patient's food, why they watch him--and so forth. Once that question's answered fully, it usually gives the necessary clues. And the average patient's apt to shut up like a clam when the psychiatrist questions him. But--" Heath's excitement mounted, "this is the biggest thing in the history of medicine. There've been Baldies since the Blowup, and only now are the doctors opening their doors to us. Ultimate empathy. A psychotic locks his mind, so he's hard to treat. But we have the keys--"

"What are you afraid of?" Burkhalter asked quietly.

Heath stopped short. He examined his fingernails.

"It's not fear," he said at last. "It's occupational anxiety. Oh, the devil with that. Four-bit words. It's simpler, really; you can put it in the form of an axiom. You can't touch pitch without getting soiled."

"I see."

"Do you, Harry? It's only this, really. My work consists of visiting abnormal minds. Not the way an ordinary psychiatrist does it. I get into those minds. I see and feel their viewpoints. I know all their terrors. The invisible horror that waits in the dark for them isn't just a word to me. I'm sane, and I see through the eyes of a hundred insane men. Keep out of my mind for a minute, Harry." He turned away. Burkhalter hesitated.

"o.k.," Heath said, looking around. "I'm glad you mentioned this, though. Every so often I find myself getting entirely too empathic. Then I either take my copter up, or get in a round robin. I'll see if I can promote a hook-up tonight. Are you in?"

"Sure," Burkhalter said. Heath nodded casually and went out. His thought came back.

I'd better not be here when the Hedgehounds come. Unless you--

No, Burkhalter thought, I'll be all right.

o.k. Here's a delivery for you.

Burkhalter opened the door in time to admit the grocer's boy, who had parked his trail car outside. He helped put the supplies away, saw that the beer would be sufficiently refrigerated, and pressed a few buttons that would insure a supply of pressure-cooked refreshments. The Hedgehounds were hearty eaters.

After that, he left the door open and relaxed behind his desk, waiting. It was hot in the office; he opened his collar and made the walls transparent. Air conditioning began to cool the room, but sight of the broad valley below was equally refreshing. Tall pines rippled their branches in the wind.

It was not like New Yale, one of the larger towns, that was intensely specialized in education. Sequoia, with its great hospital and its cellulose industry, was more of a complete, rounded unit. Isolated from the rest of the world except by air and television, it lay clean and attractive, sprawling in white and green and pastel plastics around the swift waters of the river that raced down seaward.

Burkhalter locked his hands behind his neck and yawned. He felt inexplicably fatigued, as he had felt from time to time for several weeks. Not that this work was hard; on the contrary. But reorientation to his new job wouldn't be quite as easy as he had expected. In the beginning he hadn't anticipated these wheels within wheels.

Barbara Pell, for example. She was dangerous. She, more than any of the others, perhaps, was the guiding spirit of the Sequoia paranoids. Not in the sense of planned action, no. But she ignited, like a flame. She is a born leader. And there were uncomfortably many paranoids here now. They had infiltrated--superficially with good reason, on jobs or errands or vacations; but the town was crammed with them, comparatively speaking. The nontelepaths still outnumbered both Baldies and paranoids as they did on a larger scale all over the world--

He remembered his grandfather, Ed Burkhalter. If any Baldy had ever hated the paranoids, Ed Burkhalter had. And presumably with good reason, since one of the first paranoid plots--a purely individual attempt then--had indirectly tried to indoctrinate the mind of Ed's son,

Harry Burkhalter's father. Oddly, Burkhalter remembered his grandfather's thin, harsh face more vividly than his father's gentler one. He yawned again, trying to immerse himself in the calm of the vista beyond the windows. Another world? Perhaps only in deep space could a Baldy ever be completely free from those troubling half-fragments of thoughts that he sensed even now. And without that continual distraction, with one's mind utterly unhampered--he stretched luxuriously, trying to imagine the feeling of his body without gravity, and extending that parallel to his mind. But it was impossible.

The Baldies had been born before their time, of course--an artificially hastened mutation caused by radioactivity acting on human genes and chromosomes. Thus their present environment was wrong. Burkhalter toyed idly with the concept of a deep-space race, each individual mind so delicately attuned that even the nearest of any alien personality would interfere with the smooth processes of perfect thought. Pleasant, but impractical. It would be a dead end. The telepaths weren't supermen, as the paranoids contended; at best they had only one fatally miraculous sense--fatal, because it had been mingled with common clay. With a genuine super-man, telepathy would be merely one sense among a dozen other inconceivable ones.

Whereas Barbara Pell--the name and the face slid into his thoughts again, and the beautiful body, as dangerous and as fascinating as fire--whereas Barbara Pell, for instance, undoubtedly considered herself strictly super, like all the warped telepaths of her kind.

He thought of her bright, narrow gaze, and the red mouth with its sneering smile. He thought of the red curls moving like snakes upon her shoulders, and the red thoughts moving like snakes through her mind. He stopped thinking of her.

He was very tired. The sense of fatigue, all out of proportion to the

energy he had expended, swelled and engulfed him. If the Hedgehound chiefs weren't coming, it would be pleasant to take a copter up. The inclosing walls of the mountains would fall away as the plane lifted into the empty blue, higher and higher, till it hung in space above a blurred featureless landscape, half-erased by drifting clouds. Burkhalter thought of how the ground would look, a misty, dreamy Sime illustration, and, in his daydream, he reached out slowly to touch the controls. The copter slanted down, more and more steeply, till it was flashing suicidally toward a world that spread hypnotically, like a magically expanding carpet.

Someone was coming. Burkhalter blurred his mind instantly and stood up. Beyond the open door was only the empty forest, but now he could hear the faint, rising overtones of a song. The Hedgehounds, being a nation of nomads, sang as they marched, old tunes and ballads of memorable simplicity that had come down unchanged from before the Blowup, though the original meanings had been forgotten. Green grow the lilacs, all sparkling with dew; I'm lonely, my darling, since parting from you--

Ancestors of the Hedgehounds had hummed that song along the borders of Old Mexico, long before war had been anything but distantly romantic. The grandfather of one of the current singers had been a Mexican, drifting up the California coast, dodging the villages and following a lazy wanderlust that led him into the Canadian forests at last. His name had been Ramon Alvarez but his grandson's name was Kit Carson Alvers, and his black beard rippled as he sang. But by our next meeting I'll hope to prove true, And change the green lilacs for the red, white and blue.

There were no minstrels among the Hedgehounds--they were all minstrels, which is how folk songs are kept alive. Singing, they came down the path, and fell silent at sight of the consul's house.

Burkhalter watched. It was a chapter of the past come alive before his eyes. He had read of the Hedgehounds, but not until six weeks ago had he encountered any of the new pioneers. Their bizarre costumes still had power to intrigue him.

Those costumes combined functionalism with decoration. The buckskin shirts, that could blend into a pattern of forest light and shade, were fringed with knotted tassels; Alvers had a coonskin cap, and all three men wore sandals, made of soft, tough kidskin. Sheathed knives were at their belts, hunting knives, plainer and shorter than the misericordias of the townsfolk. And their faces showed a rakehell vigor, a lean, brown independence of spirit that made them brothers. For generations now the Hedgehounds had been wresting their living from the wilderness with such rude weapons as the bow one of them had slung across his shoulder, and the ethics of dueling had never developed among them. They didn't duel. They killed, when killing seemed necessary--for survival.

Burkhalter came to the threshold. "Come in," he said. "I'm the consul--Harry Burkhalter."

"You got our message?" asked a tall, Scottish-looking chief with a bushy red beard. "That thing you got rigged up in the woods looked tetchy."

"The message conveyor? It works, all right."

"Fair enough. I'm Cobb Mattoon. This here's Kit Carson Alvers, and this un's Umpire Vine." Vine was clean-shaven, a barrel of a man who looked like a bear, his sharp brown eyes slanting wary glances all around. He gave a taciturn grunt and shook hands with Burkhalter. So did the others. As the Baldy gripped Alvers' palm, he knew that this was the man who intended to kill him.

He made no sign. "Glad you're here. Sit down and have a drink. What'll you have?"

"Whiskey," Vine grunted. His enormous hands smothered the glass. He grinned at the siphon, shook his head, and gulped a quantity of whiskey that made Burkhalter's throat smart in sympathy.

Alvers, too, took whiskey; Mattoon drank gin, with lemon. "You got a smart lot of drinks here," he said, staring at the bar Burkhalter had swung out. "I can make out to spell some of the labels, but--what's that?"

"Drambuie. Try it?"

"Sure," Mattoon said, and his red-haired throat worked. "Nice stuff. Better than the corn we cook up in the woods."

"If you walked far, you'll be hungry," Burkhalter said. He pulled out the oval table, selected covered dishes from the conveyor belt, and let his guests help themselves. They fell to without ceremony.

Alvers looked across the table. "You one of them Baldies?" he asked suddenly.

Burkhalter nodded. "Yes, I am. Why?"

Mattoon said, "So you're one of 'em." He was frankly staring. "I never seen a Baldy right close up. Maybe I have at that, but with the wigs you can't tell, of course."

Burkhalter grinned as he repressed a familiar feeling of sick distaste. He had been stared at before, and for the same reason.

"Do I look like a freak, Mr. Mattoon?"

"How long you been consul?" Mattoon asked.

"Six weeks."

"o.k.," the big man said, and his voice was friendly enough, though the tone was harsh. "You oughta remember there ain't no Mistering with the Hedgehounds. I'm Cobb Mattoon. Cobb to my friends, Mattoon to the rest. Nope, you don't look like no freak. Do people figger you Baldies are all sports?"

"A good many of them," Burkhalter said.

"One thing," Mattoon said, picking up a chop bone, "in the woods, we pay no heed to such things. If a guy's born funny, we don't mock him for that. No so long as he sticks to the tribe and plays square. We got no Baldies among us, but if we did, I kind of think they might get a better deal than they do here."

Vine grunted and poured more whiskey. Alvers'black eyes were fixed steadily on Burkhalter.

"You readin'my mind?" Mattoon demanded. Alvers drew in his breath sharply.

Without looking at him, Burkhalter said, "No. Baldies don't. It isn't healthy."

"True enough. Minding your own business is a plenty good rule. I can see how you'd have to play it. Look. This is the first time we come down here, Alvers and Vine and me. You ain't seen us before. We heard rumors about this consulate--" He stumbled over the unfamiliar word. "Up to now, we traded with Selfridge sometimes, but we didn't have contact with townfolk. You know why."

Burkhalter knew. The Hedgehounds had been outcasts, shunning the

villages, and sometimes raiding them. They were outlaws.

"But now a new time's coming. We can't live in the towns; we don't want to. But there's room enough for everybody. We still don't see why they set up these con--consulates; still, we'll string along. We got a word."

Burkhalter knew about that, too. It was the Cody's word, whispered through the Hedgehound tribes--a word they would not disobey.

He said, "Some of the Hedgehound tribes ought to be wiped out. Not many. You kill them yourselves, whenever you find them--"

"Th'cannibals," Mattoon said. "Yeah. We kill them."

"But they're a minority. The main group of Hedgehounds have no quarrel with the townsfolk. And vice versa. We want to stop the raids."

"How do you figger on doin'that?"

"If a tribe has a bad winter, it needn't starve. We've methods of making foods. It's a cheap method. We can afford to let you have grub when you're hungry."

Vine slammed his whiskey glass down on the table and snarled something. Mattoon patted the air with a large palm.

"Easy, Umpire. He don't know... listen, Burkhalter. The Hedgehounds raid sometimes, sure. They hunt, and they fight for what they get. But they don't beg."

"I'm talking about barter," Burkhalter said. "Fair exchange. We can't set up force shields around every village. And we can't use Eggs on nomads. A lot of raids would be a nuisance, that's all. There haven't

been many raids so far; they've been lessening every year. But why should there be any at all? Get rid of the motivation, and the effect's gone too."

Unconsciously he probed at Alvers' mind. There was a thought there, a sly crooked hungry thought, the avid alertness of a carnivore--and the concept of a hidden weapon.

Burkhalter jerked back. He didn't want to know. He had to wait for the Cody to move though the temptation to provoke an open battle with Alvers was dangerously strong. Yet that would only antagonize the other Hedgehounds; they couldn't read Vine's mind as Burkhalter could.

"Barter what?" Vine grunted.

Burkhalter had the answer ready. "Pelts. There's a demand for them. They're fashionable." He didn't mention that it was an artificially created fad. "Furs, for one thing. And--"

"We ain't Red Indians," Mattoon said. "Look what happened to them! There ain't nothing we need from townfolk, except when we're starving. Then--well, maybe we can barter."

"If the Hedgehounds unified--"

Alvers grinned. "In the old days," he said in a high, thin voice, "the tribes that unified got dusted off with the Eggs. We ain't unifying, brother!"

"He speaks fair, though," Mattoon said. "It makes sense. It was our grand-daddies who had a feud with the villages. We've shaken down pretty well. My tribe ain't gone hungry for seven winters now. We migrate, we go where the pickin's are good and we get along."

"My tribe don't raid," Vine growled. He poured more whiskey.

Mattoon and Alvers had taken only two drinks; Vine kept pouring it down, but his capacity seemed unlimited. Now Alvers said, "It seems on the level. One thing I don't like. This guy's a baldy."

Vine turned his enormous barrel of a torso and regarded Alvers steadily. "What you got against Baldies?" he demanded.

"We don't know nothing about'em. I heard stories--"

Vine said something rude. Mattoon laughed.

"You ain't polite, Kit Carson. Burkhalter's playin'host. Don't go throwing words around."

Alvers shrugged, glanced away, and stretched. He reached into his shirt to scratch himself--and suddenly the thought of murder hit Burkhalter like a stone from a slingshot. It took every ounce of his will power to remain motionless as Alvers'hand slid back into view, a pistol coming into sight with it.

There was time for the other Hedgehounds to see the weapon, but no time for them to interfere. The death-thought anticipated the bullet. A flare of blinding, crimson light blazed through the room. Something, moving like an invisible whirlwind, flashed among them; then, as their eyes adjusted, they stood where they had leaped from their chairs, staring at the figure who confronted them.

He wore a tight-fitting suit of scarlet, with a wide black belt, and an expressionless mask of silver covered his face. A blue-black beard emerged from under it and rippled down his chest. Enormous muscular development showed beneath the skin-tight garments.

He tossed Alvers'pistol into the air and caught it. Then, with a deep,

chuckling laugh, he gripped the weapon in both hands and broke the gun into a twisted jumble of warped metal.

"Break a truce, will you?" he said. "You little pipsqueak. What you need is the livin'daylight whaled outa you, Alvers."

He stepped forward and smashed the flat of his palm against Alvers's side. The sound of the blow rang through the room. Alvers was lifted into the air and slammed against the further wall. He screamed once, dropped into a huddle, and lay there motionless.

"Git up," the Cody said. "You ain't hurt. Mebbe a rib cracked, that's all. If'n I'd smacked your head, I'd have broke your neck clean. Git up!"

Alvers dragged himself upright, his face dead white and sweating. The other two Hedgehounds watched, impassive and alert.

"Deal with you later on. Mattoon. Vine. What you got to do with this?"

"Nuthin'," Mattoon said. "Nuthin', Cody. You know that."

The silver mask was impassive. "Lucky fer you I do. Now listen. What I say goes. Tell Alvers'tribe they'll have to find a new boss. That's all."

He stepped forward. His arms closed about Alvers, and the Hedgehound yelled in sudden panic. Then the red blaze flared out again. When it had died, both figures were gone.

"Got any more whiskey, Burkhalter?" Vine said.

IV

The Cody was in telepathic communication with the Mute, Hobson. Like the other three Codys, this one wore the same modulated-

frequency helmet as the Mutes; it was impossible for any Baldy or paranoid to tune in on that scrambled, camouflaged wave length.

It was two hours after sundown.

Alvers is dead, Hobson. Telepathy has no colloquialisms that can be expressed in language-symbols.

Necessary?

Yes. Absolute obedience to the Cody--a curiously mingled four-in-one concept--is vital. Nobody can be allowed to defy the Cody and get away with it.

Any repercussions?

None. Mattoon and Vine are agreeable. They got along with Burkhalter. What's wrong with him, Hobson?

The moment the question was asked, the Cody knew the answer. Telepaths have no secrets but subconscious ones-- and the Mute helmet can even delve a little into the secret mind.

In love with a paranoid? The Cody was shocked.

He doesn't know it. He mustn't realize it yet. He'd have to reorient; that would take time; we can't afford to have him in the side lines just now. Trouble's bound to pop.

What?

Fred Selfridge. He's drunk. He found out the Hedgehound chief visited Burkhalter today. He's afraid his trading racket is being cut from under him. I've told Burkhalter to stay out of sight.

I'll stay near here, then, in case I'll be needed. I won't go home yet. Briefly Hobson caught sight of what home meant to the Cody; a secret valley in the Canadian wilderness, its whereabouts known only to wearers of the helmets, who could never betray it inadvertently. It was there that the technicians among the Baldies sent their specialized products--via the Mutes. Products which had managed to build up a fully equipped headquarters in the heart of the forest, a centralization, it was true, but one whose whereabouts were guarded very thoroughly from the danger of discovery by either friend or enemy. From that valley laboratory in the woods came the devices that made the Cody the legendary figure he was among the Hedgehounds--a Paul Bunyan who combined incredible physical prowess with pure magic. Only such a figure could have commanded the respect and obedience of the woods runners.

Is Burkhalter safely hidden, Hobson? Or can I--

He's hidden. There's a round robin on, but Selfridge can't trace him through that.

o.k. I'll wait.

The Cody broke off. Hobson sent his thought probing out, across the dark miles, to a dozen other Mutes, scattered across the continent from Niagara to Salton. Each one of them was ready for the underground mobilization that might be necessary at any moment now.

It had taken ninety years for the storm to gather; its breaking would be cataclysmic.

Within the circle of the round robin was quiet, complete peace that only a Baldy can know. Burkhalter let his mind slip into place among the others, briefly touching and recognizing friends as he settled into

that telepathic closed circuit. He caught the faintly troubled unrest from Duke Heath's thoughts; then the deep calm of rapport swallowed them both.

At first, on the outer fringes of the psychic pool, there were ripples and currents of mild disturbance, the casual distresses that are inevitable in any gregarious society, and especially among hypersensitive Baldies. But the purge of the ancient custom of the confessional quickly began to be effective. There can be no barriers between Baldies. The basic unit of the family is far more complete than among nontelepaths, and by extension, the entire Baldy group was bound together with ties no less strong because of their intangible subtlety.

Trust and friendship: these things were certain. There could be no distrust when the tariff wall of language was eliminated. The ancient loneliness of any highly specialized, intelligent organism was mitigated in the only possible way; by a kinship closer even than marriage, and transcending it.

Any minority group as long as it maintains its specialized integrity, is automatically handicapped. It is suspect. Only the Baldies, in all social history, had been able to mingle on equal terms with the majority group and still retain the close bond of kinship. Which was paradoxical, for the Baldies, perhaps, were the only ones who desired racial assimilation. They could afford to, for the telepathic mutation was dominant: the children of Baldy father and nontelepathic mother--or vice versa--are Baldies.

But the reassurance of the round robins was needed; they were a symbol of the passive battle the Baldies had been fighting for generations. In them the telepaths found complete unity. It did not, and never would, destroy the vital competitive instinct; rather, it encouraged it. There was give and take. And, too, it was religion of

the purest kind.

In the beginning, with no senses that non-Baldies can quite understand, you touched the minds of your friends, delicately, sensitively. There was a place for you, and you were welcomed. Slowly, as the peace spread, you approached the center, that quite indescribable position in space time that was a synthesis of intelligent, vital minds. Only by analogy can that locus even be suggested.

It is half-sleep. It is like the moment during which consciousness returns sufficiently so that you know you are not awake, and can appreciate the complete calm relaxation of slumber. If you could retain consciousness while you slept--that might be it.

For there was no drugging. The sixth sense is tuned to its highest pitch, and it intermingles with and draws from the other senses. Each Baldy contributes. At first the troubles and disturbances, the emotional unbalances and problems, are cast into the pool, examined, and dissolved in the crystal water of the rapport. Then, cleansed and strengthened, the Baldies ap-approach the center, where the minds blend into a single symphony. Nuances of color one member has appreciated, shadings of sound and light and feeling, each one is a grace note in orchestration. And each note is three-dimensional, for it carries with it the Baldy's personal, individual reaction to the stimulus.

Here a woman remembered the sensuous feel of soft velvet against her palm, with its corresponding mental impact. Here a man gave the crystal-sharp pleasure of solving a difficult mathematical equation, an intellectual counterpoint to the lower-keyed feeling of velvet. Step by step the rapport built up, until there seemed but a single mind, working in perfect cohesion, a harmony without false notes.

Then this single mind began building. It began to think. It was a psychic colloid, in effect, an intellectual giant given strength and sanity by very human emotions and senses and desires.

Then into that pellucid unity crashed a thought-message that for an instant made the minds cling together in a final desperate embrace in which fear and hope and friendliness intermingled. The round robin dissolved. Each Baldy waited now, remembering Hobson's thought that said:

The pogrom's started.

He hadn't broadcast the message directly. The mind of a Mute, wearing his helmet, cannot be read except by another Mute. It was Duke Heath, sitting with Hobson in the moonlit grounds outside the hospital, who had taken the oral warning and conveyed it to the other Baldies. Now his thoughts continued to flash through Sequoia.

Come to the hospital. Avoid non-Baldies. If you're seen, you may be lynched.

In dozens of homes, eyes met in which the terror had leaped instantly to full flower. All over the world, in that moment, something electric sparked with unendurable tension from mind to sensitive mind. No non-Baldy noticed. But, with the speed of thought, the knowledge girdled the planet.

From the thousands of Baldies scattered through the villages, from helicopter and surface car, came a thought of reassurance. We are one, it said. We are with you.

That--from the Baldies. From the paranoids, fewer in number, came a message of hatred and triumph. Kill the hairy men!

But no nontelepath outside Sequoia knew what was happening.

There was an old plastic house near the edge of town where Burkhalter had been hiding. He slipped out of a side door now into the cool quiet of the night. Overhead, a full moon hung yellow. A fan of diffused light reached upward from Redwood Street in the distance, and dimmer paths in the air marked the other avenues. Burkhalter's muscles were rigid. He felt his throat tense with near-panic. Generations of anticipations had built up a violent phobia in every Baldy, and now that the day had come--

Barbaba Pell came dazzling into his thoughts, and as his mind recalled her, so her mind touched his, wild and fiery, gloating with a triumph his whole being drew back from, while against all judgment something seemed to force him to receive her message.

He's dead, Burkhalter, he's dead! I've killed Fred Selfridge! The word is "kill," but in the mind of the paranoid it's not a word or a thought, but a reeking sensation of triumph, wet with blood, a screaming thought which the sane mind reels from.

You fool! Burkhalter shouted at her across the distant streets, his mind catching a little of her wildness so that he could not wholly control it. You crazy fool, did you start this?

He was starting out to get you. He was dangerous. His talk would have started the pogrom anyhow--people were beginning to think--

It's got to be stopped!

It will be! Her thought had a terrible confidence. We've made plans.

What happened?

Someone saw me kill Selfridge. It's the brother, Ralph, who touched things off--the old lynch law. Listen. Her thought was aiddy with

triumph.

He heard it then, the belling yell of the mob, far away, but growing louder. The sound of Barbara Pell's mind was fuel to a flame. He caught terror from her, but a perverted terror that lusted after what it feared. The same fury of bloodthirst was in the crowd's yell and in the red flame which was Barbara Pell's mad mind. They were coming near her, nearer--

For a moment Burkhalter was a woman running down a dim street, stumbling, recovering, racing on with a lynch mob baying at her heels.

A man--a Baldy--dashed out into the path of the crowd. He tore off his wig and waved it at them. Then Ralph Selfridge, his thin young face dripping with sweat, shrieked in wordless hatred and turned the tide after this new quarry. The woman ran on into the darkness.

They caught the man. When a Baldy dies, there is a sudden gap in the ether, a dead emptiness that no telepath will willingly touch with his mind. But before that blankness snapped into being, the Baldy's thought of agony blazed through Sequoia with stunning impact, and a thousand minds reeled for an instant before it.

Kill the hairy men! shrieked Barbara Pell's thoughts, ravenous and mad. This was what the furies were. When a woman's mind lets go, it drops into abysses of sheer savagery that a man's mind never plumbs. The woman from time immemorial has lived closer to the abyss than the male--has had to, for the defense of her brood. The primitive woman cannot afford scruples. Barbara Pell's madness now was the red, running madness of primal force. And it was a fiery thing that ignited something in every mind it touched. Burkhalter felt little flames take hold at the edges of his thoughts and the whole fabric that was his identity shivered and drew back. But he felt in the

ether other minds, mad paranoid minds, reach out toward her and cast themselves ecstatically into the holocaust.

Kill them, kill--kill! raved her mind.

Everywhere? Burkhalter wondered, dizzy with the pull he felt from that vortex of exultant hate. All over the world, tonight? Have the paranoids risen everywhere, or only in Sequoia?

And then he sensed suddenly the ultimate hatefulness of Barbara Pell. She answered the thought, and in the way she answered he recognized how fully evil the red-haired woman was. If she had lost herself utterly in this flaming intoxication of the mob he would still, he thought, have hated her, but he need not have despised her.

She answered quite coolly, with a part of her mind detached from the ravening fury that took its fire from the howling mob and tossed it like a torch for the other paranoids to ignite their hatred from.

She was an amazing and complex woman, Barbara Pell. She had a strange, inflammatory quality which no woman, perhaps, since Jeanne d'Arc had so fully exercised. But she did not give herself up wholly to the fire that had kindled within her at the thought and smell of blood. She was deliberately casting herself into that blood-bath, deliberately wallowing in the frenzy of her madness. And as she wallowed, she could still answer with a coolness more terrible than her ardor.

No, only in Sequoia, said the mind that an instant before had been a blind raving exhortation to murder. No human must live to tell about it, she said in thought-shapes that dripped cold venom more burning than the hot bloodlust in her broadcast thoughts. We hold Sequoia. We've taken over the airfields and the power station. We're armed. Sequoia is isolated from the rest of the world. The pogrom's broken

loose here--only here. Like a cancer. It must be stopped here.

How?

How do you destroy any cancer? Venom bubbled in the thought.

Radium, Burkhalter thought. Radioactivity. The atomic bombs--

Dusting off? he wondered.

A burning coldness of affirmation answered him. No human must live to tell about it. Towns have been dusted off before--by other towns. Pinewood may get the blame this time --there's been rivalry between it and Sequoia.

But that's impossible. If the Sequoia teleaudios have gone dead--

We're sending out faked messages. Any copters coming in will be stopped. But we've got to finish it off fast. If one human escapes-- Her thoughts dissolved into inhuman, inarticulate yammering, caught up and echoed avidly by a chorus of other minds.

Burkhalter shut off the contact sharply. He was surprised, a little, to find that he had been moving toward the hospital all during the interchange, circling through the outskirts of Sequoia. Now he heard with his conscious mind the distant yelling that grew loud and faded again almost to silence, and then swelled once more. The mindless beast that ran the streets could be sensed tonight even by a nontelepath.

He moved silently through the dark for a while, sick and shaken as much by his contact with a paranoid mind as by the threat of what had happened and what might still come.

Jeanne d'Arc, he thought. She had it too, that power to inflame the

mind. She, too, had heard--"voices?" Had she perhaps been an unwitting telepath born far before her time? But at least there had been sanity behind the power she exercised. With Barbara Pell--

As her image came into his mind again her thought touched him, urgent, repellently cool and controlled in the midst of all this holocaust she had deliberately stirred up. Evidently something had happened to upset their plans, for--

Burkhalter, she called voicelessly. Burkhalter, listen, We'll co-operate with you. We hadn't intended to, but--where is the Mute, Hobson?

I don't know.

The cache of Eggs has been moved. We can't find the bombs. It'll take hours before another load of Eggs can be flown here from the nearest town. It's on the way. But every second we waste increases the danger of discovery. Find Hobson. He's the only mind we can't touch in Sequoia. We know no one else has hidden the bombs. Get Hobson to tell us where they are. Make him understand, Burkhalter. This isn't a matter affecting only us. If word of this gets out, every telepath in the world is menaced. The cancer must be cut out before it spreads.

Burkhalter felt murderous thought-currents moving toward him. He turned toward a dark house, drifted behind a bush, and waited there till the mob had poured past, their torches blazing. He felt sick and hopeless. What he had seen in the faces of the men was horrible. Had this hatred and fury existed for generations under the surface--this insane mob violence that could burst out against Baldies with so little provocation?

Common sense told him that the provocation had been sufficient. When a telepath killed a nontelepath, it was not dueling--it was

murder. The dice were loaded. And for weeks now psychological propaganda had been at work in Sequoia.

The non-Baldies were not simply killing an alien race. They were out to destroy the personal devil. They were convinced by now that the Baldies were potential world conquerors. As yet no one had suggested that the telepaths ate babies, but that was probably coming soon, Burkhalter thought bitterly.

Preview. Decentralization was helping the Baldies, because it made a temporary communication-embargo possible. The synapses that connected Sequoia to the rest of the world were blocked; they could not remain blocked forever.

He cut through a yard, hurdled a fence, and was among the pines. He felt an impulse to keep going, straight north, into the clean wilderness where this turmoil and fury could be left behind. But, instead, he angled south toward the distant hospital. Luckily he would not have to cross the river; the bridges would undoubtedly be guarded.

There was a new sound, discordant and hysterical. The barking of dogs. Animals, as a rule, could not receive the telepathic thoughts of humans, but the storm of mental currents raging in Sequoia now had stepped up the frequency--or the power--to a far higher level. And the thoughts of thousands of telepaths, all over the world, were focused on the little village on the Pacific Slope. Hark, hark! The dogs do bark! The beggars are coming to town--

But there's another poem, he thought, trying to remember. Another one that fits even better. What is it-- The hopes and fears of all the years--

The mindless barking of the dogs was worst. It set the pitch of yapping, mad savagery that washed up around the hospital like the rising waves of a neap tide. And the patients were receptive too; wet packs and hydrotherapy, and, in a few cases, restraining jackets were necessary.

Hobson stared through the one-way window at the village far below. "They can't get in here," he said.

Heath, haggard and pale, but with a new light in his eyes, nodded at Burkhalter.

"You're one of the last to arrive. Seven of us were killed. One child. There are ten others still on their way. The rest--safe here."

"How safe?" Burkhalter asked. He drank the coffee Heath had provided.

"As safe as anywhere. This place was built so irresponsible patients couldn't get out. Those windows are unbreakable. It works both ways. The mob can't get in. Not easily, anyhow. We're fireproof, of course."

"What about the staff? The non-Baldies, I mean."

A gray-haired man seated at a nearby desk stopped marking a chart to smile wryly at Burkhalter. The consul recognized him: Dr. Wayland, chief psychiatrist.

Wayland said, "The medical profession has worked with Baldies for a long time, Harry. Especially the psychologists. If any non-Baldy can understand the telepathic viewpoint, we do. We're noncombatants."

"The hospital work has to go on," Heath said. "Even in the face of this. We did something rather unprecedented, though. We read the

minds of every non-Baldy within these walls. Three men on the staff had a preconceived dislike of Baldies, and sympathized with the lynchings. We asked them to leave. There's no danger of Fifth Column work here now."

Hobson said slowly, "There was another man--Dr. Wilson. He went down to the village and tried to reason with the mob."

Heath said, "We got him back here. He's having plasma pumped into him now."

Burkhalter set down his cup. "All right. Hobson, you can read my mind. How about it?"

The Mute's round face was impassive. "We had our plans, too. Sure, I moved the Eggs. The paranoids won't find 'em now."

"More Eggs are being flown in. Sequoia's going to be dusted off. You can't stop that."

A buzzer rang; Dr. Wayland listened briefly to a transmitted voice, picked up a few charts and went out. Burkhalter jerked his thumb toward the door.

"What about him? And the rest of the staff? They know, now."

Heath grimaced. "They know more than we wanted them to know. Until tonight, no nontelepath has even suspected the existence of the paranoid group. We can't expect Wayland to keep his mouth shut about this. The paranoids are a menace to non-Baldies. The trouble is, the average man won't differentiate between paranoids and Baldies. Are those people down there"--he glanced toward the window--"are they drawing the line?"

"It's a problem," Hobson admitted. "Pure logic tells us that no non-

Baldy must survive to talk about this. But is that the answer?"

"I don't see any other way," Burkhalter said unhappily. He thought suddenly of Barbara Pell and the Mute gave him a sharp glance.

"How do you feel about it, Heath?"

The priest-medic walked to the desk and shuffled case histories. "You're the boss, Hobson. I don't know. I'm thinking about my patients. Here's Andy Pell. He's got Alzheimer's disease--early senile psychosis. He's screwed up. Can't remember things very well. A nice old guy. He spills food on his shirt, he talks my ear off, and he makes passes at the nurses. He'd be no loss to the world, I suppose. Why draw a line, then? If we're going in for killing, there can't be any exceptions. The non-Baldy staff here can't survive, either."

"That's the way you feel?"

Heath made a sharp, angry gesture. "No! It isn't the way I feel! Mass murder would mean canceling the work of ninety years, since the first Baldy was born. It'd mean putting us on the same level as the paranoids? Baldies don't kill."

"We kill paranoids."

"There's a difference. Paranoids are on equal terms with us. And... oh, I don't know, Hobson. The motive would be the same--to save our race. But somehow one doesn't kill a non-Baldy."

"Even a lynch mob?"

"They can't help it," Heath said quietly. "It's probably casuistry to distinguish between paranoids and non-Baldies but there is a difference. It would mean a lot of difference to us. We're not killers."

Burkhalter's head drooped. The sense of unendurable fatigue was back again. He forced himself to meet Hobson's calm gaze.

"Do you know any other reason?" he asked.

"No," the Mute said. "I'm in communication, though. We're trying to figure out a way."

Heath said, "Six more got here safely. One was killed. Three are still on their way."

"The mob hasn't traced us to the hospital yet," Hobson said. "Let's see. The paranoids have infiltrated Sequoia in considerable strength, and they're well armed. They've got the airfields and the power station. They're sending out faked teleaudio messages so no suspicion will be aroused outside. They're playing a waiting game; as soon as another cargo of Eggs gets here, the paranoids will beat it out of town and erase Sequoia. And us, of course."

"Can't we kill the paranoids? You haven't any compunctions about eliminating them, have you, Duke?"

Heath shook his head and smiled; Hobson said, "That wouldn't help. The problem would still exist. Incidentally, we could intercept the copter flying Eggs here, but that would just mean postponement. A hundred other copters would load Eggs and head for Sequoia; some of them would be bound to get through. Even fifty cargoes of bombs would be too dangerous. You know how the Eggs work."

Burkhalter knew, all right. One Egg would be quite sufficient to blast Sequoia entirely from the map.

Heath said, "Justified murder doesn't bother me. But killing non-Baldies--if I had any part in that, the mark of Cain wouldn't be just a symbol. I'd have it on my forehead--or inside my head, rather. Where

any Baldy could see it. If we could use propaganda on the mob--"

Burkhalter shook his head. "There's no time. And even if we did cool off the lynchers, that wouldn't stop word of this from getting around. Have you listened in on the catch-phrases, Duke?"

"The mob?"

"Yeah. They've built up a nice personal devil by now. We never made any secret of our round robins, and somebody had a bright idea. We're polygamists. Purely mental polygamists, but they're shouting that down in the village now."

"Well," Heath said, "I suppose they're right. The norm is arbitrary, isn't it--automatically set by the power-group? Baldies are variants from that norm."

"Norms change."

"Only in crises. It took the Blowup to bring about decentralization. Besides, what's the true standard of values? What's right for non-Baldies isn't always right for telepaths."

"There's a basic standard of morals--" "Semantics." Heath shuffled his case histories again. "Somebody once said that insane asylums won't find their true function till ninety percent of the world is insane. Then the sane group can just retire to the sanitariums." He laughed harshly. "But you can't even find a basic standard in psychoses. There's a lot less schizophrenia since the Blowup; most d.p. cases come from cities. The more I work with psycho patients, the less I'm willing to accept any arbitrary standards as the real ones. This man"--he picked up a chart--"he's got a fairly familiar delusion. He contends that when he dies, the world will end. Well--maybe, in this one particular case it's true."

"You sound like a patient, yourself," Burkhalter said succinctly.

Hobson raised a hand. "Heath, I suggest you administer sedatives to the Baldies here. Including us. Don't you feel the tension?"

The three were silent for a moment, telepathetically listening. Presently Burkhalter was able to sort out individual chords in the discordant thought-melody that was focused on the hospital.

"The patients," he said. "Eh?"

Heath scowled and touched a button. "Fernald? Issue sedatives--" He gave a quick prescription, clicked off the communicator, and rose. "Too many psychotic patients are sensitive," he told Hobson. "We're liable to have a panic on our hands. Did you catch that depressive thought--" He formed a quick mental image. "I'd better give that man a shot. And I'd better check up on the violent cases, too." But he waited.

Hobson remained motionless, staring out the window. After a time he nodded.

"That's the last one. We're all here now, all of Us. Nobody's left in Sequoia but paranoids and non-Baldies."

Burkhalter moved his shoulders uneasily. "Thought of an answer yet?"

"Even if I had, I couldn't tell you, you know. The paranoids could read your mind."

True enough. Burkhalter thought of Barbara Pell, somewhere in the village--perhaps barricaded in the power station, or at the airfield. Some confused, indefinable emotion moved within him. He caught

Hobson's bright glance.

"There aren't any volunteers among the Baldies," the Mute said. "You didn't ask to be involved in this crisis. Neither did I, really. But the moment a Baldy's born, he automatically volunteers for dangerous duty, and stands ready for instant mobilization. It just happened that the crisis occurred in Sequoia."

"It would have happened somewhere. Sometime."

"Right. Being a Mute isn't so easy, either. We're shut out. We can never know a complete round robin. We can communicate fully only with other Mutes. We can never resign." Not even to another Baldy could a Mute reveal the existence of the Helmet.

Burkhalter said, "Our mutation wasn't due for another thousand years, I guess. We jumped the gun."

"We didn't. But we're paying. The Eggs were the fruit of knowledge, in a way. If man hadn't used atomic power as he did, the telepathic mutations would have had their full period of gestation. They'd never have appeared till the planet was ready for them. Not exactly ready, perhaps," he qualified, "but we wouldn't have had quite this mess on our hands."

"I blame the paranoids," Burkhalter said. "And... in a way... myself."

"You're not to blame."

The Baldy grimaced. "I think I am, Hobson. Who precipitated this crisis?"

"Selfridge--" Hobson was watching.

"Barbara Pell," Burkhalter said. "She killed Fred Selfridge. Ever

since I came to Sequoia, she's been riding me."

"So she killed Selfridge to annoy you? That doesn't make sense."

"It fitted in with the general paranoid plan, I suppose. But it was what she wanted, too. She couldn't touch me when I was consul. But where's the consulate now?"

Hobson's round face was very grave. A Baldy intern came in, offered sedatives and water, and the two silently swallowed the barbiturates. Hobson went to the window and watched the flaring of torches from the village. His voice was muffled.

"They're coming up," he said. "Listen."

The distant shouting grew louder as they stood there in silence. Nearer and louder. Burkhalter moved forward to Hobson's side. The town was a flaming riot of torches now, and a river of light poured up the curved road toward the hospital.

"Can they get in?" someone asked in a hushed voice.

Heath shrugged. "Sooner or later."

The intern said, with a touch of hysteria: "What can we do?"

Hobson said, "They're counting on the weight of numbers, of course. And they've got plenty of that. They aren't armed, I suppose, except for daggers--but then they don't need arms to do what they think they're going to do."

There was a dead silence in the room for a moment. Then Heath said in a thin voice, "What they think--?"

The Mute nodded toward the window. "Look."

There was a small rush toward the glass. Peering over one another's shoulders, the men in the room stared down the slope of the road, seeing the vanguard of the mob so near already that the separate torches were clearly distinguishable, and the foremost of the distorted, shouting faces. Ugly, blind with hatred and the intention to kill.

Hobson said in a detached voice, as if this imminent disaster were already in the past. "We've got the answer, you see--we know about this. But there's another problem I can't solve. Maybe it's the most important one of all." And he looked at the back of Burkhalter's head. Burkhalter was watching the road. Now he leaned forward suddenly and said,

"Look! There in the woods--what is it? Something moving--people? Listen--what is it?"

No one paid any attention beyond the first two or three words he spoke, for all of them saw it now. It happened very swiftly. One moment the mob was pouring unchecked up the road, the next a wave of shadowy forms had moved purposefully out of the trees in compact, disciplined order. And above the hoarse shouting of the mob a cry went terribly up, a cry that chilled the blood.

It was the shrill falsetto that had once been the Rebel Yell. Two hundred years ago it echoed over the bloody battlefields of the Civil War. It moved westward with the conquered rebels and became the cowboy yell. It moved and spread with westerners after the Blowup, the tall, wild men who could not endure the regimentation of the towns. Now it was the Hedgehound yell.

From the window the hospital watchers saw it all, enacted as if on a firelit stage below them.

Out of the shadows the men in buckskin came. Firelight flashed on the long blades they carried, on the heads of the arrows they held against the bent bows. Their wild, shrill, terrible yell rose and fell, drowning out the undisciplined screams of the mob.

The buckskin ranks closed in behind the mob, around it. The townsmen began to huddle together a little, until the long loosely organized mob had become a roughly compact circle with the woodsmen surrounding them. There were cries of, "Kill 'em! Get 'em all!" from the townsmen, and the disorderly shouts rose raggedly through the undulations of the Hedgehound yell, but you could tell after the first two or three minutes who had the upper hand.

Not that there was no fighting. The men at the front of the mob had to do something. They did--or tried to. It was little more than a scuffle as the buckskin forms closed in.

"They're only townsmen, you see," Hobson said quietly, like a lecturer explaining some movie scene from old newsreel files. "Did you ever think before how completely the profession of the fighting man has died out since the Blowup? The only organized fighting men left in the world are out there, now." He nodded toward the Hedgehound ranks, but nobody saw the motion. They were all watching with the incredulous eagerness of reprieved men as the Hedgehounds competently dealt with the mob which was so rapidly changing into a disorganized rabble now as the nameless, powerful, ugly spirit that had welded it into a mob died mysteriously away among them.

All it took was superior force, superior confidence--the threat of weapons in more accustomed hands. For four generations these had been townsmen whose ancestors never knew what war meant. For four generations the Hedgehounds had lived only because they knew unremitting warfare, against the forest and mankind.

Competently they went about rounding up the mob.

"It doesn't solve anything," Burkhalter said at last, reluctantly, turning from the window. Then he ceased to speak, and sent his mind out in rapid thoughts so that the nontelepaths might not hear. Don't we have to keep it all quiet? Do we still have to decide about--killing them all? We've saved our necks, sure--but what about the rest of the world?

Hobson smiled a grim, thin smile that looked odd on his plump face. He spoke aloud, to everyone in the room.

"Get ready," he said. "We're leaving the hospital. All of us. The non-Baldy staff, too."

Heath, sweating and haggard, caught his breath. "Wait a minute. I know you're the boss, but--I'm not leaving my patients!"

"We're taking them, too," Hobson said. Confidence was in his voice, but not in his eyes. He was looking at Burkhalter. The last and most difficult problem was still to be met.

The Cody's thought touched Hobson's mind. All ready.

You've got enough Hedgehounds?

Four tribes. They were all near the Fraser Run. The new consulate set-up had drawn 'em from the north. Curiosity.

Report to group.

Scattered across the continent, Mutes listened. We've cleaned out Sequoia. No deaths. A good many got pretty well beaten up, but they can all travel. (A thought of wry amusement.) Your townspeople ain't fighters.

Ready for the march?

Ready. They're all rounded up, men, women and children, in the north valley. Umpire Vine's in charge of that sector.

Start the march. About the paranoids, any trouble there?

No trouble. They haven't figured it all out yet. They're still in the town, sitting tight. We've got to move fast, though. If they try to get out of Sequoia, my men will kill. There was a brief pause. Then-- The march has started.

Good. Use the blindfolds when necessary.

There are no stars underground, the Cody's thought said grimly.

No non-Baldy must die. Remember, this is a point of honor. Our solution may not be the best one, but--

None will die.

We're evacuating the hospital. Is Mattoon ready?

Ready. Evacuate.

Burkhalter rubbed a welt on his jaw. "What happened?" he asked thickly, staring around in the rustling darkness of the pines.

A shadow moved among the trees. "Getting the patients ready for transportation--remember? You were slugged. That violent case--"

"I remember." Burkhalter felt sheepish. "I should have watched his mind closer. I couldn't. He wasn't thinking--" He shivered slightly. Then he sat up. "Where are we?"

"Quite a few miles north of Sequoia."

"My head feels funny." Burkhalter rearranged his wig. He rose, steadying himself against a tree, and blinked vaguely. After a moment he had reoriented. This must be Mount Nichols, the high peak that rose tall among the mountains guarding Sequoia. Very far away, beyond intervening lower summits, he could see a distant glow of light that was the village.

But beneath him, three hundred feet down, a procession moved through a defile in the mountain wall. They emerged into the moonlight and went swiftly on and were lost in shadow.

There were stretcher-bearers, and motionless, prone figures being carried along; there were men who walked arm in arm; there were tall men in buckskin shirts and fur caps, bows slung across their shoulders, and they were helping, too. The silent procession moved on into the wilderness.

"The Sequoia Baldies," Hobson said. "And the non-Baldy staff--and the patients. We couldn't leave them."

"But--"

"It was the only possible answer for us, Burkhalter. Listen. For twenty years we've been preparing--not for this, but for the pogrom. Up in the woods, in a place only Mutes know about, there's a series of interlocking caves. It's a city now. A city without population. The Cody's--there are four of them, really--have been using it as a laboratory and a hideout. There's material there for hydroponics, artificial sunlight, everything a culture needs. The caves aren't big enough to shelter all the Baldies, but they'll hold Sequoia's population."

Burkhalter stared. "The non-Baldies?"

"Yes. They'll be segregated, for a while, till they can face truth. They'll be prisoners; we can't get around that fact. It was a choice between killing them and holding them incommunicado. In the caves, they'll adapt. Sequoia was a tight, independent community. Family units won't be broken up. The same social pattern can be followed. Only--it'll be underground, in an artificial culture,"

"Can't the paranoids find them?"

"There are no stars underground. The paranoids may read the minds of the Sequoians, but you can't locate a mind by telepathic triangulation. Only Mutes know the location of the caves, and no paranoid can read a Mute's thoughts. They're on their way now to join us--enough Mutes to take the Sequoians on the last lap. Not even the Hedgehounds will know where they're going."

"Then the secret will be safe among telepaths--except for the Hedgehounds. What if they talk?"

"They won't. Lots of reasons. For one, they have no communication to speak of with the outside world. For another, they're under an autocracy, really. The Codys know how to enforce their rules. Also, have you thought how the towns would react if they knew Hedgehounds had cleaned out a whole village? To save their own skins the Hedgehounds will keep their mouths shut. Oh, it may leak out. With so many individuals involved you never can be absolutely sure. But I think for an extemporaneous plan, it'll work out well enough." Hobson paused and his mind brushed with the keenness of a quick glance against Burkhalter's mind. "What's the matter, Burk? Still worried about something?"

"The people, I suppose," Burkhalter admitted. "The humans. It

doesn't seem exactly fair, you know. I'd hate to be cut off forever from all contact from the rest of the world. They--"

Hobson thought an explosive epithet. It was much more violent thought than voiced. He said, "Fair! Of course it isn't fair! You saw that mob coming up the road, Burk--did they have fairness in mind then? If anyone ever deserved punishment that mob does!" His voice grew milder. "One thing we tend to lose sight of, you see. We grow up with the idea of indulgence toward humans pounded into us to such an extent we almost forget they're responsible people, after all. A pogrom is the most indefensible concerted action a group can be guilty of. It's always an attack by a large majority on a defenseless minority. These people would have killed us all without a qualm, if they could. They're lucky we aren't as vicious as they were. They deserve a lot worse than they're getting, if you ask me. We didn't ask to be put in a spot like this. There's unfairness involved all around, but I think this solution is the best possible under the circumstances.

They watched the procession below moving through the moonlight. Presently Hobson went on. "Another angle turned up after we put this thing in motion, too. A mighty good one. By sheer accident we're going to have a wonderful laboratory experiment going on in human relations. It won't be a dead-end community in the caves. Eventually, we think the Baldies and the non-Baldies will intermarry there. The hospital staff are potential good-will ambassadors. It'll take careful handling, but I think with our facilities for mind reading and the propaganda we can put out adjusted by the readings, things will work out. It may be the basis for the ultimate solution of the whole Baldy-human problem.

"You see, this will be a microcosm of what the whole world ought to be--would have been if the Blowup hadn't brought us telepaths into being ahead of our normal mutation time. It will be a community of humans dominated by telepaths, controlled by them benevolently.

We'll learn how to regulate relations with humans, and there'll be no danger while we learn. It'll be trial and error without punishment for error. A little hard on the humans, perhaps, but no harder than it's been for generations on the Baldy minority all over the world. We might even hope that in a few years'time the experiment may go well enough that even if the news leaked out, the community members would elect to stay put. Well, we'll have to wait and see. It can't be solved any better way that we know of. There is no solution, except adjustment between the races. If every Baldy on earth committed voluntary suicide, there'd still be Baldies born. You can't stop it. The Blowup's responsible for that, not us. We... wait a minute."

Hobson turned his head sharply, and in the rustling night silences of the forest, broken only by the subdued noises of the proposition far below, they listened for a sound not meant for ears.

Burkhalter heard nothing, but in a moment Hobson nodded.

"The town's about to go," he said.

Burkhalter frowned. "There's another loose end, isn't there? What if they blame Pinewood for dusting Sequoia off?"

"There won't be any proof either way. We've about decided to spread rumors indicating two or three other towns along with Pinewood, enough to confuse the issue. Maybe we'll say the explosion might have come from an accident in the Egg dump. That's happened, you know. Pinewood and the rest will just have to get along under a slight cloud for awhile. They'll have an eye kept on them, and if they should show any more signs of aggression... but of course, nothing will happen. I think... look, Burkhalter! There she goes!"

Far away below them the glow that was Sequoia lay like a lake of

light in the mountains'cup. As they watched, it changed. A nova flamed in incandescent splendor, whitening the men's faces and showing the pines in starkly black silhouette.

For an instant the soundless ether was full of a stunning, mindless cry that rocked the brain of every telepath within its range. Then there was that terrible void, that blankness of cessation into which no Baldy cares to look. This time it was a mighty vortex, for a great many telepathic minds perished together in that nova. It was a vortex that made the mind reel perilously near its great, sucking brink. Paranoid they may have been, but they were telepathic too, and their going shook every brain that could perceive the passing.

In Burkhalter's mind a reeling blindness struck. He thought, Barbara, Barbara....

It was an utterly unguarded cry. He made no effort to hush it from Hobson's perception.

Hobson said, as if he had not heard, "That's the finish. Two mutes in copters dropped the eggs. They're watching now. No survivors. Burkhalter--"

He waited. Slowly Burkhalter pulled himself out of that blind abyss into which the beautiful, terrible, deadly image of Barbara Pell whirled away toward oblivion. Slowly he brought the world back into focus around him. "Yes?"

"Look. The last of the Sequoians are going by. You and I aren't needed here any more, Burk."

There was significance in that statement. Burkhalter shook himself mentally and said with painful bewilderment, "I don't... quite get it. Why did you bring me up here? Am I--" He hesitated. "I'm not going

with the others?"

"You can't go with them," the Mute said quietly. There was a brief silence; a cool wind whispered through the pine needles. The pungent fragrance and freshness of the night washed around the two telepaths. "Think, Burkhalter," Hobson said, "Think."

"I loved her," Burkhalter said. "I know that now." There was shock and self-revulsion in his mind, but he was too stunned by the realization for much emotion to come through yet.

"You know what that means, Burkhalter? You're not a true Baldy. Not quite." He was silent for a moment. "You're a latent paranoid, Burk," Hobson said.

There was no sound or thought between them for a full minute. Then Burkhalter sat down suddenly on the pine needles that carpeted the forest floor.

"It isn't true," he said. The trees were reeling around him.

"It is true, Burk." Hobson's voice and mind were infinitely gentle. "Think. Would you--could you--have loved a paranoid, and such a paranoid as that, if you were a normal telepath?"

Dumbly Burkhalter shook his head. He knew it was true. Love between telepaths is a far more unerring thing than love between blind and groping humans. A telepath can make no mistake about the quality of the beloved's character. He could not if he wished. No normal Baldy could feel anything but utter revulsion toward the thing that had been Barbara Pell. No normal Baldy--

"You should have hated her. You did hate her. But there was something more than hate. It's a paranoid quality, Burk, to feel drawn toward what you despise. If you'd been normal, you'd have loved

some normal telepathic woman, someone your equal. But you never did. You had to find a woman you could look down on. Someone you could build up your Ego by despising. No paranoid can admit any other being is his equal. I'm sorry, Burk. I hate to say these things."

Hobson's voice was like a knife, merciless and merciful, excising diseased tissue. Burkhalter heard him, and trod down the latent hatred which the truth--and he knew the truth of it--brought out in his double mind.

"Your father's mind was warped too, Burk," Hobson went on. "He was born too receptive to paranoid indoctrination--"

"They tried their tricks on him when he was a kid," Burkhalter said hoarsely. "I remember that."

"We weren't sure at first about what ailed you. The symptoms didn't show till you took on the consulate. Then we began to build up a prognosis, of sorts. You didn't really want that job, Burkhalter. Not subconsciously. Those heavy fatigues were a defense. I caught that daydream, of yours today--not the first one you've had. Daydreams concerned with suicide--another symptom, and another means of escape. And Barbara Pell--that was the payoff. You couldn't let yourself know what your real feelings were, so you projected the opposite emotion--hatred. You believed she was persecuting you, and you let your hatred have full freedom. But it wasn't hatred, Burk."

"No. It wasn't hatred. She... she was horrible, Hobson! She was horrible!"

"I know."

Burkhalter's mind boiled with violent emotions, too tangled to sort out. Hatred, intolerable grief, bright flashes of the paranoid world,

memory of Barbara Pell's wild mind like a flame in the wind.

"If you're right, Hobson," he said with difficulty, "you've got to kill me. I know too much. If I'm really a latent paranoid some day I might betray--Us."

"Latent," Hobson said. "There's a world of difference--if you can be honest with yourself."

"I'm not safe if I live. I can feel--disease--back in my mind right now. I-hate you, Hobson. I hate you for showing me myself. Some day the hate may spread to all Mutes and all Baldies. How can I trust myself any more?"

"Touch your wig, Burk," Hobson said.

Bewildered, Burkhalter laid a shaking hand upon his head. He felt nothing unusual. He looked at Hobson in complete confusion.

"Take it off, Burk."

Burkhalter lifted off the wig. It came hard, the suction caps that held it in place giving way with reluctance. When it was off, Burkhalter was amazed to feel that there was still something on his head. He lifted his free hand and felt with unsteady fingers a fine cap of wires like silk, hugging his skull. He looked up in the moonlight and met Hobson's eyes. He could see the fine wrinkles around them, and the look of kindness and compassion on the Mute's round face. For an instant he forgot even the mystery of the strange cap on his head. He cried voicelessly,

Help me, Hobson! Don't let me hate you!

Instantly into his mind came a firm, strong, compassionate locking of thoughts from many, many minds. It was a communion more intimate

and of a different quality than anything he had ever felt before. And it was to the mind as the clasp of many supporting hands would be to the body when the body is weary and in infinite need of support.

You're one of us now, Burkhalter. You wear the Helmet. You are a Mute. No Paranoid can ever read your mind.

It was Hobson's thought that spoke to him, but behind it spoke the thoughts of many others, many trained minds from hundreds of other Mutes, all speaking as if in a chorus that echoed and amplified all Hobson said.

But I... I'm a latent--

The hundreds of minds blended into a cohesive unit, the psychic colloid of the round robin, but a different, more intense union, wrought into something new by the caps that filtered all their thoughts. The unit became a single mind, strong and sane and friendly, welcoming the newcomer. He did not find miraculous healing there--he found something better.

Truth. Honesty.

Now the warp in his mind, the paranoid quirk and its symptoms and illogic, became very clear. It was the highest kind of psychoanalysis, which only a Baldy can know.

He thought, It will take time. The cure will take--

Hobson was standing behind him. I'll be with you. Until you can stand alone. And even then--we'll all be with you. You are one of us. No Baldy is ever alone.

"Vintage Season"

Published in Astounding Science Fiction, Vol. 38, No. 1 (September 1946) under the pseudonym Lawrence O'Donnell.

Three people came up the walk to the old mansion just at dawn on a perfect May morning. Oliver Wilson in his pajamas watched them from an upper window through a haze of conflicting emotions, resentment predominant. He didn't want them there.

They were foreigners. He knew only that much about them. They had the curious name of Sancisco, and their first names, scrawled in loops on the lease, appeared to be Omerie, Kleph and Kliia, though it was impossible as he looked down upon them now to sort them out by signature. He hadn't even been sure whether they would be men or women, and he had expected something a little less cosmopolitan.

Oliver's heart sank a little as he watched them follow the taxi driver up the walk. He had hoped for less self-assurance in his unwelcome tenants, because he meant to force them out of the house if he could. It didn't look very promising from here.

The man went first. He was tall and dark, and he wore his clothes and carried his body with that peculiar arrogant assurance that comes from perfect confidence in every phase of one's being. The two women were laughing as they followed him. Their voices were light and sweet, and their faces were beautiful, each in its own exotic way, but the first thing Oliver thought of when he looked at them was, Expensive!

It was not only that patina of perfection that seemed to dwell in every line of their incredibly flawless garments. There are degrees of wealth beyond which wealth itself ceases to have significance. Oliver had seen before, on rare occasions, something like this assurance that the earth turning beneath their well-shod feet turned only to their

whim.

It puzzled him a little in this case, because he had the feeling as the three came up the walk that the beautiful clothing they wore so confidently was not clothing they were accustomed to. There was a curious air of condescension in the way they moved. Like women in costume. They minced a little on their delicate high heels, held out an arm to stare at the cut of a sleeve, twisted now and then inside their garments as if the clothing sat strangely on them, as if they were accustomed to something entirely different.

And there was an elegance about the way the garments fitted them which even to Oliver looked strikingly unusual. Only an actress on the screen, who can stop time and the film to adjust every disarranged fold so that she looks perpetually perfect, might appear thus elegantly clad. But let these women move as they liked, and each fold of their clothing followed perfectly with the movement and fell perfectly into place again. One might almost suspect the garments were not cut of ordinary cloth, or that they were cut according to some unknown, subtle scheme, with many artful hidden seams placed by a tailor incredibly skilled at his trade.

They seemed excited. They talked in high, clear, very sweet voices, looking up at the perfect blue and transparent sky in which dawn was still frankly pink. They looked at the trees on the lawn, the leaves translucently green with an under color of golden newness, the edges crimped from constriction in the recent bud.

Happily and with excitement in their voices they called to the man, and when he answered his own voice blended so perfectly in cadence with theirs that it sounded like three people singing together. Their voices, like their clothing, seemed to have an elegance far beyond the ordinary, to be under a control such as Oliver Wilson had never dreamed of before this morning.

The taxi driver brought up the luggage, which was of a beautiful pale stuff that did not look quite like leather, and had curves in it so subtle it seemed square until you saw how two or three pieces of it fitted together when carried, into a perfectly balanced block. It was scuffed, as if from much use. And though there was a great deal of it, the taxi man did not seem to find his burden heavy. Oliver saw him look down at it now and then and heft the weight incredulously.

One of the women had very black hair and skin like cream, and smoke-blue eyes heavy-lidded with the weight of her lashes. It was the other woman Oliver's gaze followed as she came up the walk. Her hair was a clear, pale red, and her face had a softness that he thought would be like velvet to touch. She was tanned to a warm amber darker than her hair.

Just as they reached the porch steps the fair woman lifted her head and looked up. She gazed straight into Oliver's eyes and he saw that hers were very blue, and just a little amused, as if she had known he was there all along. Also they were frankly admiring.

Feeling a bit dizzy, Oliver hurried back to his room to dress.

"We are here on a vacation," the dark man said, accepting the keys. "We will not wish to be disturbed, as I made clear in our correspondence. You have engaged a cook and housemaid for us, I understand? We will expect you to move your own belongings out of the house, then, and--"

"Wait," Oliver said uncomfortably. "Something's come up. I--" He hesitated, not sure just how to present it. These were such increasingly odd people. Even their speech was odd. They spoke so distinctly, not slurring any of the words into contractions. English seemed as familiar to them as a native tongue, but they all spoke as

trained singers sing, with perfect breath control and voice placement.

And there was a coldness in the man's voice, as if some gulf lay between him and Oliver, so deep no feeling of human contact could bridge it.

"I wonder," Oliver said, "if I could find you better living quarters somewhere else in town. There's a place across the street that--"

The dark woman said, "Oh, no!" in a lightly horrified voice, and all three of them laughed. It was cool, distant laughter that did not include Oliver.

The dark man said, "We chose this house carefully, Mr. Wilson. We would not be interested in living anywhere else."

Oliver said desperately, "I don't see why. It isn't even a modern house. I have two others in much better condition. Even across the street you'd have a fine view of the city. Here there isn't anything. The other houses cut off the view, and--"

"We engaged rooms here, Mr. Wilson," the man said with finality. "We expect to use them. Now will you make arrangements to leave as soon as possible?"

Oliver said, "No," and looked stubborn. "That isn't in the lease. You can live here until next month, since you paid for it, but you can't put me out. I'm staying."

The man opened his mouth to say something. He looked coldly at Oliver and closed it again. The feeling of aloofness was chill between them. There was a moment's silence. Then the man said, "Very well. Be kind enough to stay out of our way."

It was a little odd that he didn't inquire into Oliver's motives. Oliver

was not yet sure enough of the man to explain. He couldn't very well say, "Since the lease was signed, I've been offered three times what the house is worth if I'll sell it before the end of May." He couldn't say, "I want the money, and I'm going to use my own nuisance-value to annoy you until you're willing to move out." After all, there seemed no reason why they shouldn't. After seeing them, there seemed doubly no reason, for it was clear they must be accustomed to surroundings infinitely better than this timeworn old house.

It was very strange, the value this house had so suddenly acquired. There was no reason at all why two groups of semi-anonymous people should be so eager to possess it for the month of May.

In silence Oliver showed his tenants upstairs to the three big bedrooms across the front of the house. He was intensely conscious of the red-haired woman and the way she watched him with a sort of obviously covert interest, quite warmly, and with a curious undertone to her interest that he could not quite place. It was familiar, but elusive. He thought how pleasant it would be to talk to her alone, if only to try to capture that elusive attitude and put a name to it.

Afterward he went down to the telephone and called his fiancée.

Sue's voice squeaked a little with excitement over the wire.

"Oliver, so early? Why, it's hardly six yet. Did you tell them what I said? Are they going to go?"

"Can't tell yet. I doubt it. After all, Sue, I did take their money, you know."

"Oliver, they've got to go! You've got to do something!"

"I'm trying, Sue. But I don't like it."

"Well, there isn't any reason why they shouldn't stay somewhere else. And we're going to need that money. You'll just have to think of something, Oliver."

Oliver met his own worried eyes in the mirror above the telephone and scowled at himself. His straw-colored hair was tangled and there was a shining stubble on his pleasant, tanned face. He was sorry the red-haired woman had first seen him in his untidy condition. Then his conscience smote him at the sound of Sue's determined voice and he said:

"I'll try, darling. I'll try. But I did take their money."

They had, in fact, paid a great deal of money, considerably more than the rooms were worth even in that year of high prices and high wages. The country was just moving into one of those fabulous eras which are later referred to as the Gay Forties or the Golden Sixties--a pleasant period of national euphoria. It was a stimulating time to be alive--while it lasted.

"All right," Oliver said resignedly. "I'll do my best."

But he was conscious, as the next few days went by, that he was not doing his best. There were several reasons for that. From the beginning the idea of making himself a nuisance to his tenants had been Sue's, not Oliver's. And if Oliver had been a little less determined the whole project would never have got under way. Reason was on Sue's side, but-- For one thing, the tenants were so fascinating. All they said and did had a queer sort of inversion to it, as if a mirror had been held up to ordinary living and in the reflection showed strange variations from the norm. Their minds worked on a different basic premise, Oliver thought, from his own. They seemed to derive covert amusement from the most unamusing things; they patronized, they were aloof with a quality of cold detachment which

did not prevent them from laughing inexplicably far too often for Oliver's comfort.

He saw them occasionally, on their way to and from their rooms. They were polite and distant, not, he suspected, from anger at his presence but from sheer indifference.

Most of the day they spent out of the house. The perfect May weather held unbroken and they seemed to give themselves up wholeheartedly to admiration of it, entirely confident that the warm, pale-gold sunshine and the scented air would not be interrupted by rain or cold. They were so sure of it that Oliver felt uneasy.

They took only one meal a day in the house, a late dinner. And their reactions to the meal were unpredictable. Laughter greeted some of the dishes, and a sort of delicate disgust others. No one would touch the salad, for instance. And the fish seemed to cause a wave of queer embarrassment around the table.

They dressed elaborately for each dinner. The man--his name was Omerie--looked extremely handsome in his dinner clothes, but he seemed a little sulky and Oliver twice heard the women laughing because he had to wear black. Oliver entertained a sudden vision, for no reason, of the man in garments as bright and as subtly cut as the women's, and it seemed somehow very right for him. He wore even the dark clothing with a certain flamboyance, as if cloth-of-gold would be more normal for him.

When they were in the house at other mealtimes, they ate in their rooms. They must have brought a great deal of food with them, from whatever mysterious place they had come. Oliver wondered with increasing curiosity where it might be. Delicious odors drifted into the hall sometimes, at odd hours, from their closed doors. Oliver could not identify them, but almost always they smelled irresistible. A

few times the food smell was rather shockingly unpleasant, almost nauseating. It takes a connoisseur, Oliver reflected, to appreciate the decadent. And these people, most certainly, were connoisseurs.

Why they lived so contentedly in this huge ramshackle old house was a question that disturbed his dreams at night. Or why they refused to move. He caught some fascinating glimpses into their rooms, which appeared to have been changed almost completely by additions he could not have defined very clearly from the brief sights he had of them. The feeling of luxury which his first glance at them had evoked was confirmed by the richness of the hangings they had apparently brought with them, the half-glimpsed ornaments, the pictures on the walls, even the whiffs of exotic perfume that floated from half-open doors.

He saw the women go by him in the halls, moving softly through the brown dimness in their gowns so uncannily perfect in fit, so lushly rich, so glowingly colored they seemed unreal. That poise born of confidence in the subservience of the world gave them an imperious aloofness, but more than once Oliver, meeting the blue gaze of the woman with the red hair and the soft, tanned skin, thought he saw quickened interest there. She smiled at him in the dimness and went by in a haze of fragrance and a halo of incredible richness, and the warmth of the smile lingered after she had gone.

He knew she did not mean this aloofness to last between them. From the very first he was sure of that. When the time came she would make the opportunity to be alone with him. The thought was confusing and tremendously exciting. There was nothing he could do but wait, knowing she would see him when it suited her.

On the third day he lunched with Sue in a little downtown restaurant overlooking the great sweep of the metropolis across the river far below. Sue had shining brown curls and brown eyes, and her chin

was a bit more prominent than is strictly accordant with beauty. From childhood Sue had known what she wanted and how to get it, and it seemed to Oliver just now that she had never wanted anything quite so much as the sale of this house.

"It's such a marvelous offer for the old mausoleum," she said, breaking into a roll with a gesture of violence. "We'll never have a chance like that again, and prices are so high we'll need the money to start housekeeping. Surely you can do something, Oliver!"

"I'm trying," Oliver assured her uncomfortably.

"Have you heard anything more from that madwoman who wants to buy it?"

Oliver shook his head. "Her attorney phoned again yesterday. Nothing new. I wonder who she is."

"I don't think even the attorney knows. All this mystery--I don't like it, Oliver. Even those Sancisco people-- What did they do today?"

Oliver laughed. "They spent about an hour this morning telephoning movie theaters in the city, checking up on a lot of third-rate films they want to see parts of."

"Parts of? But why?"

"I don't know. I think... oh, nothing. More coffee?"

The trouble was, he thought he did know. It was too unlikely a guess to tell Sue about, and without familiarity with the Sancisco oddities she would only think Oliver was losing his mind. But he had from their talk, a definite impression that there was an actor in bit parts in all these films whose performances they mentioned with something very near to awe. They referred to him as Golconda, which didn't appear

to be his name, so that Oliver had no way of guessing which obscure bit-player it was they admired so deeply. Golconda might have been the name of a character he had once played--and with superlative skill, judging by the comments of the Sanciscos--but to Oliver he meant nothing at all.

"They do funny things," he said, stirring his coffee reflectively. "Yesterday Omerie--that's the man--came in with a book of poems published about five years ago, and all of them handled it like a first edition of Shakespeare. I never even heard of the author, but he seems to be a tin god in their country, wherever that is."

"You still don't know? Haven't they even dropped any hints?"

"We don't do much talking," Oliver reminded her with some irony.

"I know, but-- Oh, well, I guess it doesn't matter. Go on, what else do they do?"

"Well, this morning they were going to spend studying 'Golconda' and his great art, and this afternoon I think they're taking a trip up the river to some sort of shrine I never heard of. It isn't very far, wherever it is, because I know they're coming back for dinner. Some great man's birthplace, I think--they promised to take home souvenirs of the place if they could get any. They're typical tourists, all right--if I could only figure out what's behind the whole thing. It doesn't make sense."

"Nothing about that house makes sense any more. I do wish--"

She went on in a petulant voice, but Oliver ceased suddenly to hear her, because just outside the door, walking with imperial elegance on her high heels, a familiar figure passed. He did not see her face, but he thought he would know that poise, that richness of line and motion, anywhere on earth.

"Excuse me a minute," he muttered to Sue, and was out of his chair before she could speak. He made the door in half a dozen long strides, and the beautifully elegant passerby was only a few steps away when he got there. Then, with the words he had meant to speak already half-uttered, he fell silent and stood there staring.

It was not the red-haired woman. It was not her dark companion. It was a stranger. He watched, speechless, while the lovely, imperious creature moved on through the crowd and vanished, moving with familiar poise and assurance and an equally familiar strangeness as if the beautiful and exquisitely fitted garments she wore were an exotic costume to her, as they had always seemed to the San Francisco women. Every other woman on the street looked untidy and ill at ease beside her. Walking like a queen, she melted into the crowd and was gone.

She came from their country, Oliver told himself dizzily. So someone else nearby had mysterious tenants in this month of perfect May weather. Someone else was puzzling in vain today over the strangeness of the people from the nameless land.

In silence he went back to Sue.

The door stood invitingly ajar in the brown dimness of the upper hall. Oliver's steps slowed as he drew near it, and his heart began to quicken correspondingly. It was the red-haired woman's room, and he thought the door was not open by accident. Her name, he knew now, was Kleph.

The door creaked a little on its hinges and from within a very sweet voice said lazily, "Won't you come in?"

The room looked very different indeed. The big bed had been pushed back against the wall and a cover thrown over it that brushed

the floor all around looked like soft-haired fur except that it was a pale blue-green and sparkled as if every hair were tipped with invisible crystals. Three books lay open on the fur, and a very curious-looking magazine with faintly luminous printing and a page of pictures that at first glance appeared three-dimensional. Also a tiny porcelain pipe encrusted with porcelain flowers, and a thin wisp of smoke floating from the bowl.

Above the bed a broad picture hung, framing a square of blue water so real Oliver had to look twice to be sure it was not rippling gently from left to right. From the ceiling swung a crystal globe on a glass cord. It turned gently, the light from the windows making curved rectangles in its sides.

Under the center window a sort of chaise longue stood which Oliver had not seen before. He could only assume it was at least partly pneumatic and had been brought in the luggage. There was a very rich-looking quilted cloth covering and hiding it, embossed all over in shining metallic patterns.

Kleph moved slowly from the door and sank upon the chaise longue with a little sigh of content. The couch accommodated itself to her body with what looked like delightful comfort. Kleph wriggled a little and then smiled up at Oliver.

"Do come on in. Sit over there, where you can see out the window. I love your beautiful spring weather. You know, there never was a May like it in civilized times." She said that quite seriously, her blue eyes on Oliver's, and there was a hint of patronage in her voice, as if the weather had been arranged especially for her.

Oliver started across the room and then paused and looked down in amazement at the floor, which felt unstable. He had not noticed before that the carpet was pure white, unspotted, and sank about an

inch under the pressure of the feet. He saw then that Kleph's feet were bare, or almost bare. She wore something like gossamer buskins of filmy net, fitting her feet exactly. The bare soles were pink as if they had been rouged, and the nails had a liquid gleam like tiny mirrors. He moved closer, and was not as surprised as he should have been to see that they really were tiny mirrors, painted with some lacquer that gave them reflecting surfaces.

"Do sit down," Kleph said again, waving a white-sleeved arm toward a chair by the window. She wore a garment that looked like short, soft down, loosely cut but following perfectly every motion she made. And there was something curiously different about her very shape today. When Oliver saw her in street clothes, she had the square-shouldered, slim-flanked figure that all women strove for, but here in her lounging robe she looked--well, different. There was an almost swanlike slope to her shoulders today, a roundness and softness to her body that looked unfamiliar and very appealing.

"Will you have some tea?" Kleph asked, and smiled charmingly.

A low table beside her held a tray and several small covered cups, lovely things with an inner glow like rose quartz, the color shining deeply as if from within layer upon layer of translucence. She took up one of the cups--there were no saucers--and offered it to Oliver.

It felt fragile and thin as paper in his hand. He could not see the contents because of the cup's cover, which seemed to be one with the cup itself and left only a thin open crescent at the rim. Steam rose from the opening.

Kleph took up a cup of her own and tilted it to her lips, smiling at Oliver over the rim. She was very beautiful. The pale red hair lay in shining loops against her head and the corona of curls like a halo above her forehead might have been pressed down like a wreath.

Every hair kept order as perfectly as if it had been painted on, though the breeze from the window stirred now and then among the softly shining strands.

Oliver tried the tea. Its flavor was exquisite, very hot, and the taste that lingered upon his tongue was like the scent of flowers. It was an extremely feminine drink. He sipped again, surprised to find how much he liked it.

The scent of flowers seemed to increase as he drank, swirling through his head like smoke. After the third sip there was a faint buzzing in his ears. The bees among the flowers, perhaps, he thought incoherently--and sipped again.

Kleph watched him, smiling.

"The others will be out all afternoon," she told Oliver comfortably. "I thought it would give us a pleasant time to be acquainted."

Oliver was rather horrified to hear himself saying, "What makes you talk like that?" He had had no idea of asking the question; something seemed to have loosened his control over his own tongue.

Kleph's smile deepened. She tipped the cup to her lips and there was indulgence in her voice when she said, "What do you mean 'like that?'"

He waved his hand vaguely, noting with some surprise that at a glance it seemed to have six or seven fingers as it moved past his face.

"I don't know--precision, I guess. Why don't you say 'don't,' for instance?"

"In our country we are trained to speak with precision," Kleph

explained. "Just as we are trained to move and dress and think with precision. Any slovenliness is trained out of us in childhood. With you, of course—" She was polite. "With you, this does not happen to be a national fetish. With us, we have time for the amenities. We like them."

Her voice had grown sweeter and sweeter as she spoke, until by now it was almost indistinguishable from the sweetness of the flower-scent in Oliver's head, and the delicate flavor of the tea.

"What country do you come from?" he asked, and tilted the cup again to drink, mildly surprised to notice that it seemed inexhaustible.

Kleph's smile was definitely patronizing this time. It didn't irritate him. Nothing could irritate him just now. The whole room swam in a beautiful rosy glow as fragrant as the flowers.

"We must not speak of that, Mr. Wilson."

"But—" Oliver paused. After all, it was, of course, none of his business. "This is a vacation?" he asked vaguely.

"Call it a pilgrimage, perhaps."

"Pilgrimage?" Oliver was so interested that for an instant his mind came back into sharp focus. "To--what?"

"I should not have said that, Mr. Wilson. Please forget it. Do you like the tea?"

"Very much."

"You will have guessed by now that it is not only tea, but an euphoriac."

Oliver stared. "Euphoriac?"

Kleph made a descriptive circle in the air with one graceful hand, and laughed. "You do not feel the effects yet? Surely you do?"

"I feel," Oliver said, "the way I'd feel after four whiskeys."

Kleph shuddered delicately. "We get our euphoria less painfully. And without the after-effects your barbarous alcohols used to have."

She bit her lip. "Sorry. I must be euphoric myself to speak so freely. Please forgive me. Shall we have some music?"

Kleph leaned backward on the chaise longue and reached toward the wall beside her. The sleeve, falling away from her round tanned arm, left bare the inside of the wrist, and Oliver was startled to see there a long, rosy streak of fading scar. His inhibitions had dissolved in the fumes of the fragrant tea; he caught his breath and leaned forward to stare.

Kleph shook the sleeve back over the scar with a quick gesture. Color came into her face beneath the softly tinted tan and she would not meet Oliver's eyes. A queer shame seemed to have fallen upon her.

Oliver said tactlessly, "What is it? What's the matter?"

Still she would not look at him. Much later he understood that shame and knew she had reason for it. Now he listened blankly as she said:

"Nothing... nothing at all. A... an inoculation. All of us... oh, never mind. Listen to the music."

This time she reached out with the other arm. She touched nothing,

but when she held her hand near the wall a sound breathed through the room. It was the sound of water, the sighing of waves receding upon long, sloped beaches. Oliver followed Kleph's gaze toward the picture of the blue water above the bed.

The waves there were moving. More than that, the point of vision moved. Slowly the seascape drifted past, moving with the waves, following them toward shore. Oliver watched, half-hypnotized by a motion that seemed at the time quite acceptable and not in the least surprising.

The waves lifted and broke in creaming foam and ran seething up a sandy beach. Then through the sound of the water music began to breathe, and through the water itself a man's face dawned in the frame, smiling intimately into the room. He held an oddly archaic musical instrument, lute-shaped, its body striped light and dark like a melon and its long neck bent back over his shoulder. He was singing, and Oliver felt mildly astonished at the song. It was very familiar and very odd indeed. He groped through the unfamiliar rhythms and found at last a thread to catch the tune by--it was "Make-Believe," from "Showboat," but certainly a showboat that had never steamed up the Mississippi.

"What's he doing to it?" he demanded after a few moments of outraged listening. "I never heard anything like it!"

Kleph laughed and stretched out her arm again. Enigmatically she said, "We call it kyling. Never mind. How do you like this?"

It was a comedian, a man in semi-clown make-up, his eyes exaggerated so that they seemed to cover half his face. He stood by a broad glass pillar before a dark curtain and sang a gay, staccato song interspersed with patter that sounded impromptu, and all the while his left hand did an intricate, musical tattoo of the nailtips on the

glass of the column. He strolled around and around it as he sang. The rhythms of his fingernails blended with the song and swung widely away into patterns of their own, and blended again without a break.

It was confusing to follow. The song made even less sense than the monologue, which had something to do with a lost slipper and was full of allusions which made Kleph smile, but were utterly unintelligible to Oliver. The man had a dry, brittle style that was not very amusing, though Kleph seemed fascinated. Oliver was interested to see in him an extension and a variation of that extreme smooth confidence which marked all three of the Sanciscos. Clearly a racial trait, he thought.

Other performances followed, some of them fragmentary as if lifted out of a completer version. One he knew. The obvious, stirring melody struck his recognition before the figures--marching men against a haze, a great banner rolling backward above them in the smoke, foreground figures striding gigantically and shouting in rhythm, "Forward, forward the lily banners go!"

The music was tinny, the images blurred and poorly colored, but there was a gusto about the performance that caught at Oliver's imagination. He stared, remembering the old film from long ago. Dennis King and a ragged chorus, singing "The Song of the Vagabonds" from--was it "Vagabond King?"

"A very old one," Kleph said apologetically. "But I like it."

The steam of the intoxicating tea swirled between Oliver and the picture. Music swelled and sank through the room and the fragrant fumes and his own euphoric brain. Nothing seemed strange. He had discovered how to drink the tea. Like nitrous oxide, the effect was not cumulative. When you reached a peak of euphoria, you could not

increase the peak. It was best to wait for a slight dip in the effect of the stimulant before taking more.

Otherwise it had most of the effects of alcohol--everything after awhile dissolved into a delightful fog through which all he saw was uniformly enchanting and partook of the qualities of a dream. He questioned nothing. Afterward he was not certain how much of it he really had dreamed.

There was the dancing doll, for instance. He remembered it quite clearly, in sharp focus--a tiny, slender woman with a long-nosed, dark-eyed face and a pointed chin. She moved delicately across the white rug--knee-high, exquisite. Her features were as mobile as her body, and she danced lightly, with resounding strokes of her toes, each echoing like a bell. It was a formalized sort of dance, and she sang breathlessly in accompaniment, making amusing little grimaces. Certainly it was a portrait-doll, animated to mimic the original perfectly in voice and motion. Afterward, Oliver knew he must have dreamed it.

What else happened he was quite unable to remember later. He knew Kleph had said some curious things, but they all made sense at the time, and afterward he couldn't remember a word. He knew he had been offered little glittering candies in a transparent dish, and that some of them had been delicious and one or two so bitter his tongue still curled the next day when he recalled them, and one--Kleph sucked luxuriantly on the same kind--of a taste that was actively nauseating.

As for Kleph herself--he was frantically uncertain the next day what had really happened. He thought he could remember the softness of her white-downed arms clasped at the back of his neck, while she laughed up at him and exhaled into his face the flowery fragrance of the tea. But beyond that he was totally unable to recall anything, for a

while.

There was a brief interlude later, before the oblivion of sleep. He was almost sure he remembered a moment when the other two Sanciscos stood looking down at him, the man scowling, the smoky-eyed woman smiling a derisive smile.

The man said, from a vast distance, "Kleph, you know this is against every rule--" His voice began in a thin hum and soared in fantastic flight beyond the range of hearing. Oliver thought he remembered the dark woman's laughter, thin and distant too, and the hum of her voice like bees in flight.

"Kleph, Kleph, you silly little fool, can we never trust you out of sight?"

Kleph's voice then said something that seemed to make no sense. "What does it matter, here?"

The man answered in that buzzing, faraway hum. "The matter of giving your bond before you leave, not to interfere. You know you signed the rules--"

Kleph's voice, nearer and more intelligible: "But here the difference is... it does not matter here! You both know that. How could it matter?"

Oliver felt the downy brush of her sleeve against his cheek, but he saw nothing except the slow, smokelike ebb and flow of darkness past his eyes. He heard the voices wrangle musically from far away, and he heard them cease.

When he woke the next morning, alone in his own room, he woke with the memory of Kleph's eyes upon him very sorrowfully, her lovely tanned face looking down on him with the red hair falling fragrantly on each side of it and sadness and compassion in her eyes. He thought

he had probably dreamed that. There was no reason why anyone should look at him with such sadness.

Sue telephoned that day.

"Oliver, the people who want to buy the house are here. That madwoman and her husband. Shall I bring them over?"

Oliver's mind all day had been hazy with the vague, bewildering memories of yesterday. Kleph's face kept floating before him, blotting out the room. He said, "What? I... oh, well, bring them if you want to. I don't see what good it'll do."

"Oliver, what's wrong with you? We agreed we needed the money, didn't we? I don't see how you can think of passing up such a wonderful bargain without even a struggle. We could get married and buy our own house right away, and you know we'll never get such an offer again for that old trash-heap. Wake up, Oliver!"

Oliver made an effort. "I know, Sue--I know. But--"

"Oliver, you've got to think of something!" Her voice was imperious.

He knew she was right. Kleph or no Kleph, the bargain shouldn't be ignored if there was any way at all of getting the tenants out. He wondered again what made the place so suddenly priceless to so many people. And what the last week in May had to do with the value of the house.

A sudden sharp curiosity pierced even the vagueness of his mind today. May's last week was so important that the whole sale of the house stood or fell upon occupancy by then. Why? Why?

"What's going to happen next week?" he asked rhetorically of the telephone. "Why can't they wait till these people leave? I'd knock a

couple of thousand off the price if they'd--"

"You would not, Oliver Wilson! I can buy all our refrigeration units with that extra money. You'll just have to work out some way to give possession by next week, and that's that. You hear me?"

"Keep your shirt on," Oliver said practically. "I'm only human, but I'll try."

"I'm bringing the people over right away," Sue told him. "While the Sanciscos are still out. Now you put your mind to work and think of something, Oliver." She paused, and her voice was reflective when she spoke again. "They're... awfully odd people, darling."

"Odd?"

"You'll see."

It was an elderly woman and a very young man who trailed Sue up the walk. Oliver knew immediately what had struck Sue about them. He was somehow not at all surprised to see that both wore their clothing with the familiar air of elegant self-consciousness he had come to know so well. They, too, looked around them at the beautiful, sunny afternoon with conscious enjoyment and an air of faint condescension. He knew before he heard them speak how musical their voices would be and how meticulously they would pronounce each word.

There was no doubt about it. The people of Kleph's mysterious country were arriving here in force--for something. For the last week of May? He shrugged mentally; there was no way of guessing--yet. One thing only was sure: all of them must come from that nameless land where people controlled their voices like singers and their garments like actors who could stop the reel of time itself to adjust

every disordered fold.

The elderly woman took full charge of the conversation from the start. They stood together on the rickety, unpainted porch, and Sue had no chance even for introductions.

"Young man, I am Madame Hollia. This is my husband." Her voice had an underrunning current of harshness, which was perhaps age. And her face looked almost corsetted, the loose flesh coerced into something like firmness by some invisible method Oliver could not guess at. The make-up was so skillful he could not be certain it was make-up at all, but he had a definite feeling that she was much older than she looked. It would have taken a lifetime of command to put so much authority into the harsh, deep, musically controlled voice.

The young man said nothing. He was very handsome. His type, apparently, was one that does not change much no matter in what culture or country it may occur. He wore beautifully tailored garments and carried in one gloved hand a box of red leather, about the size and shape of a book.

Madame Hollia went on. "I understand your problem about the house. You wish to sell to me, but are legally bound by your lease with Omerie and his friends. Is that right?"

Oliver nodded. "But--"

"Let me finish. If Omerie can be forced to vacate before next week, you will accept our offer. Right? Very well. Hara!" She nodded to the young man beside her. He jumped to instant attention, bowed slightly, said, "Yes, Hollia," and slipped a gloved hand into his coat.

Madame Hollia took the little object offered on his palm, her gesture as she reached for it almost imperial, as if royal robes swept from

her outstretched arm.

"Here," she said, "is something that may help us. My dear--" She held it out to Sue--"if you can hide this somewhere about the house, I believe your unwelcome tenants will not trouble you much longer."

Sue took the thing curiously. It looked like a tiny silver box, no more than an inch square, indented at the top and with no line to show it could be opened.

"Wait a minute," Oliver broke in uneasily. "What is it?"

"Nothing that will harm anyone, I assure you."

"Then what--"

Madame Hollia's imperious gesture at one sweep silenced him and commanded Sue forward. "Go on, my dear. Hurry, before Omerie comes back. I can assure you there is no danger to anyone."

Oliver broke in determinedly. "Madame Hollia, I'll have to know what your plans are. I--"

"Oh, Oliver, please!" Sue's fingers closed over the silver cube. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure Madame Hollia knows best. Don't you want to get those people out?"

"Of course I do. But I don't want the house blown up or--"

Madame Hollia's deep laughter was indulgent. "Nothing so crude, I promise you, Mr. Wilson. Remember, we want the house! Hurry, my dear."

Sue nodded and slipped hastily past Oliver into the hall. Outnumbered, he subsided uneasily. The young man, Hara, tapped a

negligent foot and admired the sunlight as they waited. It was an afternoon as perfect as all of May had been, translucent gold, balmy with an edge of chill lingering in the air to point up a perfect contrast with the summer to come. Hara looked around him confidently, like a man paying just tribute to a stageset provided wholly for himself. He even glanced up at a drone from above and followed the course of a big transcontinental plane half dissolved in golden haze high in the sun. "Quaint," he murmured in a gratified voice.

Sue came back and slipped her hand through Oliver's arm, squeezing excitedly. "There," she said. "How long will it take, Madame Hollia?"

"That will depend, my dear. Not very long. Now, Mr. Wilson, one word with you. You live here also, I understand? For your own comfort, take my advice and--"

Somewhere within the house a door slammed and a clear high voice rang wordlessly up a rippling scale. Then there was the sound of feet on the stairs, and a single line of song. "Come hider, love, to me--"

Hara started, almost dropping the red leather box he held.

"Kleph!" he said in a whisper. "Or Kila. I know they both just came on from Canterbury. But I thought--"

"Hush." Madame Hollia's features composed themselves into an imperious blank. She breathed triumphantly through her nose, drew back upon herself and turned an imposing facade to the door.

Kleph wore the same softly downy robe Oliver had seen before, except that today it was not white, but a pale, clear blue that gave her tan an apricot flush. She was smiling.

"Why, Hollia!" Her tone was at its most musical. "I thought I

recognized voices from home. How nice to see you. No one knew you were coming to the—" She broke off and glanced at Oliver and then away again. "Hara, too," she said. "What a pleasant surprise."

Sue said flatly, "When did you get back?"

Kleph smiled at her. "You must be the little Miss Johnson. Why, I did not go out at all. I was tired of sightseeing. I have been napping in my room."

Sue drew in her breath in something that just escaped being a disbelieving sniff. A look flashed between the two women, and for an instant held—and that instant was timeless. It was an extraordinary pause in which a great deal of wordless interplay took place in the space of a second.

Oliver saw the quality of Kleph's smile at Sue, that same look of quiet confidence he had noticed so often about all of these strange people. He saw Sue's quick inventory of the other woman, and he saw how Sue squared her shoulders and stood up straight, smoothing down her summer frock over her flat hips so that for an instant she stood posed consciously, looking down on Kleph. It was deliberate. Bewildered, he glanced again at Kleph.

Kleph's shoulders sloped softly, her robe was belted to a tiny waist and hung in deep folds over frankly rounded hips. Sue's was the fashionable figure—but Sue was the first to surrender.

Kleph's smile did not falter. But in the silence there was an abrupt reversal of values, based on no more than the measureless quality of Kleph's confidence in herself, the quiet, assured smile. It was suddenly made very clear that fashion is not a constant. Kleph's curious, out-of-mode curves without warning became the norm, and Sue was a queer, angular, half-masculine creature beside her.

Oliver had no idea how it was done. Somehow the authority passed in a breath from one woman to the other. Beauty is almost wholly a matter of fashion; what is beautiful today would have been grotesque a couple of generations ago and will be grotesque a hundred years ahead. It will be worse than grotesque; it will be outmoded and therefore faintly ridiculous.

Sue was that. Kleph had only to exert her authority to make it clear to everyone on the porch. Kleph was a beauty, suddenly and very convincingly, beautiful in the accepted mode, and Sue was amusingly old-fashioned, an anachronism in her lithe, square-shouldered slimness. She did not belong. She was grotesque among these strangely immaculate people.

Sue's collapse was complete. But pride sustained her, and bewilderment. Probably she never did grasp entirely what was wrong. She gave Kleph one glance of burning resentment and when her eyes came back to Oliver there was suspicion in them, and mistrust.

Looking backward later, Oliver thought that in that moment, for the first time clearly, he began to suspect the truth. But he had no time to ponder it, for after the brief instant of enmity the three people from--elsewhere--began to speak all at once, as if in a belated attempt to cover something they did not want noticed.

Kleph said, "This beautiful weather--" and Madame Hollia said, "So fortunate to have this house--" and Hara, holding up the red leather box, said loudest of all, "Cenbe sent you this, Kleph. His latest."

Kleph put out both hands for it eagerly, the eiderdown sleeves falling back from her rounded arms. Oliver had a quick glimpse of that mysterious scar before the sleeve fell back, and it seemed to him that there was the faintest trace of a similar scar vanishing into

Hara's cuff as he let his own arm drop.

"Cenbe!" Kleph cried, her voice high and sweet and delighted. "How wonderful! What period?"

"From November 1664," Hara said. "London, of course, though I think there may be some counterpoint from the 1347 November. He hasn't finished--of course." He glanced almost nervously at Oliver and Sue. "A wonderful example," he said quickly. "Marvelous. If you have the taste for it, of course."

Madame Hollia shuddered with ponderous delicacy.

"That man!" she said. "Fascinating, of course--a great man. But--so advanced!"

"It takes a connoisseur to appreciate Cenbe's work fully," Kleph said in a slightly tart voice. "We all admit that."

"Oh yes, we all bow to Cenbe," Hollia conceded. "I confess the man terrifies me a little, my dear. Do we expect him to join us?"

"I suppose so," Kleph said. "If his--work--is not yet finished, then of course. You know Cenbe's tastes."

Hollia and Hara laughed together. "I know when to look for him, then," Hollia said. She glanced at the staring Oliver and the subdued but angry Sue, and with a commanding effort brought the subject back into line.

"So fortunate, my dear Kleph, to have this house," she declared heavily. "I saw a tridimensional of it--afterward--and it was still quite perfect. Such a fortunate coincidence. Would you consider parting with your lease, for a consideration? Say, a coronation seat at--"

"Nothing could buy us, Hollia," Kleph told her gaily, clasping the red box to her bosom.

Hollia gave her a cool stare. "You may change your mind, my dear Kleph," she said pontifically. "There is still time. You can always reach us through Mr. Wilson here. We have rooms up the street in the Montgomery House--nothing like yours, of course, but they will do. For us, they will do."

Oliver blinked. The Montgomery House was the most expensive hotel in town. Compared to this collapsing old ruin, it was a palace. There was no understanding these people. Their values seemed to have suffered a complete reversal.

Madame Hollia moved majestically toward the steps.

"Very pleasant to see you, my dear," she said over one well-padded shoulder. "Enjoy your stay. My regards to Omerie and Klia. Mr. Wilson--" she nodded toward the walk. "A word with you."

Oliver followed her down toward the street. Madame Hollia paused halfway there and touched his arm.

"One word of advice," she said huskily. "You say you sleep here? Move out, young man. Move out before tonight."

Oliver was searching in a half-desultory fashion for the hiding place Sue had found for the mysterious silver cube, when the first sounds from above began to drift down the stairwell toward him. Kleph had closed her door, but the house was old, and strange qualities in the noise overhead seemed to seep through the woodwork like an almost visible stain.

It was music, in a way. But much more than music. And it was a terrible sound, the sounds of calamity and of all human reaction to

calamity, everything from hysteria to heartbreak, from irrational joy to rationalized acceptance.

The calamity was--single. The music did not attempt to correlate all human sorrows; it focused sharply upon one and followed the ramifications out and out. Oliver recognized these basics to the sounds in a very brief moment. They were essentials, and they seemed to beat into his brain with the first strains of the music which was so much more than music.

But when he lifted his head to listen he lost all grasp upon the meaning of the noise and it was sheer medley and confusion. To think of it was to blur it hopelessly in the mind, and he could not recapture that first instant of unreasoning acceptance.

He went upstairs almost in a daze, hardly knowing what he was doing. He pushed Kleph's door open. He looked inside-- What he saw there he could not afterward remember except in a blurring as vague as the blurred ideas the music roused in his brain. Half the room had vanished behind a mist, and the mist was a three-dimensional screen upon which were projected-- He had no words for them. He was not even sure if the projections were visual. The mist was spinning with motion and sound, but essentially it was neither sound nor motion that Oliver saw.

This was a work of art. Oliver knew no name for it. It transcended all art-forms he knew, blended them, and out of the blend produced subtleties his mind could not begin to grasp. Basically, this was the attempt of a master composer to correlate every essential aspect of a vast human experience into something that could be conveyed in a few moments to every sense at once.

The shifting visions on the screen were not pictures in themselves, but hints of pictures, subtly selected outlines that plucked at the mind

and with one deft touch set whole chords ringing through the memory. Perhaps each beholder reacted differently, since it was in the eye and the mind of the beholder that the truth of the picture lay. No two would be aware of the same symphonic panorama, but each would see essentially the same terrible story unfold.

Every sense was touched by that deft and merciless genius. Color and shape and motion flickered in the screen, hinting much, evoking unbearable memories deep in the mind; odors floated from the screen and touched the heart of the beholder more poignantly than anything visual could do. The skin crawled sometimes as if to a tangible cold hand laid upon it. The tongue curled with remembered bitterness and remembered sweet.

It was outrageous. It violated the innermost privacies of a man's mind, called up secret things long ago walled off behind mental scar tissue, forced its terrible message upon the beholder relentlessly though the mind might threaten to crack beneath the stress of it.

And yet, in spite of all this vivid awareness, Oliver did not know what calamity the screen portrayed. That it was real, vast, overwhelmingly dreadful he could not doubt. That it had once happened was unmistakable. He caught flashing glimpses of human faces distorted with grief and disease and death--real faces, faces that had once lived and were seen now in the instant of dying. He saw men and women in rich clothing superimposed in panorama upon reeling thousands of ragged folk, great throngs of them swept past the sight in an instant, and he saw that death made no distinction among them.

He saw lovely women laugh and shake their curls, and the laughter shriek into hysteria and the hysteria into music. He saw one man's face, over and over--a long, dark, saturnine face, deeply lined, sorrowful, the face of a powerful man wise in worldliness, urbane--

and helpless. That face was for awhile a recurring motif, always more tortured, more helpless than before.

The music broke off in the midst of a rising glide. The mist vanished and the room reappeared before him. The anguished dark face for an instant seemed to Oliver printed everywhere he looked, like after-vision on the eyelids. He knew that face. He had seen it before, not often, but he should know its name-- "Oliver, Oliver--" Kleph's sweet voice came out of a fog at him.

He was leaning dizzily against the doorpost looking down into her eyes. She, too, had that dazed blankness he must show on his own face. The power of the dreadful symphony still held them both. But even in this confused moment Oliver saw that Kleph had been enjoying the experience.

He felt sickened to the depths of his mind, dizzy with sickness and revulsion because of the superimposing of human miseries he had just beheld. But Kleph--only appreciation showed upon her face. To her it had been magnificence, and magnificence only.

Irrelevantly Oliver remembered the nauseating candies she had enjoyed, the nauseating odors of strange food that drifted sometimes through the hall from her room.

What was it she had said downstairs a little while ago? Connoisseur, that was it. Only a connoisseur could appreciate work as--as advanced--as the work of someone called Cenbe.

A whiff of intoxicating sweetness curled past Oliver's face. Something cool and smooth was pressed into his hand.

"Oh, Oliver, I am so sorry," Kleph's voice murmured contritely. "Here, drink the euphoriac and you will feel better. Please drink!"

The familiar fragrance of the hot sweet tea was on his tongue before he knew he had complied. Its relaxing fumes floated up through his brain and in a moment or two the world felt stable around him again. The room was as it had always been. And Kleph-- Her eyes were very bright. Sympathy showed in them for him, but for herself she was still brimmed with the high elation of what she had just been experiencing.

"Come and sit down," she said gently, tugging at his arm. "I am so sorry--I should not have played that over, where you could hear it. I have no excuse, really. It was only that I forgot what the effect might be on one who had never heard Cenbe's symphonies before. I was so impatient to see what he had done with... with his new subject. I am so very sorry, Oliver!"

"What was it?" His voice sounded steadier than he had expected. The tea was responsible for that. He sipped again, glad of the consoling euphoria its fragrance brought.

"A... a composite interpretation of... oh, Oliver, you know I must not answer questions!"

"But--"

"No--drink your tea and forget what it was you saw. Think of other things. Here, we will have music--another kind of music, something gay--"

She reached for the wall beside the window, and as before, Oliver saw the broad framed picture of blue water above the bed ripple and grow pale. Through it another scene began to dawn like shapes rising beneath the surface of the sea.

He had a glimpse of a dark-curtained stage upon which a man in a

tight dark tunic and hose moved with a restless, sidelong pace, his hands and face startlingly pale against the black about him. He limped; he had a crooked back and he spoke familiar lines. Oliver had seen John Barrymore once as the crook-backed Richard, and it seemed vaguely outrageous to him that any other actor should essay that difficult part. This one he had never seen before, but the man had a fascinatingly smooth manner and his interpretation of the Plantagenet king was quite new and something Shakespeare probably never dreamed of.

"No," Kleph said, "not this. Nothing gloomy." And she put out her hand again. The nameless new Richard faded and there was a swirl of changing pictures and changing voices, all blurred together, before the scene steadied upon a stageful of dancers in pastel ballet skirts, drifting effortlessly through some complicated pattern of motion. The music that went with it was light and effortless too. The room filled up with the clear, floating melody.

Oliver set down his cup. He felt much surer of himself now, and he thought the euphoriac had done all it could for him. He didn't want to blur again mentally. There were things he meant to learn about. Now. He considered how to begin.

Kleph was watching him. "That Hollia," she said suddenly. "She wants to buy the house?"

Oliver nodded. "She's offering a lot of money. Sue's going to be awfully disappointed if--" He hesitated. Perhaps, after all, Sue would not be disappointed. He remembered the little silver cube with the enigmatic function and he wondered if he should mention it to Kleph. But the euphoriac had not reached that level of his brain, and he remembered his duty to Sue and was silent.

Kleph shook her head, her eyes upon his warm with--was it

sympathy?

"Believe me," she said, "you will not find that--important--after all. I promise you, Oliver."

He stared at her. "I wish you'd explain."

Kleph laughed on a note more sorrowful than amused. But it occurred to Oliver suddenly that there was no longer condescension in her voice. Imperceptibly that air of delicate amusement had vanished from her manner toward him. The cool detachment that still marked Omerie's attitude, and Klia's, was not in Kleph's any more. It was a subtlety he did not think she could assume. It had to come spontaneously or not at all. And for no reason he was willing to examine, it became suddenly very important to Oliver that Kleph should not condescend to him, that she should feel toward him as he felt toward her. He would not think of it.

He looked down at his cup, rose-quartz, exhaling a thin plume of steam from its crescent-slit opening. This time, he thought, maybe he could make the tea work for him. For he remembered how it loosened the tongue, and there was a great deal he needed to know. The idea that had come to him on the porch in the instant of silent rivalry between Kleph and Sue seemed now too fantastic to entertain. But some answer there must be.

Kleph herself gave him the opening.

"I must not take too much euphoric this afternoon," she said, smiling at him over her pink cup. "It will make me drowsy, and we are going out this evening with friends."

"More friends?" Oliver asked. "From your country?"

Kleph nodded. "Very dear friends we have expected all this week."

"I wish you'd tell me," Oliver said bluntly, "where it is you come from. It isn't from here. Your culture is too different from ours-- even your names--" He broke off as Kleph shook her head.

"I wish I could tell you. But that is against all the rules. It is even against the rules for me to be here talking to you now."

"What rules?"

She made a helpless gesture. "You must not ask me, Oliver." She leaned back on the chaise longue, which adjusted itself luxuriously to the motion, and smiled very sweetly at him. "We must not talk about things like that. Forget it, listen to the music, enjoy yourself if you can--" She closed her eyes and laid her head back against the cushions. Oliver saw the round tanned throat swell as she began to hum a tune. Eyes still closed, she sang again the words she had sung upon the stairs. "Come hider, love, to me--"

A memory clicked over suddenly in Oliver's mind. He had never heard the queer, lagging tune before, but he thought he knew the words. He remembered what Hollia's husband had said when he heard that line of song, and he leaned forward. She would not answer a direct question, but perhaps-- "Was the weather this warm in Canterbury?" he asked, and held his breath. Kleph hummed another line of the song and shook her head, eyes still closed.

"It was autumn there," she said. "But bright, wonderfully bright. Even their clothing, you know... everyone was singing that new song, and I can't get it out of my head." She sang another line, and the words were almost unintelligible--English, yet not an English Oliver could understand.

He stood up. "Wait," he said. "I want to find something. Back in a

minute."

She opened her eyes and smiled mistily at him, still humming. He went downstairs as fast as he could--the stairway swayed a little, though his head was nearly clear now--and into the library. The book he wanted was old and battered, interlined with the penciled notes of his college days. He did not remember very clearly where the passage he wanted was, but he thumbed fast through the columns and by sheer luck found it within a few minutes. Then he went back upstairs, feeling a strange emptiness in his stomach because of what he almost believed now.

"Kleph," he said firmly, "I know that song. I know the year it was new."

Her lids rose slowly; she looked at him through a mist of euphoric. He was not sure she had understood. For a long moment she held him with her gaze. Then she put out one downy-sleeved arm and spread her tanned fingers toward him. She laughed deep in her throat.

"Come hider, love, to me," she said.

He crossed the room slowly, took her hand. The fingers closed warmly about his. She pulled him down so that he had to kneel beside her. Her other arm lifted. Again she laughed, very softly, and closed her eyes, lifting her face to his.

The kiss was warm and long. He caught something of her own euphoria from the fragrance of the tea breathed into his face. And he was startled at the end of the kiss, when the clasp of her arms loosened about his neck, to feel the sudden rush of her breath against his cheek. There were tears on her face, and the sound she made was a sob.

He held her off and looked down in amazement. She sobbed once more, caught a deep breath, and said, "Oh, Oliver, Oliver--" Then she shook her head and pulled free, turning away to hide her face. "I... I am sorry," she said unevenly. "Please forgive me. It does not matter... I know it does not matter... but--"

"What's wrong? What doesn't matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing... please forget it. Nothing at all." She got a handkerchief from the table and blew her nose, smiling at him with an effect of radiance through the tears.

Suddenly he was very angry. He had heard enough evasions and mystifying half-truths. He said roughly, "Do you think I'm crazy? I know enough now to--"

"Oliver, please!" She held up her own cup, steaming fragrantly. "Please, no more questions. Here, euphoria is what you need, Oliver. Euphoria, not answers."

"What year was it when you heard that song in Canterbury?" he demanded, pushing the cup aside.

She blinked at him, tears bright on her lashes. "Why... what year do you think?"

"I know," Oliver told her grimly. "I know the year that song was popular. I know you just came from Canterbury--Hollia's husband said so. It's May now, but it was autumn in Canterbury, and you just came from there, so lately the song you heard is still running through your head. Chaucer's Pardoner sang that song some time around the end of the fourteenth century. Did you see Chaucer, Kleph? What was it like in England that long ago?"

Kleph's eyes fixed his for a silent moment. Then her shoulders

drooped and her whole body went limp with resignation beneath the soft blue robe. "I am a fool," she said gently. "It must have been easy to trap me. You really believe--what you say?"

Oliver nodded.

She said in a low voice, "Few people do believe it. That is one of our maxims, when we travel. We are safe from much suspicion because people before The Travel began will not believe."

The emptiness in Oliver's stomach suddenly doubled in volume. For an instant the bottom dropped out of time itself and the universe was unsteady about him. He felt sick. He felt naked and helpless. There was a buzzing in his ears and the room dimmed before him.

He had not really believed--not until this instant. He had expected some rational explanation from her that would tidy all his wild half-thoughts and suspicions into something a man could accept as believable. Not this.

Kleph dabbed at her eyes with the pale-blue handkerchief and smiled tremulously.

"I know," she said. "It must be a terrible thing to accept. To have all your concepts turned upside down-- We know it from childhood, of course, but for you... here, Oliver. The euphoric will make it easier."

He took the cup, the faint stain of her lip rouge still on the crescent opening. He drank, feeling the dizzy sweetness spiral through his head, and his brain turned a little in his skull as the volatile fragrance took effect. With that turning, focus shifted and all his values with it.

He began to feel better. The flesh settled on his bones again, and the warm clothing of temporal assurance settled upon his flesh, and he

was no longer naked and in the vortex of unstable time.

"The story is very simple, really," Kleph said. "We--travel. Our own time is not terribly far ahead of yours. No. I must not say how far. But we still remember your songs and poets and some of your great actors. We are a people of much leisure, and we cultivate the art of enjoying ourselves.

"This is a tour we are making--a tour of a year's seasons. Vintage seasons. That autumn in Canterbury was the most magnificent autumn our researchers could discover anywhere. We rode in a pilgrimage to the shrine--it was a wonderful experience, though the clothing was a little hard to manage.

"Now this month of May is almost over--the loveliest May in recorded times. A perfect May in a wonderful period. You have no way of knowing what a good, gay period you live in, Oliver. The very feeling in the air of the cities--that wonderful national confidence and happiness--everything going as smoothly as a dream. There were other Mays with fine weather, but each of them had a war or a famine, or something else wrong." She hesitated, grimaced and went on rapidly. "In a few days we are to meet at a coronation in Rome," she said. "I think the year will be 800--Christmastime. We--"

"But why," Oliver interrupted, "did you insist on this house? Why do the others want to get it away from you?"

Kleph stared at him. He saw the tears rising again in small bright crescents that gathered above her lower lids. He saw the look of obstinacy that came upon her soft, tanned face. She shook her head.

"You must not ask me that." She held out the steaming cup. "Here, drink and forget what I have said. I can tell you no more. No more at all."

When he woke, for a little while he had no idea where he was. He did not remember leaving Kleph or coming to his own room. He didn't care, just then. For he woke to a sense of overwhelming terror.

The dark was full of it. His brain rocked on waves of fear and pain. He lay motionless, too frightened to stir, some atavistic memory warning him to lie quiet until he knew from which direction the danger threatened. Reasonless panic broke over him in a tidal flow; his head ached with its violence and the dark throbbed to the same rhythms.

A knock sounded at the door. Omerie's deep voice said, "Wilson! Wilson, are you awake?"

Oliver tried twice before he had breath to answer. "Y-yes--what is it?"

The knob rattled. Omerie's dim figure groped for the light switch and the room sprang into visibility. Omerie's face was drawn with strain, and he held one hand to his head as if it ached in rhythm with Oliver's.

It was in that moment, before Omerie spoke again, that Oliver remembered Hollia's warning. "Move out, young man--move out before tonight." Wildly he wondered what threatened them all in this dark house that throbbed with the rhythms of pure terror.

Omerie in an angry voice answered the unspoken question.

"Someone has planted a subsonic in the house, Wilson. Kleph thinks you may know where it is."

"S-subsonic?"

"Call it a gadget," Omerie interpreted impatiently. "Probably a small

metal box that--"

Oliver said, "Oh," in a tone that must have told Omerie everything.

"Where is it?" he demanded. "Quick. Let's get this over."

"I don't know." With an effort Oliver controlled the chattering of his teeth. "Y-you mean all this--all this is just from the little box?"

"Of course. Now tell me how to find it before we all go crazy."

Oliver got shakily out of bed, groping for his robe with nerveless hands. "I s-suppose she hid it somewhere downstairs," he said. "S-she wasn't gone long."

Omerie got the story out of him in a few brief questions. He clicked his teeth in exasperation when Oliver had finished it.

"That stupid Hollia--"

"Omerie!" Kleph's plaintive voice wailed from the hall. "Please hurry, Omerie! This is too much to stand! Oh, Omerie, please!"

Oliver stood up abruptly. Then a redoubled wave of the inexplicable pain seemed to explode in his skull at the motion, and he clutched the bedpost and reeled.

"Go find the thing yourself," he heard himself saying dizzily. "I can't even walk--"

Omerie's own temper was drawn wire-tight by the pressure in the room. He seized Oliver's shoulder and shook him, saying in a tight voice, "You let it in--now help us get it out, or--"

"It's a gadget out of your world, not mine!" Oliver said furiously.

And then it seemed to him there was a sudden coldness and silence in the room. Even the pain and the senseless terror paused for a moment. Omerie's pale, cold eyes fixed upon Oliver a stare so chill he could almost feel the ice in it.

"What do you know about our--world?" Omerie demanded.

Oliver did not speak a word. He did not need to; his face must have betrayed what he knew. He was beyond concealment in the stress of this night-time terror he still could not understand.

Omerie bared his white teeth and said three perfectly unintelligible words. Then he stepped to the door and snapped, "Kleph!"

Oliver could see the two women huddled together in the hall, shaking violently with involuntary waves of that strange, synthetic terror. Klia, in a luminous green gown, was rigid with control, but Kleph made no effort whatever at repression. Her downy robe had turned soft gold tonight; she shivered in it and the tears ran down her face unchecked.

"Kleph," Omerie said in a dangerous voice, "you were euphoric again yesterday?"

Kleph darted a scared glance at Oliver and nodded guiltily.

"You talked too much." It was a complete indictment in one sentence. "You know the rules, Kleph. You will not be allowed to travel again if anyone reports this to the authorities."

Kleph's lovely creamy face creased suddenly into impenitent dimples.

"I know it was wrong. I am very sorry--but you will not stop me if

Cenbe says no."

Klia flung out her arms in a gesture of helpless anger. Omerie shrugged. "In this case, as it happens, no great harm is done," he said, giving Oliver an unfathomable glance. "But it might have been serious. Next time perhaps it will be. I must have a talk with Cenbe."

"We must find the subsonic first of all," Klia reminded them, shivering. "If Kleph is afraid to help, she can go out for a while. I confess I am very sick of Kleph's company just now."

"We could give up the house!" Kleph cried wildly. "Let Hollia have it! How can you stand this long enough to hunt--"

"Give up the house?" Klia echoed. "You must be mad! With all our invitations out?"

"There will be no need for that," Omerie said. "We can find it if we all hunt. You feel able to help?" He looked at Oliver.

With an effort Oliver controlled his own senseless panic as the waves of it swept through the room. "Yes," he said. "But what about me? What are you going to do?"

"That should be obvious," Omerie said, his pale eyes in the dark face regarding Oliver impassively. "Keep you in the house until we go. We can certainly do no less. You understand that. And there is no reason for us to do more, as it happens. Silence is all we promised when we signed our travel papers."

"But--" Oliver groped for the fallacy in that reasoning. It was no use. He could not think clearly. Panic surged insanely through his mind from the very air around him. "All right," he said. "Let's hunt."

It was dawn before they found the box, tucked inside the ripped

seam of a sofa cushion. Omerie took it upstairs without a word. Five minutes later the pressure in the air abruptly dropped and peace fell blissfully upon the house.

"They will try again," Omerie said to Oliver at the door of the back bedroom. "We must watch for that. As for you, I must see that you remain in the house until Friday. For your own comfort, I advise you to let me know if Hollia offers any further tricks. I confess I am not quite sure how to enforce your staying indoors. I could use methods that would make you very uncomfortable. I would prefer to accept your word on it."

Oliver hesitated. The relaxing of pressure upon his brain had left him exhausted and stupid, and he was not at all sure what to say.

Omerie went on after a moment. "It was partly our fault for not insuring that we had the house to ourselves," he said. "Living here with us, you could scarcely help suspecting. Shall we say that in return for your promise, I reimburse you in part for losing the sale price on this house?"

Oliver thought that over. It would pacify Sue a little. And it meant only two days indoors. Besides, what good would escaping do? What could he say to outsiders that would not lead him straight to a padded cell?

"All right," he said wearily. "I promise."

By Friday morning there was still no sign from Hollia. Sue telephoned at noon. Oliver knew the crackle of her voice over the wire when Kleph took the call. Even the crackle sounded hysterical; Sue saw her bargain slipping hopelessly through her grasping little fingers.

Kleph's voice was soothing. "I am sorry," she said many times, in the

intervals when the voice paused. "I am truly sorry. Believe me, you will find it does not matter. I know... I am sorry--"

She turned from the phone at last. "The girl says Hollia has given up," she told the others.

"Not Hollia," Klia said firmly.

Omerie shrugged. "We have very little time left. If she intends anything more, it will be tonight. We must watch for it."

"Oh, not tonight!" Kleph's voice was horrified. "Not even Hollia would do that!"

"Hollia, my dear, in her own way is quite as unscrupulous as you are," Omerie told her with a smile.

"But--would she spoil things for us just because she can't be here?"

"What do you think?" Klia demanded.

Oliver ceased to listen. There was no making sense out of their talk, but he knew that by tonight whatever the secret was must surely come into the open at last. He was willing to wait and see.

For two days excitement had been building up in the house and the three who shared it with him. Even the servants felt it and were nervous and unsure of themselves. Oliver had given up asking questions-- it only embarrassed his tenants--and watched.

All the chairs in the house were collected in the three front bedrooms. The furniture was rearranged to make room for them, and dozens of covered cups had been set out on trays. Oliver recognized Kleph's rose-quartz set among the rest. No steam rose from the thin crescent-openings, but the cups were full. Oliver lifted one and felt a

heavy liquid move within it, like something half-solid, sluggishly.

Guests were obviously expected, but the regular dinner hour of nine came and went, and no one had yet arrived. Dinner was finished; the servants went home. The Sanciscos went to their rooms to dress, amid a feeling of mounting tension.

Oliver stepped out on the porch after dinner, trying in vain to guess what it was that had wrought such a pitch of expectancy in the house. There was a quarter moon swimming in haze on the horizon, but the stars which had made every night of May thus far a dazzling translucency, were very dim tonight. Clouds had begun to gather at sundown, and the undimmed weather of the whole month seemed ready to break at last.

Behind Oliver the door opened a little, and closed. He caught Kleph's fragrance before he turned, and a faint whiff of the fragrance of the euphoriac she was much too fond of drinking. She came to his side and slipped a hand into his, looking up into his face in the darkness.

"Oliver," she said very softly. "Promise me one thing. Promise me not to leave the house tonight."

"I've already promised that," he said a little irritably.

"I know. But tonight—I have a very particular reason for wanting you indoors tonight." She leaned her head against his shoulder for a moment, and despite himself his irritation softened. He had not seen Kleph alone since that last night of her revelations; he supposed he never would be alone with her again for more than a few minutes at a time. But he knew he would not forget those two bewildering evenings. He knew too, now, that she was very weak and foolish—but she was still Kleph and he had held her in his arms, and was not likely ever to forget it.

"You might be--hurt--if you went out tonight," she was saying in a muffled voice. "I know it will not matter, in the end, but--remember you promised, Oliver."

She was gone again, and the door had closed behind her, before he could voice the futile questions in his mind.

The guests began to arrive just before midnight. From the head of the stairs Oliver saw them coming in by twos and threes, and was astonished at how many of these people from the future must have gathered here in the past weeks. He could see quite clearly now how they differed from the norm of his own period. Their physical elegance was what one noticed first--perfect grooming, meticulous manners, meticulously controlled voices. But because they were all idle, all, in a way, sensation-hunters, there was a certain shrillness underlying their voices, especially when heard all together. Petulance and self-indulgence showed beneath the good manners. And tonight, an all-pervasive excitement.

By one o'clock everyone had gathered in the front rooms. The teacups had begun to steam, apparently of themselves, around midnight, and the house was full of the faint, thin fragrance that induced a sort of euphoria all through the rooms, breathed in with the perfume of the tea.

It made Oliver feel light and drowsy. He was determined to sit up as long as the others did, but he must have dozed off in his own room, by the window, an unopened book in his lap.

For when it happened he was not sure for a few minutes whether or not it was a dream.

The vast, incredible crash was louder than sound. He felt the whole house shake under him, felt rather than heard the timbers grind upon

one another like broken bones, while he was still in the borderland of sleep. When he woke fully he was on the floor among the shattered fragments of the window.

How long or short a time he had lain there he did not know. The world was still stunned with that tremendous noise, or his ears still deaf from it, for there was no sound anywhere.

He was halfway down the hall toward the front rooms when sound began to return from outside. It was a low, indescribable rumble at first, prickled with countless tiny distant screams. Oliver's eardrums ached from the terrible impact of the vast unheard noise, but the numbness was wearing off and he heard before he saw it the first voices of the stricken city.

The door to Kleph's room resisted him for a moment. The house had settled a little from the violence of the--the explosion?--and the frame was out of line. When he got the door open he could only stand blinking stupidly into the darkness within. All the lights were out, but there was a breathless sort of whispering going on in many voices.

The chairs were drawn around the broad front windows so that everyone could see out; the air swam with the fragrance of euphoria. There was light enough here from outside for Oliver to see that a few onlookers still had their hands to their ears, but all were craning eagerly forward to see.

Through a dreamlike haze Oliver saw the city spread out with impossible distinctness below the window. He knew quite well that a row of houses across the street blocked the view--yet he was looking over the city now, and he could see it in a limitless panorama from here to the horizon. The houses between had vanished.

On the far skyline fire was already a solid mass, painting the low

clouds crimson. That sulphurous light reflecting back from the sky upon the city made clear the rows upon rows of flattened houses with flame beginning to lick up among them, and farther out the formless rubble of what had been houses a few minutes ago and was now nothing at all.

The city had begun to be vocal. The noise of the flames rose loudest, but you could hear a rumble of human voices like the beat of surf a long way off, and staccato noises of screaming made a sort of pattern that came and went continuously through the web of sound. Threading it in undulating waves the shrieks of sirens knit the web together into a terrible symphony that had, in its way, a strange, inhuman beauty.

Briefly through Oliver's stunned incredulity went the memory of that other symphony Kleph had played there one day, another catastrophe retold in terms of music and moving shapes.

He said hoarsely, "Kleph--"

The tableau by the window broke. Every head turned, and Oliver saw the faces of strangers staring at him, some few in embarrassment avoiding his eyes, but most seeking them out with that avid, inhuman curiosity which is common to a type in all crowds at accident scenes. But these people were here by design, audience at a vast disaster timed almost for their coming.

Kleph got up unsteadily, her velvet dinner gown tripping her as she rose. She set down a cup and swayed a little as she came toward the door, saying, "Oliver... Oliver--" in a sweet, uncertain voice. She was drunk, he saw, and wrought up by the catastrophe to a pitch of stimulation in which she was not very sure what she was doing.

Oliver heard himself saying in a thin voice not his own, "W-what was

it, Kleph? What happened? What--" But happened seemed so inadequate a word for the incredible panorama below that he had to choke back hysterical laughter upon the struggling questions, and broke off entirely, trying to control the shaking that had seized his body.

Kleph made an unsteady stoop and seized a steaming cup. She came to him, swaying, holding it out--her panacea for all ills.

"Here, drink it, Oliver--we are all quite safe here, quite safe." She thrust the cup to his lips and he gulped automatically, grateful for the fumes that began their slow, coiling surcease in his brain with the first swallow.

"It was a meteor," Kleph was saying. "Quite a small meteor, really. We are perfectly safe here. This house was never touched."

Out of some cell of the unconscious Oliver heard himself saying incoherently, "Sue? Is Sue--" he could not finish.

Kleph thrust the cup at him again. "I think she may be safe--for awhile. Please, Oliver--forget about all that and drink."

"But you knew!" Realization of that came belatedly to his stunned brain. "You could have given warning, or--"

"How could we change the past?" Kleph asked. "We knew--but could we stop the meteor? Or warn the city? Before we come we must give our word never to interfere--"

Their voices had risen imperceptibly to be audible above the rising volume of sound from below. The city was roaring now, with flames and cries and the crash of failing buildings. Light in the room turned lurid and pulsed upon the walls and ceiling in red light and redder dark.

Downstairs a door slammed. Someone laughed. It was high, hoarse, angry laughter. Then from the crowd in the room someone gasped and there was a chorus of dismayed cries. Oliver tried to focus upon the window and the terrible panorama beyond, and found he could not.

It took several seconds of determined blinking to prove that more than his own vision was at fault. Kleph whimpered softly and moved against him. His arms closed about her automatically, and he was grateful for the warm, solid flesh against him. This much at least he could touch and be sure of, though everything else that was happening might be a dream. Her perfume and the heady perfume of the tea rose together in his head, and for an instant, holding her in this embrace that must certainly be the last time he ever held her, he did not care that something had gone terribly wrong with the very air of the room.

It was blindness--not continuous, but a series of swift, widening ripples between which he could catch glimpses of the other faces in the room, strained and astonished in the flickering light from the city. The ripples came faster. There was only a blink of sight between them now, and the blinks grew briefer and briefer, the intervals of darkness more broad.

From downstairs the laughter rose again up the stairwell. Oliver thought he knew the voice. He opened his mouth to speak, but a door nearby slammed open before he could find his tongue, and Omerie shouted down the stairs.

"Hollia?" he roared above the roaring of the city. "Hollia, is that you?"

She laughed again, triumphantly. "I warned you!" her hoarse, harsh voice called. "Now come out in the street with the rest of us if you

want to see any more!"

"Hollia!" Omerie shouted desperately. "Stop this or--"

The laughter was derisive. "What will you do, Omerie? This time I hid it too well--come down in the street if you want to watch the rest."

There was angry silence in the house. Oliver could feel Kleph's quick, excited breathing light upon his cheek, feel the soft motions of her body in his arms. He tried consciously to make the moment last, stretch it out to infinity. Everything had happened too swiftly to impress very clearly on his mind anything except what he could touch and hold. He held her in an embrace made consciously light, though he wanted to clasp her in a tight, despairing grip, because he was sure this was the last embrace they would ever share.

The eye-straining blinks of light and blindness went on. From far away below the roar of the burning city rolled on, threaded together by the long, looped cadences of the sirens that linked all sounds into one.

Then in the bewildering dark another voice sounded from the hall downstairs. A man's voice, very deep, very melodious, saying:

"What is this? What are you doing here? Hollia--is that you?"

Oliver felt Kleph stiffen in his arms. She caught her breath, but she said nothing in the instant while heavy feet began to mount the stairs, coming up with a solid, confident tread that shook the old house to each step.

Then Kleph thrust herself hard out of Oliver's arms. He heard her high, sweet, excited voice crying, "Cenbe! Cenbe!" and she ran to meet the newcomer through the waves of dark and light that swept the shaken house.

Oliver staggered a little and felt a chair seat catching the back of his legs. He sank into it and lifted to his lips the cup he still held. Its steam was warm and moist in his face, though he could scarcely make out the shape of the rim.

He lifted it with both hands and drank.

When he opened his eyes it was quite dark in the room. Also it was silent except for a thin, melodious humming almost below the threshold of sound. Oliver struggled with the memory of a monstrous nightmare. He put it resolutely out of his mind and sat up, feeling an unfamiliar bed creak and sway under him.

This was Kleph's room. But no--Kleph's no longer. Her shining hangings were gone from the walls, her white resilient rug, her pictures. The room looked as it had looked before she came, except for one thing.

In the far corner was a table--a block of translucent stuff--out of which light poured softly. A man sat on a low stool before it, leaning forward, his heavy shoulders outlined against the glow. He wore ear-phones and he was making quick, erratic notes upon a pad on his knee, swaying a little as if to the tune of unheard music.

The curtains were drawn, but from beyond them came a distant, muffled roaring that Oliver remembered from his nightmare. He put a hand to his face, aware of a feverish warmth and a dipping of the room before his eyes. His head ached, and there was a deep malaise in every limb and nerve.

As the bed creaked, the man in the corner turned, sliding the ear-phones down like a collar. He had a strong, sensitive face above a dark beard, trimmed short. Oliver had never seen him before, but he

had that air Oliver knew so well by now, of remoteness which was the knowledge of time itself lying like a gulf between them.

When he spoke his deep voice was impersonally kind.

"You had too much euphoriac, Wilson," he said, aloofly sympathetic. "You slept a long while."

"How long?" Oliver's throat felt sticky when he spoke.

The man did not answer. Oliver shook his head experimentally. He said, "I thought Kleph said you don't get hangovers from--" Then another thought interrupted the first, and he said quickly, "Where is Kleph?" He looked confusedly toward the door.

"They should be in Rome by now. Watching Charlemagne's coronation at St. Peter's on Christmas Day a thousand years from here."

That was not a thought Oliver could grasp clearly. His aching brain sheered away from it; he found thinking at all was strangely difficult. Staring at the man, he traced an idea painfully to its conclusion.

"So they've gone on--but you stayed behind? Why? You... you're Cenbe? I heard your--symphonia, Kleph called it."

"You heard part of it. I have not finished yet. I needed--this." Cenbe inclined his head toward the curtains beyond which the subdued roaring still went on.

"You needed--the meteor?" The knowledge worked painfully through his dulled brain until it seemed to strike some area still untouched by the aching, an area still alive to implication. "The meteor? But--"

There was a power implicit in Cenbe's raised hand that seemed to

push Oliver down upon the bed again. Cenbe said patiently, "The worst of it is past now, for a while. Forget if you can. That was days ago. I said you were asleep for some time. I let you rest. I knew this house would be safe--from the fire at least."

"Then--something more's to come?" Oliver only mumbled his question. He was not sure he wanted an answer. He had been curious so long, and now that knowledge lay almost within reach, something about his brain seemed to refuse to listen. Perhaps this weariness, this feverish, dizzy feeling would pass as the effect of the euphoric wore off.

Cenbe's voice ran on smoothly, soothingly, almost as if Cenbe too did not want him to think. It was easiest to lie here and listen.

"I am a composer," Cenbe was saying. "I happen to be interested in interpreting certain forms of disaster into my own terms. That is why I stayed on. The others were dilettantes. They came for the May weather and the spectacle. The aftermath--well why should they wait for that? As for myself--I suppose I am a connoisseur. I find the aftermath rather fascinating. And I need it. I need to study it at first hand, for my own purposes."

His eyes dwelt upon Oliver for an instant very keenly, like a physician's eyes, impersonal and observing. Absently he reached for his stylus and the note pad. And as he moved, Oliver saw a familiar mark on the underside of the thick, tanned wrist.

"Kleph had that scar, too," he heard himself whisper. "And the others."

Cenbe nodded. "Inoculation. It was necessary, under the circumstances. We did not want disease to spread in our own time-world."

"Disease?"

Cenbe shrugged. "You would not recognize the name."

"But, if you can inoculate against disease--" Oliver thrust himself up on an aching arm. He had a half-grasp upon a thought now which he did not want to let go. Effort seemed to make the ideas come more clearly through his mounting confusion. With enormous effort he went on.

"I'm getting it now," he said. "Wait. I've been trying to work this out. You can change history? You can! I know you can. Kleph said she had to promise not to interfere. You all had to promise. Does that mean you really could change your own past--our time?"

Cenbe laid down his pad again. He looked at Oliver thoughtfully, a dark, intent look under heavy brows. "Yes," he said. "Yes, the past can be changed, but not easily. And it changes the future, too, necessarily. The lines of probability are switched into new patterns--but it is extremely difficult, and it has never been allowed. The physio-temporal course tends to slide back to its norm, always. That is why it is so hard to force any alteration." He shrugged. "A theoretical science. We do not change history, Wilson. If we changed our past, our present would be altered, too. And our time-world is entirely to our liking. There may be a few malcontents there, but they are not allowed the privilege of temporal travel."

Oliver spoke louder against the roaring from beyond the windows. "But you've got the power! You could alter history, if you wanted to--wipe out all the pain and suffering and tragedy--"

"All of that passed away long ago," Cenbe said.

"Not--now! Not--this!"

Cenbe looked at him enigmatically for a while. Then-- "This, too," he said.

And suddenly Oliver realized from across what distances Cenbe was watching him. A vast distance, as time is measured. Cenbe was a composer and a genius, and necessarily strongly empathic, but his psychic locus was very far away in time. The dying city outside, the whole world of now was not quite real to Cenbe, falling short of reality because of that basic variance in time. It was merely one of the building blocks that had gone to support the edifice on which Cenbe's culture stood in a misty, unknown, terrible future.

It seemed terrible to Oliver now. Even Kleph--all of them had been touched with a pettiness, the faculty that had enabled Hollia to concentrate on her malicious, small schemes to acquire a ringside seat while the meteor thundered in toward Earth's atmosphere. They were all dilettantes, Kleph and Omerie and the other. They toured time, but only as onlookers. Were they bored--sated--with their normal existence?

Not sated enough to wish change, basically. Their own time-world was a fulfilled womb, a perfection made manifest for their needs. They dared not change the past--they could not risk flawing their own present.

Revulsion shook him. Remembering the touch of Kleph's lips, he felt a sour sickness on his tongue. Alluring she had been; he knew that too well. But the aftermath-- There was something about this race from the future. He had felt it dimly at first, before Kleph's nearness had drowned caution and buffered his sensibilities. Time traveling purely as an escape mechanism seemed almost blasphemous. A race with such power-- Kleph--leaving him for the barbaric, splendid coronation at Rome a thousand years ago--how had she seen him?

Not as a living, breathing man. He knew that, very certainly. Kleph's race were spectators.

But he read more than casual interest in Cenbe's eyes now. There was an avidity there, a bright, fascinated probing. The man had replaced his earphones--he was different from the others. He was a connoisseur. After the vintage season came the aftermath--and Cenbe.

Cenbe watched and waited, light flickering softly in the translucent block before him, his fingers poised over the note pad. The ultimate connoisseur waited to savor the rarities that no non-gourmet could appreciate.

Those thin, distant rhythms of sound that was almost music began to be audible again above the noises of the distant fire. Listening, remembering, Oliver could very nearly catch the pattern of the symphonia as he had heard it, all intermingled with the flash of changing faces and the rank upon rank of the dying-- He lay back on the bed letting the room swirl away into the darkness behind his closed and aching lids. The ache was implicit in every cell of his body, almost a second ego taking possession and driving him out of himself, a strong, sure ego taking over as he himself let go.

Why, he wondered dully, should Kleph have lied? She had said there was no aftermath to the drink she had given him. No aftermath--and yet this painful possession was strong enough to edge him out of his own body.

Kleph had not lied. It was no aftermath to drink. He knew that--but the knowledge no longer touched his brain or his body. He lay still, giving them up to the power of the illness which was aftermath to something far stronger than the strongest drink. The illness that had no name--yet.

Cenbe's new symphonia was a crowning triumph. It had its premiere from Antares Hall, and the applause was an ovation. History itself, of course, was the artist--opening with the meteor that forecast the great plagues of the fourteenth century and closing with the climax Cenbe had caught on the threshold of modern times. But only Cenbe could have interpreted it with such subtle power.

Critics spoke of the masterly way in which he had chosen the face of the Stuart king as a recurrent motif against the montage of emotion and sound and movement. But there were other faces, fading through the great sweep of the composition, which helped to build up to the tremendous climax. One face in particular, one moment that the audience absorbed greedily. A moment in which one man's face loomed huge in the screen, every feature clear. Cenbe had never caught an emotional crisis so effectively, the critics agreed. You could almost read the man's eyes.

After Cenbe had left, he lay motionless for a long while. He was thinking feverishly-- I've got to find some way to tell people. If I'd known in advance, maybe something could have been done. We'd have forced them to tell us how to change the probabilities. We could have evacuated the city.

If I could leave a message-- Maybe not for today's people. But later. They visit all through time.

If they could be recognized and caught somewhere, sometime, and made to change destiny-- It wasn't easy to stand up. The room kept tilting. But he managed it. He found pencil and paper and through the swaying of the shadows he wrote down what he could. Enough. Enough to warn, enough to save.

He put the sheets on the table, in plain sight, and weighted them down before he stumbled back to bed through closing darkness.

The house was dynamited six days later, part of the futile attempt to halt the relentless spread of the Blue Death.

The Children's Hour

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He sat on a bench in the little grove in front of Administration, watching the clock over the provost marshal's door jerk its long hand toward seven. Presently, when the hour struck, he would be going in that door, and up one flight of stairs, and down the corridor to the room where Lieutenant Dyke sat waiting, as he had waited so many evenings before.

Tonight might be the night that would end it. Lessing thought perhaps it would be. Something was stirring behind the intangible locks of his mind, and tonight that door might open which had resisted the skilled manipulations of hypnosis for so long. The door might swing wide tonight at last, and let the secret out which not even Lessing knew.

Lessing was a good hypnosis subject. Lieutenant Dyke had discovered that early in their class experiments in psychonamics--that astonishing means by which a soldier can learn to desensitize his own body and feel neither pain nor hunger, when pain or hunger would otherwise be intolerable. In the process of learning, dim and untrodden corridors of the mind are sometimes laid bare. But seldom in any mind was such a thing to be encountered as that block in Lessing's.

He responded well to all the usual tests. Immobility and desensitization, the trick of warping the balance center, the familiar routine of posthypnotic commands, all these succeeded without a hitch, as they had succeeded with so many others. But in Lessing's brain one barrier stood up immovable. Three months in his life were locked and sealed behind adamant walls--under hypnosis.

That was the strangest thing of all, for waking, he remembered those three months clearly. Under hypnosis--they did not exist. Under hypnosis he had no recollection that in June, July and August of two years ago he had been living a perfectly normal existence. He was in New York, a civilian then, working in an advertising office and living the patterned life that still existed for a time after December 7, 1941. Nothing had happened to make his hypnotized memory blank out with such stubborn vehemence when asked to remember.

And so began the long sessions of searching, probing, delicately manipulating Lessing's mind as a complicated machine is readjusted, or as muscles wasted and atrophied are gently massaged back to life.

Up to now, the dam had resisted. Tonight--

The first stroke of seven vibrated upon the evening air. Lessing got up slowly, conscious of an unaccustomed touch of panic in his mind. This was the night, he thought. There was a stirring deep down in the roots of his subconscious. He would know the truth tonight--he would look again upon the memory his mind had refused to retain--and he was illogically just a little afraid to face it. He had no idea why.

In the doorway he paused for a moment, looking back. Only the twilight was out there, gathering luminously over the camp, blurring the outlines of barracks, the bulk of the hospital distantly rising. Somewhere a train hooted toward New York an hour away. New York that held mysteriously the memory his mind rejected.

"Good evening, sergeant," said Lieutenant Dyke, looking up from behind his desk.

Lessing looked at him a little uneasily. Dyke was a small, tight, blond

man, sharp with nervous vigor, put together with taut wires. He had shown intense interest in the phenomenon of Lessing's memory, and Lessing had felt a bewildered sort of gratitude until this moment. Now he was not sure.

"Evening, sir," he said automatically.

"Sit down. Cigarette? Nervous, Lessing?"

"I don't know." He took the cigarette without knowing he had done it. This was the flood tide, he thought, and he had no mind for any other awareness than that. The dam was beginning to crumble, and behind it what flood waters, pent up in darkness, waited for release? There were almost inaudible little clicks in his mind as the bolts subconsciously, automatically clicked open. Conditioned reflex by now. His brain, responsive to Dyke's hypnotic probing, was preparing itself.

A bare light swung above Dyke's desk. His eyes turned to it, and everything else began to darken. This, too, was reflexive by now. Dyke, behind him, traced a finger back along his scalp. And Lessing went under very quickly. He heard Dyke's voice, and that changed from a sound to a strong, even suction pulling somewhere in darkness. An indefinable force that drew, and guided as it drew. The dam began to go almost at once. The gates of memory quivered, and Lessing was afraid.

"Go back. Go back. Back to the summer of '41. Summer. You are in New York. When I count ten you will remember. One. Two--" At ten Dyke's voice dropped.

Then again. And again. Until the long, difficult preparation for this moment proved itself, and James Lessing went back through time and....

And saw a face, white against the dark, blazing like a flame in the emptiness of the swift temporal current. Whose face? He did not know, but he knew there was a shadow behind it, darker than the blackness, shapeless and watchful.

The shadow grew, looming, leaning over him. A tinkling rhythm beat out. Words fitted themselves to it.

Between the dark and the daylight
When the night is beginning to lower
Comes a pause in the day's occupation
That is known as the children's hour--

It meant nothing. He groped through blindness, searching for reason.

And then it began to come back to him, the thing he had forgotten. A minor thing, something hardly worth remembering, surely. Something... no, someone-- And not quite so minor, after all. Someone rather important. Someone he had met casually in a place he could not quite remember--a bar, or in the park, or at a party somewhere--very casually. Someone--yes, it had been in the park--but who? He could remember now a flickering of green around them, leaves twinkling in sunshine and grass underfoot. A fountain where they had stopped to drink. He could remember the water, clear and colorless, trickling musically away, but he could not quite remember who had... who it was-- Everything else was coming clear except the person. Forgetfulness clung stubbornly around that figure at his side. That slender figure, smaller than himself--dark? Fair? No, dark.

"Stabbed by a white wench's black eyes."

He caught his breath suddenly, in a violent physical wrench, as memory deluged back with appalling violence. Clarissa! How could he have forgotten? How could he? How could even amnesia have erased her? He sat stunned, the shining flood all but blinding him.

And somewhere under that pouring brightness was grief--but he would not let that break the surface yet.

Clarissa. What words were there to get all that vivid color into speech? When the barrier went down, it collapsed with such a blast of sudden glory that... that--

They had walked in the park above the Hudson, blue water marbled with deeper blue and twinkling in the sun, sliding away below them. Clear water in the fountain, tinkling down over pebbles wet and brown in the dappled shadows beneath the trees. And everything as vivid at Creation's first morning, because of Clarissa walking beside him under the shining leaves. Clarissa--and he had forgotten.

It was like looking back into a world a little brighter than human. Everything shone, everything glistened, every sound was sweeter and clearer; there was a sort of glory over all he saw and felt and heard. Childhood had been like that, when the newness of the world invested every commonplace with particular glamour. Glamour--yes, that was the word for Clarissa.

Not sveltiness and slickness, but glamour, the old word for enchantment. When he was with her it had been like stepping back into childhood and seeing everything with an almost intolerable fresh clarity.

But as for Clarissa herself--who had she been? What had she looked like? And above all, how could he have forgotten?

He groped backward into the shapeless fog of the past. What phrase was it that had suddenly ripped the curtain? Shock had all but erased it from his mind. It was like a lightning-flash forking through the darkness and vanishing again. Darkness--blackness--black eyes--yes, that was it. "Stabbed by a white wench's black eyes." A

quotation, of course, but from what? More groping. Shakespeare? Yes, "Romeo and Juliet." Why, wasn't that what--Mercutio?--had said to Romeo about Romeo's first love? The girl he loved before he met Juliet. The girl he forgot so completely....

Forgot!

Lessing sat back in his chair, letting everything else slide away for a moment in sheer amazement at the complexity of the subconscious. Something had wiped out all recollection of Clarissa from level below level of his memory, but far down in the dark, memory had clung on, disguised, distorted; hiding behind analogy and allegory, behind a phrase written by a wandering playwright three hundred years before.

So it had been impossible, after all, to erase Clarissa entirely from his mind. She had struck so deep, she had glowed so vividly, that nothing at all could quite smudge her out. And yet only Lieutenant Dyke's skill and the chance unburial of a phrase had resurrected the memory. (For one appalling moment he wondered with a shaken mind what other memories lay hidden and shivering behind other allegorical words and phrases and innocent pictures, deep in the submarine gulfs.)

So he had defeated them after all--the bodiless, voiceless people who had stood between them. The jealous god--the shadowy guardians-- For a moment the glare of showering gold flashed in his mind's eye blindingly. He was, in that one shutter-flash, aware of strangers in rich garments moving against confused and unfamiliar backgrounds. Then the door slammed in his face again and he sat there blinking.

Them? Defeated them? Who? He had no idea. Even in that one magical glimpse before memory blanked out again he thought he

had not been sure who they were. That much, perhaps, had been a mystery never solved. But somewhere back in the darkness of his mind incredible things lay hidden. Gods and showering gold, and people in bright clothing that blew upon a wind not--surely not--of this earth--

Bright, bright--brighter than normal eyes ever perceive the world. That was Clarissa and all that surrounded her. It had been a stronger glamour than the sheer enchantment of first love. He felt sure about that now. He who walked with Clarissa shared actual magic that shed a luster on all they passed. Lovely Clarissa, glorious world as clear--as clarissima indeed--as a child's new, shining world. But between himself and her, the shadowy people--

Wait. Clarissa's--aunt? Had there been an... an aunt? A tall, dark, silent woman who damped the glory whenever she was near? He could not remember her face; she was no more than a shadow behind Clarissa's shining presence, a faceless, voiceless nonentity glowering in the background.

His memory faltered, and into the gap flowed the despair which he had been fighting subconsciously since the lustrous flood first broke upon him. Clarissa, Clanssa--where was she now, with the glory around her?

"Tell me," said Lieutenant Dyke.

"There was a girl," Lessing began futilely. "I met her in a park--"

Clarissa on a glittering June morning, tall and dark and slim, with the waters of the Hudson pouring past beyond her in a smooth, blue, glassy current. Stabbed by a white wench's black eyes. Yes, very black eyes, bright and starry with blackness, and set wide apart in a grave face that had the remoteness and thoughtfulness of a child's.

And from the moment he met that grave, bright glance they knew one another. He had been stabbed indeed--stabbed awake after a lifetime of drowsiness. (Stabbed--like Romeo, who lost both his loves....)

"Hello," said Clarissa.

"It didn't last very long... I think," he told Dyke, speaking distractedly. "Long enough to find out there was something very strange about Clarissa... very wonderful... but not long enough to find out what it was... I think."

(And yet they had been days of glory, even after the shadows began to fall about them. For there were always shadows, just at her elbow. And he thought they had centered about the aunt who lived with her, that grim nonentity whose face he could not remember.)

"She didn't like me," he explained, frowning with the effort of remembering. "Well, no, not quite that. But there was something in the... in the air when she was with us. In a minute I may remember-- I wish I could think what she looked like."

It probably didn't matter. They had not seen her often. They had met, Clarissa and he, in so many places in New York, and each place acquired a brilliance of its own once her presence made it clarissima for him. There was no sensible explanation for that glory about her, so that street noises clarified to music and dust turned golden while they were together. It was as if he saw the world through her eyes when they were together, and as if she saw it with vision clearer--or perhaps less clear--than human.

"I knew so little about her," he said. (She might almost have sprung into existence in that first moment by the river. And so far as he would ever know, now, she had vanished back into oblivion in that

other moment in the dim apartment, when the aunt said--now what was it the aunt had said?)

This was the moment he had been avoiding ever since memory began to come back. But he must think of it now. Perhaps it was the most important moment in the whole strange sequence, the moment that had shut him off so sharply from Clarissa and her shining, unreal, better than normal world.

What had the woman said to him?

He sat very still, thinking. He shut his eyes and turned his mind inward and backward to that strangely clouded hour, groping among shadows that slid smoothly away at his touch.

"I can't--" he said, scowling, his eyes still closed. "I can't. They were... negative... words, I think, but-- No, it's no use."

"Try the aunt again," suggested Dyke. "What did she look like?"

Lessing put his hands over his eyes and thought hard. Tall? Dark, like Clarissa? Gum, certainly--or had that only been the connotation of her words? He could not remember. He slumped down in his chair, grimacing with the effort. She had stood before the mirrors, hadn't she, looking down? Had she? What were her outlines against the light? She had no outlines. She had never existed. Her image seemed to slide behind furniture or slip deftly around corners whenever his persistent memory followed it through the apartment. Here, quite clearly, the memory block was complete.

"I don't think I ever can have seen her," he said, looking up at Dyke with strained, incredulous eyes. "She just isn't there."

Yet it was her shadow between him and Clarissa in the last moment before... before... what was it that cut off all memory between that

hour and this? What happened? Well, say before forgetfulness began, then. Before--Lethe.

This much he remembered--Clarissa's face in the shadowed room, grief and despair upon it, her eyes almost unbearably bright with tears, her arms still extended, the fingers curved as they had slipped from his. He could remember the warmth and softness of them in that last handclasp. And then Lethe had poured between them.

"That was it," said Lessing in a bewildered voice. He looked up. "Those were the highlights. None of them mean anything."

Dyke drew on his cigarette, his eyes narrow above its glow. "Somewhere we've missed the point," he said. "The real truth's still hidden, even deeper than all this was. Hard to know yet, just where to begin probing. Clarissa, do you think?"

Lessing shook his head. "I don't think she knew." (She had walked through all those enchanted days, gravely and aloofly, a perfectly normal girl except for-- What had happened? He could not quite remember yet, but that which did happen had not been normal. Something shocking, something terrible, buried deep down under the commonplaces. Something glorious, glimmering far beneath the surface.)

"Try the aunt again," said Dyke.

Lessing shut his eyes. That faceless, bodiless, voiceless woman who maneuvered through his memories so deftly that he began to despair of ever catching her full-face....

"Go back, then," Dyke told him. "Back to the very beginning. When did you first realize that something out of the ordinary was happening?"

Lessing's mind fumbled backward through those unnaturally empty spaces of the past.

He had not even been aware, at the outset, of the one strangeness he could remember now--that wonderful clarifying of the world in Clarissa's presence. It had to come slowly, through many meetings, as if by a sort of induced magnetism he became sensitized to her and aware as she was aware. He had known only that it was delightful simply to breathe the same air as she, and walk the same streets.

The same streets? Yes, something curious had happened on a street somewhere. Street noises, loud voices shouting-- An accident. The collision just outside the Central Park entrance at Seventy-second Street. It was coming back clearly now, and with a swelling awareness of terror. They had been strolling up by the winding walk under the trellises toward the street. And as they neared it, the scream of brakes and the hollow, reverberant crash of metal against metal, and then voices rising.

Lessing had been holding Clarissa's hand. At the sudden noise he felt a tremor quiver along her arm, and then very softly, and with a curiously shocking deftness, her hand slipped out of his. Their fingers had been interlocked, and his did not relax, but somehow her hand was smoothly withdrawn.

He turned to look.

His mind shrank from the memory. But he knew it had happened. He knew he had seen the circle of shaken air ring her luminously about, like a circle in water from a dropped stone. It was very like the spreading rings in water, except that these rings did not expand, but contracted. And as they contracted, Clarissa moved farther away. She was drawn down a rapidly diminishing tunnel of shining circles,

with the park distorted in focus beyond them. And she was not looking at Lessing or at anything around him. Her eyes were downcast and that look of thoughtful quiet on her face shut out the world.

He stood perfectly still, too stunned even for surprise.

The luminous, concentric rings drew together in a dazzle, and when he looked again she was not there. People were running up the slope toward the street now, and the voices beyond the wall had risen to a babble. No one had been near enough to see--or perhaps only Lessing himself could have seen an aberration of his own mind. Perhaps he was suddenly mad. Panic was rising wildly in him, but it had not broken the surface yet. There hadn't been time.

And before the full, stunning realization could burst over him, he saw Clarissa again. She was coming leisurely up the hill around a clump of bushes. She was not looking at him.

He stood quite still in the middle of the path, his heart thudding so hard that the whole park shook around him.

Not until she reached his side did she look up, smiling, and take his hand again.

And that was the first thing that happened.

"I couldn't talk to her about it," Lessing told Dyke miserably. "I knew I couldn't from the first look at her face I got. Because she didn't know. To her it hadn't happened. And then I thought I'd imagined it, of course--but I knew I couldn't have imagined such a thing unless there was something too wrong with me to talk about. Later, I began to figure out a theory." He laughed nervously. "Anything, you know, to keep from admitting that I might have... well, had hallucinations."

"Go on." Dyke said again. He was leaning forward across the desk, his eyes piercing upon Lessing's. "Then what? It happened again?"

"Not that, no."

Not that? How did he know? He could not quite remember yet. The memories came in flashes, each complete even to its interlocking foreshadow of events to come, but the events themselves still lay hidden.

Had those shining rings been sheer hallucination? He would have believed so, he was sure, if nothing further had happened. As the impossible recedes into distance we convince ourselves, because we must, that it never really could have been. But Lessing was not allowed to forget....

The memories were unraveling now, tumbling one after another through his mind. He had caught the thread. He relaxed in his chair, his face smoothing out from its scowl of deep concentration. Deep beneath the surface that discovery lay whose astonishing gleam shone up through the murk of forgetfulness, tantalizing, still eluding him, but there to be grasped when he reached it. If he wanted to grasp it. If he dared. He hurried on, not ready yet to think of that.

What had the next thing been?

The park again. Curious how memory-haunted the parks of New York were for him now. This time there had been rain, and something--alarming--had happened. What was it? He did not know. He had to grope back step by step toward a climax of impossibility that his mind shied away from touching.

Rain. A sudden thunderstorm that caught them at the edge of the lake. Cold wind ruffling the water, raindrops spattering down big and

noisy around them. And himself saying, "Hurry, we can make it back to the summerhouse."

They ran hand in hand along the shore, laughing, Clarissa clutching her big hat and matching her steps to his, long, easy, running strides so that they moved as smoothly as dancers over the grass.

The summerhouse was dingy from many winters upon the rocks. It stood in a little niche in the black stone of the hill-side overlooking the lake, a dusty gray refuge from the spattering drops as they ran laughing up the slope of the rock.

But it never sheltered them. The summerhouse did not wait.

Looking incredulously up the black hills, Lessing saw it glimmer and go in a luminous blurring-out, like a picture on a trick film that faded as he watched.

"Not the way Clarissa disappeared," he told Dyke carefully. "That happened quite clearly, in concentric diminishing rings. This time-- the thing just blurred and melted. One minute it was there, the next--" He made an expunging gesture in the air.

Dyke had not moved. His clear, piercing gaze dwelt unwavering upon Lessing.

"What did Clarissa say this time?"

Lessing rubbed his chin, frowning. "She saw it happen. I.. I think she just said something like, 'Hell, we're in for it now. Never mind, I like walking in the rain, don't you?' As if she were used to things like that. Of course, maybe she was-- It didn't surprise her."

"And you didn't comment this time either?"

"I couldn't. Not when she took it so calmly. It was a relief to know that she'd seen it too. That meant I hadn't just imagined the thing. Not this time, anyhow. But by now--"

Suddenly Lessing paused. Up to this moment he had been too absorbed in the recapture of elusive memory to look objectively at what he was remembering. Now the incredible reality of what he had just been saying struck him without warning and he stared at Dyke with real terror in his eyes. How could there be any explanation for these imaginings, except actual madness? All this could not possibly have happened in the lost months which his conscious mind had remembered so clearly. It was incredible enough that he could have forgotten, but as for what he had forgotten, as for the unbelievable theory he had been about to explain to Dyke, and quite matter-of-factly, drawn from hypotheses of sheer miracle--

"Go on," Dyke said quietly. "By now--what?"

Lessing took a long, unsteady breath.

"By now... I think... I began to discard the idea I was having hallucinations." He paused again, unable to continue with such obvious impossibilities.

Dyke urged him gently. "Go on, Lessing. You've got to go on until we can get hold of something to work from. There must be an explanation somewhere. Keep digging. Why did you decide you weren't subject to hallucinations?"

"Because... well, I suppose it seemed too easy an explanation," Lessing said doggedly. It was ridiculous to argue so solidly from a basis of insanity, but he searched through his mind again and came out with an answer of very tenuous logic. "Somehow madness seemed the wrong answer," he said. "As I remember now, I think I

felt there was a reason behind what had happened. Clarissa didn't know, but I'd begun to see."

"A reason? What?"

He frowned with concentration. In spite of himself the fascination of the still unknown was renewing its spell and he groped through the murk of amnesia for the answer he had grasped once, years ago, and let slip again.

"It was so natural--to her that she didn't even notice. A nuisance, but something to accept with philosophy. You were meant to get wet if you got caught in the rain away from shelter, and if the shelter were miraculously removed--well, that only emphasized the fact that you were meant to get a soaking. Meant to, you see." He paused, not at all sure just where this thread was leading, but his memory, dredging among the flotsam, had come up with that one phrase that all but dripped with significance when he saw it in full light. Revelations hovered just beyond the next thought.

"She did get wet," he went on slowly. "I remember now. She went home dripping, and caught cold, and had a high fever for several days--"

His mind moved swiftly along the chain of thoughts, drawing incredible conclusions. Was something, somehow, ruling Clarissa's life with a hand so powerful it could violate every law of nature to keep her in the path its whim selected? Had something snatched her away through a tiny section of time and space to keep the street accident from her? But she had been meant to have that drenching and that fever, so--let the summerhouse be erased. Let it never have been. Let it vanish as naturally as the rain came down, so that Clarissa might have her fever....

Lessing shut his eyes again and ground his palms hard over them. Did he want to remember much farther? What morasses of implausibility was his memory leading him into? Vanishing summerhouses and vanishing girls and... and... intervention from--outside? He took one horrified mental glance at that thought and then covered it up quickly and went on. Deep down in the murk the gleam of that amazing discovery still drew him on, but he went more slowly now, not at all certain that he wanted to plumb the depths and see it clearly.

Dyke's voice broke in as his mind began to let go and fall slack.

"She had a fever? Go on, what came next?"

"I didn't see her for a couple of weeks. And the... the colors began to go out of everything--"

It had to be renewed, then, by her presence, that strange glamour that heightened every color, sharpened every outline, made every sound musical when they were together. He began to crave the stimulus as he felt it fade. Looking back now, he remembered the intolerable dullness of that period. It was then, probably, that he first began to realize he had fallen in love.

And Clarissa, in the interval, had discovered it too. Yes, he was remembering. He had seen it shining in her enormous black eyes on the first day he visited her again. A brilliance almost too strong to look upon, as if bright stars were interlacing their rays there until her eyes were a blaze of blackness more dazzling than any light.

He had seen her, alone, in that first meeting after her illness. Where had the aunt been? Not there, at any rate. The strange, windowless apartment was empty except for themselves. Windowless? He looked back curiously. It was true--there had been no windows. But

there were many mirrors. And the carpets were very deep and dark. That was his dominant impression of the place, walking upon softness and silence, with the glimmer of reflecting distances all around.

He had sat beside Clarissa, holding her hand, talking in a low voice. Her smile had been tremulous, and her eyes so bright they were almost frightening. They were very happy that afternoon. He glowed a little, even now, remembering how happy they had been. He would not remember, just yet, that nothing was to come of it but grief.

The wonderful clarity of perception came back around him by degrees as they sat there talking, so that everything in the world had seemed gloriously right. The room was the center of a perfect universe, beautiful and ordered, and the spheres sang together as they turned around it.

"I was closer to Clarissa then," he thought to himself, "than I ever came again. That was Clarissa's world, beautiful and peaceful, and very bright. You could almost hear the music of the machinery, singing in its perfection as it worked. Life was always like that to her. No, I never came so close again."

Machinery-- Why did that image occur to him?

There was only one thing wrong with the apartment. He kept thinking that eyes were upon him, watching all he thought and did. It was probably only the mirrors, but it made him uncomfortable. He asked Clarissa why there were so many. She laughed.

"All the better to see you in, my darling." But then she paused as if some thought had come to her unexpectedly, and glanced around the reflecting walls at her own face seen from so many angles, looking puzzled. Lessing was used by then to seeing reactions upon

her face that had no real origin in the normal cause-and-effect sequence of familiar life, and he did not pursue the matter. She was a strange creature, Clarissa, in so many, many ways. Two and two, he thought with sudden affectionate amusement, seldom made less than six to her, and she fell so often into such disproportionately deep and thoughtful silences over the most trivial things. He had learned early in their acquaintance how futile it was to question her about them.

"By now," he said, almost to himself, "I wasn't questioning anything. I didn't dare. I lived on the fringes of a world that wasn't quite normal, but it was Clarissa's world and I didn't ask questions."

Clarissa's serene, bright, immeasurably orderly little universe. So orderly that the stars in their courses might be forced out of pattern, if need be, to maintain her in her serenity. The smooth machinery singing in its motion as it violated possibility to spare her a street accident, or annihilating matter that she might have her drenching and her fever....

The fever served a purpose. Nothing happened to Clarissa,, he was fairly sure now, except things with a purpose. Chance had no place in that little world that circled her in. The fever brought delirium, and in the delirium with its strange, abnormal clarity of vision--suppose she had glimpsed the truth? Or was there a truth? He could not guess. But her eyes were unnaturally bright now, as if the brilliance of fever had lingered or as if... as if she were looking ahead into a future so incredibly shining that its reflections glittered constantly in her eyes, with a blackness brighter than light.

He was sure by now that she did not suspect life was at all different for her, that everyone did not watch miracles happen or walk in the same glory clarissima. (And once or twice the world reversed itself and he wondered wildly if she could be right and he wrong, if

everyone did but himself.)

They moved in a particular little glory of their own during those days. She did love him; he had no doubt of it. But her subtle exaltation went beyond that. Something wonderful was to come, her manner constantly implied, but the most curious thing was that he thought she herself did not know what. He was reminded of a child waking on Christmas morning and lying there in a delicious state of drowsiness, remembering only that something wonderful waits him when he comes fully awake.

"She never spoke of it?" Dyke asked.

Lessing shook his head. "It was all just beneath the surface. And if I tried to ask questions they... they seemed to slide right off. She wasn't consciously evading me. It was more as if she hadn't quite understood--" He paused. "And then things went wrong," he said slowly. "Something--"

It was hard to recapture this part. The bad memories were submerged perhaps a little deeper than the good ones, shut off behind additional layers of mental scar tissue. What had happened? He knew Clarissa loved him; they talked of marriage plans. The pattern of happiness had surely been set out clearly for them to follow.

"The aunt," he said doubtfully. "I think she must have interfered. I think... Clarissa seemed to slip out of my hands. She'd be busy when I phoned, or the aunt would say she was out. I was fairly sure she was lying, but what could I do?"

When she did see him, Clarissa had denied her neglect, reassuring him with shining glances and delicate, grave caresses. But she was so preoccupied. She did so little, really, and yet she seemed always

absorbingly busy.

"If she was only watching a sparrow pick up crumbs," he told Dyke, "or two men arguing on the street, she gave all her attention to them and had none left over for me. So after awhile--I think about a week had gone by without my even seeing her--I decided to have it out with the aunt,"

There were gaps-- He remembered clearly only standing in the white hallway outside the apartment door and knocking. He remembered the door creaking softly open a little way. Only a little way. The chain had been on it, and it hung open only that narrow width, the chain glinting slightly from light within. It had been dim inside, light reflecting from wall to wall in the many mirrors, but from no source he could see. He could see, though, that someone was moving about inside, a figure distorted by the mirrors, multiplied by them, flickering quietly as it went about its own enigmatic business within, paying no attention to his ring at the door.

"Hello," he called. "Is that you, Clarissa?"

No answer. Nothing but the silent motion inside, visible now and then in the reflecting walls. He had called the aunt by name, then.

"Is it you, Mrs.--" What name? He had no idea, now. But he had called her again and again, getting angrier as the motion flickered on heedlessly. "I can see you," he remembered saying, his face against the jamb. "I know you can hear me. Why don't you answer?"

Still nothing. The motion vanished inside for a moment or two, then wavered twice and was still again. He could not see what figure cast the reflection. Someone dark, moving silently over the thick dark carpets, paying no attention to the voice at the door. What a very odd sort of person the aunt must be.

Abruptly he was struck with the unreality of the situation; that dim, flitting shape in the next room, and the unsatisfactory figure he cut, hesitating there on the threshold calling through the door. Why the devil did the woman insist on this mystery? She was too dominant. Sudden unexpected reaction. Clarissa's life to please herself--

Hot anger rose in him, a violent, sudden, unexpected reaction. "Clarissa!" he called. Then, as dim motion flickered in the mirrors again, he put his shoulder to the yielding panel, pushing hard.

The safety latch must have been flimsy. It gave with a crackling snap, and Lessing, off balance, staggered forward.

The room with its many dark mirrors whirled vertiginously. He did not see Clarissa's aunt except as a swift, enigmatic movement in the glass, but quite suddenly he faced the inexplicable.

Gravity had shifted, both in direction and in force. His motion continued and he fell with nightmare slowness--Alice down the Rabbit Hole--in a spiraling, expanding orbit; it was like anaesthesia in its unlikeliness and the fact that it did not surprise him. The curious quality of the motion pushed everything else out of his mind for the moment. There was no one in the room with him; there were no mirrors; there was no room. Bodiless, an equation, a simplified ego, he fell toward--

There was Clarissa. Then he saw a burst of golden light flaming and faffing against the white dark. A golden shower that enveloped Clarissa and carried her away.

Distantly, with the underbeat of his mind, he knew he should be surprised. But it was like half-sleep. It was too easy to accept things as they came, and he was too lazy to make the effort of awakening. He saw Clarissa again, moving against backgrounds sometimes

only a little unfamiliar, at other times--he thought--wildly impossible--

Then an armored man was dropping down through warm sunlit air to the terrace, and the background was a park, with mountains rising far away. A woman was shrinking from him, two men had moved in front of her. Clarissa was there too. He could understand the language, though he did not know how he understood it. The armored man had a weapon of some sort lifted, and was crying, "Get back, Highness! I can't fire--too close--"

A young man in a long, belted robe of barbaric colors skipped backward, tugging at the coiled scarlet whip which was his belt. But neither of them seemed quite ready to make any aggressive moves, astonishment blanking their faces and staring eyes as they gaped at Lessing. Behind them the tall woman with the commanding, discontented face stood frozen by the same surprise. Lessing glanced around in bewilderment, meeting the incredulous stares of the girls flocking behind her. Clarissa was among them, and beyond her--beyond her--someone he could not quite remember. A dark figure, enigmatic, a little stooped....

All of them stood transfixed. (All but Clarissa, perhaps, and perhaps the figure at her elbow--) The armored man's weapon was poised half lifted, the young robed man's whip unslung--but trailing. They wore fantastic garments of a style and period Lessing had never heard of, and all their faces were strained and unhappy beneath the blankness of surprise, as if they had been living under some long-standing pressure of anxiety. He never knew what it was.

Only Clarissa looked as serene as always. And only she showed no surprise. Her black eyes under a strange, elaborate coiffure met his with the familiar twinkling of many lights, and she smiled without saying anything.

A buzzing of excitement rose among the girls. The armored man said uncertainly, "Who are you? Where did you come from? Stand back or I'll--"

"--Out of thin air!" the robed young man gasped, and gave the crimson whip a flick that made it writhe along the grass.

Lessing opened his mouth to say--well, something. The whip looked dangerous. But Clarissa shook her head, still smiling.

"Never mind," she said. "Don't bother explaining. They'll forget, you know."

If he had meant to say anything, that robbed him of all coherent thought again. It was too fantastically like... like... something familiar. Alice, that was it. Alice again, in Looking Glass Land, at the Duchess'garden party. The bright, strange costumes, the bright green grass, the same air of latent menace. In a moment someone would scream, "Off with his head!"

The robed man stepped back and braced his feet against the weight of the whip as he swung its long coil up. Lessing watched the scarlet tongue arch against the sky. ("Serpents! Serpents! There's no pleasing them!" he thought wildly.) And then the whole world was spinning with the spin of the whip. The garden was a top, whirling faster and faster under that crimson lash. He lost his footing on the moving grass and centrifugal force flung him off into unconsciousness.

His head ached.

He got up off the hall floor slowly, pushing against the wall to steady himself. The walls were still spinning, but they slowed to a stop as he stood there swaying and feeling the bump on his forehead. His mind

took a little longer to stop spinning, but once it came under control again he could see quite clearly what had happened. That chain had never broken at all. He had not fallen into the dark, mirrored room within, where the shadow of the aunt flitted quietly to and fro. The door, actually, had never been opened at all. At least, it was not open now. And the position of the doormat and the long, dark scrape on the floor made it obvious that he had tried to force the door and had slipped. His head must have cracked hard against the knob.

He wondered if such a blow could send hallucinations forward as well as backward through time from the moment of collision. Because he knew he had dreamed—he must have dreamed—that the door was open and the silent shadow moving inside.

When he called Clarissa that night he was fully determined to talk to her this time if he had to threaten the guardian aunt with violence or arrest or whatever seemed, on the spur of the moment, most effective. He knew how humiliatingly futile such threats would sound, but he could think of no other alternative. And the need to see Clarissa was desperate now, after that curious Wonderland dream. He meant to tell her about it, and he thought the story would have some effect. Almost, in his bewilderment, he expected her to remember the part she herself had played, though he knew how idiotic the expectation was.

It was a little disconcerting, after his fiery resolution, to hear not the aunt's voice but Clarissa's on the telephone.

"I'm coming over," he said flatly, frustrated defiance making the statement a challenge.

"Why, of course," Clarissa sounded as if they had parted only a few hours ago.

His eagerness made the trip across town seem very long. He was rehearsing the story he would tell her as soon as they were alone. The dream had been so real and vivid, though it must have passed in the flash of a second between the time his head struck the doorknob and the time his knees struck the floor. What would she say about it? He did not know why at all, but he thought she could give him an answer to his questions, if he told her.

He rang the doorbell impatiently. As before, there was no sound from within. He rang again. No answer. Feeling eerily as if he had stepped back in time, to relive that curious dream all over again, he tried the knob, and was surprised to find the door opening to his push. No chain fastened it this time. He was looking into familiar, many-mirrored dimness as the door swung wide. While he hesitated on the threshold, not sure whether to call out or try the bell again, he saw something moving far back in the apartment, visible only in the mirrors.

For a moment the conviction that he was reliving the past made his head swim. Then he saw that it was Clarissa this time. Clarissa standing quite still and looking up with a glow of shining anticipation upon her face. It was that Christmas morning look he had caught glimpses of before, but never so clearly as now. What she looked at he could not see, but the expression was unmistakable. Something glorious was about to happen, the lovely look implied. Something very glorious, very near, very soon--

About her the air shimmered. Lessing blinked. The air turned golden and began to shower down around her in sparkling rain. This was the dream, then, he thought wildly. He had seen it all before. Clarissa standing quietly beneath the golden shower, her face lifted, letting that shining waterfall pour over her slowly. But if it were the dream again, nothing further was to happen. He waited for the floor to spin underfoot--

No, it was real. He was watching another miracle take place, silently and gloriously, in the quiet apartment.

He had seen it in a dream; now it happened before his eyes. Clarissa in a shower of... of stars? Standing like Danae in a shower of gold--

Like Danae in her brazen tower, shut away from the world. Her likeness to Danae struck him with sudden violence. And that impossible rain of gold, and her look of rapt delight. What was it that poured down the shining torrent upon her? What was responsible for setting Clarissa so definitely apart from the rest of humanity, sheltering her at the cost of outraging natural laws, keeping the smooth machinery that protected her humming along its inaudible, omnipotent course? Omnipotent--yes, omnipotent as Zeus once was, who descended upon his chosen in that fabulous rain of gold.

Standing perfectly still and staring at the distant reflection in the glass, Lessing let his mind flash swifter and swifter along a chain of reasoning that left him at once gasping with incredulity and stunned with impossible conviction. For he thought at last he had the answer. The wildly improbable answer.

He could no longer doubt that somehow, somewhere, Clarissa's life impinged upon some other world than his. And wherever the two clashed, that other world took effortless precedence. It was difficult to believe that some dispassionate force had focused so solicitously upon her. He thought the few glimpses he had been allowed to catch spoke more of some individual intelligence watching everything she did. Some one being who understood humanity as perfectly as if it were itself very nearly human. Someone in the role of literal guardian angel, shepherding Clarissa along a path toward--what?

Certainly Someone had not wanted Clarissa to see the street accident, and had snatched her back through space and time to a safe distance, keeping the veil about her so that she did not even guess it had happened. Someone had meant her to experience the delirium of fever, and had erased the summerhouse. Someone, he began to realize, was leading her almost literally by the hand through her quiet, thoughtful, shining days and nights, casting glamour about her so heavily that it enveloped anyone who came intimately into its range. In her long moments of absorption, when she watched such trivial things so intently, whose voice whispered inaudibly in her ear, repeating what unguessable lessons.

And how did Lessing himself fit into the pattern? Perhaps, he thought dizzily, he had a part to play in it, trivial, but in its way essential. Someone let the two of them amuse themselves harmlessly together, except when that omnipotent hand had to stretch out and push them gently back into their proper course, Clarissa's course, not Lessing's. Indeed, when anything outré had to happen, it was Clarissa who was protected. She did not guess the hiatus at the time of the street accident; she had scarcely noticed the disappearance of the summerhouse. Lessing did know. Lessing was shocked and stunned. But--Lessing was to forget.

At what point in her life, then, had Clarissa stepped into this mirrored prison with the strange aunt for jailor, and turned unknowing and unguessing into the path that Someone had laid out for her? Who whispered in her ear as she went so dreamily about her days, who poured down in a golden torrent about this Danae when she stood alone in her glass-walled tower?

No one could answer that. There might be as many answers as the mind could imagine, and many more beyond imagination. How could any man guess the answer to a question entirely without precedent in human experience? Well--no precedent but one.

There was Danae.

It was ridiculous, Lessing told himself at this point, to imagine any connection at all in this chance likeness. And yet—how had the legend of Danae started? Had some interloper like himself, two thousand years ago, unwittingly glimpsed another Clarissa standing rapt and ecstatic under another shower of stars? And if that were possible, what right had Lessing to assume arbitrarily that the first of the Danae legend had been as true as what he was watching, and the last of it wholly false? There were so many, many legends of mortals whom the gods desired. Some of them must have had obvious explanations, but the Greeks were not a naive people, and there might, he thought, have been some basis of fact existing behind the allegory. There must have been some basis, to explain those countless stories, pointing so insistently to some definite rock of reality beyond the fantasy.

But why this long preparation which Clarissa was undergoing? He wondered, and then unbidden into his mind leaped the legend of Semele, who saw her Olympian lover in the unveiled glory of his godhood, and died of that terrible sight. Could this long, slow preparation be designed for no other purpose than to spare Clarissa from Semele's fate? Was she being led gently, inexorably from knowledge to knowledge, so that when the god came down to her in his violence and his splendor, she could endure the glory of her destiny? Was this the answer behind that look of shining anticipation he had seen so often on her face?

Sudden, scalding jealousy enveloped him. Clarissa, glimpsing already and without guessing it, the splendor to come in which he himself could have no part....

Lessing struck the door a resounding blow and called, "Clarissa!"

In the mirror he saw her start a little and turn. The shower wavered about her. Then she moved out of sight, except for a golden flickering among the mirrors, as she approached the door.

Lessing stood there, shaking and sweating with intolerable confusion. He knew his deductions were ridiculous and impossible. He did not really believe them. He was leaping to conclusions too wild to credit, from premises too arbitrary to consider in any sane moment. Granted that inexplicable things were happening, still he had no logical reason to assume a divine lover's presence. But someone, Someone stood behind the events he had just been rehearsing, and of that Someone, whoever and whatever it might be, Lessing was agonizingly jealous. For those plans did not include himself. He knew they never could. He knew--

"Hello," said Clarissa softly. "Did I keep you waiting? The bell must be out of order--I didn't hear you ring. Come on in."

He stared. Her face was as serene as always. Perhaps a little glow of rapture still shone in her eyes, but the shower of gold was gone and she gave no outward sign of remembering it.

"What were you doing?" he asked, his voice slightly unsteady.

"Nothing," said Clarissa.

"But I saw you!" he burst out. "In the mirrors--I saw you! Clarissa, what--"

Gently and softly a--a hand?--was laid across his mouth. Nothing tangible, nothing real. But the words did not come through. It was silence itself, a thick gag of it, pressing against his lips. There was one appalling, mind-shaking moment of that gag, and then Lessing knew that Someone was right, that he must not speak, that it would

be cruel and wrong to say what he had meant to say.

It was all over in an instant, so suddenly that afterward he was not sure whether a gag had actually touched his lips, or whether a subtler gag of the mind had silenced him. But he knew he must say nothing, neither of this nor of that strange, vivid dream in which he had met Clarissa. She did not guess. She must not know--yet.

He could feel the sweat rolling down his forehead, and his knees felt shaky and his head light. He said, from a long way off,

"I... I don't feel well, Clarissa. I think I'd better go--"

The light above Dyke's desk swung gently in a breeze from the shaded window. Outside a distant train's hooting floated in across the post grounds, made immeasurably more distant by the darkness. Lessing straightened in his chair and looked around a little dizzily, startled at the abrupt transition from vivid memory to reality. Dyke leaned forward above his crossed arms on the desk, and said gently,

"And did you go?"

Lessing nodded. He was far beyond any feeling now of incredulity or reluctance to accept his own memories. The things he was remembering were more real than this desk or the soft-voiced man behind it.

"Yes. I had to get away from her and straighten my mind out. It was so important that she should understand what was happening to her, and yet I couldn't tell her about it. She was--asleep. But she had to be wakened before it was too late. I thought she had a right to know what was coming, and I had a right to have her know, let her make her choice between me and--it. Him. I kept feeling the choice would

have to be made soon, or it would be too late. He didn't want her to know, of course. He meant to come at the right moment and find her unquestioning, prepared for him. It was up to me to rouse her and make her understand before that moment."

"You thought it was near then?"

"Very near."

"What did you do?"

Lessing's eyes went unfocused in remembrance. "I took her out dancing." he said, "the next night...."

She sat across from him at a table beside a little dance floor, slowly twirling a glass of sherry and bitters and listening to the noises of a bad orchestra echoing in the small, smoky room. Lessing was not quite sure why he had brought her here, after all. Perhaps he hoped that though he could not speak to her in words of all he suspected and feared, he could rouse her enough out of her serene absorption so that she might notice for herself how far her own world differed from the normal one. Here in this small, inclosed space shaking with savage rhythms, crowded by people who were deliberately giving themselves up to the music and the liquor, might not that serene and shining armor be pierced a little, enough to show what lay inside?

Lessing was tinkling the ice in his third collins and enjoying the pleasant haze that just enough alcohol lent to the particular, shining haze that always surrounded Clarissa. He would not, he told himself, have any more. He was far from drunk, certainly, but there was intoxication in the air to-night, even in this little, noisy, second-rate nightclub. The soaring music had a hint of marijuana delirium in it; the dancers on the hot, crowded floor exhaled excitement.

And Clarissa was responding. Her great black eyes shone with unbearable brightness, and her laughter was bright and spontaneous too. They danced in the jostling mob, not feeling jostled at all because of the way the music caught them up on its rhythms. Clarissa was talking much more than usual this evening, very gayly, her body resilient in his arms.

As for himself--yes, he was drunk after all, whether on the three drinks or on some subtler, more powerful intoxication he did not know. But all his values were shifting deliciously toward the irresponsible, and his ears rang with inaudible music. Now nothing could overpower him. He was not afraid of anything or anyone at all. He would take Clarissa away--clear away from New York and her jailor aunt, and that shining Someone who drew nearer with every breath.

There began to be gaps in his memory after awhile. He could not remember how they had got out of the nightclub and into his car, or just where they intended to go, but presently they were driving up the Henry Hudson Parkway with the river sliding darkly below and the lights of Jersey lying in wreaths upon the Palisades.

They were defying the--the pattern. He thought both of them knew that. There was no place in the pattern for this wild and dizzying flight up the Hudson, with the cross-streets reeling past like spokes in a shining wheel. Clarissa, leaning back in the bend of his free arm, was in her way as drunk as he, on nothing more than two sherries and the savage rhythms of the music, the savage excitement of this strange night. The intoxication of defiance, perhaps, because they were running away. From something--from Someone.

(That was impossible, of course. Even in his drunkenness he knew that. But they could try--)

"Faster," Clarissa urged, moving her head in the crook of his arm. She was glitteringly alive tonight as he had never seen her before. Very nearly awake, he thought in the haze of his reeling mind. Very nearly ready to be told what it was he must tell her. The warning-- Once he pulled up deliberately beneath a street light and took her in his arms. Her eyes and her voice and her laughter flashed and sparkled tonight, and Lessing knew that if he thought he had loved her before, this new Clarissa was so enchanting that... that... yea, even a god might lean out from Olympus to desire her. He kissed her with an ardor that made the city whirl solemnly around them. It was delightful to be drunk and in love, and kissing Clarissa under the eyes of the jealous gods....

There was a feeling of... of wrongness in the air as they drove on. The pattern strove to right itself, to force them back into their ordained path. He could feel its calm power pressing against his mind. He was aware of traffic imperceptibly edging him into streets that led back toward the apartment they had left. He had to wrench himself out of it, and then presently the northbound way would be closed off for repairs, and a detour went off along other streets that took them south again. Time after time he found himself driving past descending street numbers toward downtown New York, and swung around the block in bewildered determination not to return.,

The pattern must be broken. It must be. Hazily he thought that if he could snap one thread of it, defy that smooth, quiet power in even so small a way as this, he would have accomplished his purpose. But alone he could not have done it. The omnipotent machinery humming in its course would have been irresistible--he would have obeyed it without knowing he obeyed--had not Clarissa shared his defiance tonight.

There seemed to be a power in her akin to the power of that omnipotence, as if she had absorbed some of it from long nearness

to the source.

Or was it that Someone stayed his hand rather than strike her forcibly back to her place in the pattern, rather than let her guess--yet--the extent of his power?

"Turn," said Clarissa. "Turn around. We're going wrong again."

He struggled with the wheel. "I can't... I can't," he told her, almost breathless. She gave him a dazzling dark glance and leaned over to take the wheel herself.

Even for her it was hard. But slowly she turned the car, while traffic blared irritably behind them, and slowly they broke out of the pattern's grip again and rounded another corner, heading north, the lights of Jersey swimming unfocused in the haze of their delirium.

This was no normal drunkenness. It was increasing by leaps and bounds. This, thought Lessing dimly, is His next step. He won't let her see what he's doing, but he knows he's got to stop us now, or we'll break the pattern and prove our independence.

The tall, narrow buildings shouldering together along the streets were like tall trees in a forest, with windows for motionless leaves. No two windows on the same level, or quite alike. Infinite variety with infinitesimal differences, all of them interlacing and glimmering as they drove on and on through the stony forest. Now Lessing could see among the trees, and between them, not transparently but as if through some new dimension. He could see the streets that marked off this forest into squares and oblongs, and his dazed mind remembered another forest, checkered into squares--Looking Glass Land.

He was going south again through the forest.

"Clarissa--help me," he said distantly, wrestling again with the wheel. Her small white hands came out of the dark to cover his.

A shower of light from a flickering window poured down upon them, enveloping Clarissa as Zeus enveloped Danae. The jealous god, the jealous god-- Lessing laughed and smacked the wheel in senseless triumph.

There was a light glimmering ahead through the trees. He would have to go softly, he warned himself, and tiptoed forward over the... the cobbled road. Without surprise he saw that he was moving on foot through a forest in darkness, quite alone. He was still drunk. Drunker than ever, he thought with mild pride, drunker, probably, than any mortal ever was before. Any mortal. The gods, now--

People were moving through the trees ahead. He knew they must not see him. It would shock them considerably if they did; he remembered the garishly dressed people of his other dream, and the young man with the whip. No, it would be better to stay hidden this time if he could. The forest was wheeling and dipping around him behind a haze of obscurity, and nothing had very much coherence. The ringing in his ears was probably intoxication, not actual sound.

The people were somberly clad in black, with black hoods that covered their hair and framed pale, intolerant faces.

They were moving in a long column through the trees. Lessing watched them go by for what seemed a long while. Some of the women carried work bags over their arms and knitted as they walked. A few of the men read from small books and stumbled now and then on the cobblestones. There was no laughter.

Clarissa came among the last. She had a gay little face beneath the

black cap, gayer and more careless than he had ever seen her in this... this world. She walked lightly, breaking into something like a dance step occasionally that called down upon her the frowns of those who walked behind. She did not seem to care.

Lessing wanted to call to her. He wanted to call so badly that it seemed to him she sensed it, for she began to fall behind, letting first one group pass her and then another, until she walked at the very end of the column. Several girls in a cluster looked back a few times and giggled a little, but said nothing. She fell farther back. Presently the procession turned a corner and Clarissa stopped in the middle of the road, watching them go. Then she laughed and performed a solemn little pirouette on one toe, her black skirts swinging wide around her.

Lessing stepped from behind his tree and took a step toward her, ready to speak her name. But he was too late. Someone else was already nearer than he. Someone else-- Clarissa called out gayly in a language he did not know, and then there was a flash of crimson through the trees and a figure cloaked from head to heels in bright red came up to her and took her into its embrace, the red folds swinging forward to infold them both. Clarissa's happy laughter was smothered beneath the stooping hood.

Lessing stood perfectly still. It might be another woman, he told himself fiercely. It might be a sister or an aunt. But it was probably a man. Or--

He squinted slightly--nothing focused very well in his present state, and things tended to slip sidewise when he tried to fix his eyes upon them--but this time he was almost sure of what he saw. He was almost sure that upon Clarissa's lifted face in the dimness of the woods a light was falling softly--from the hood above her. A light, glowing from within the hood. A shower of light. Danae, in her shower

of gold.

The woods tilted steeply and turned end for end. Lessing was beyond surprise as he fell away, spinning and whirling through darkness, falling farther and farther from Clarissa in the woods. Leaving Clarissa alone in the embrace of her god.

When the spinning stopped he was sitting in his car again, with traffic pouring noisily past on the left. He was parked, somewhere. Double-parked, with the motor running. He blinked.

"I'll get out here," Clarissa told him matter-of-factly. "No, don't bother. You'll never find a parking place, and I'm so sleepy. Good night, darling. Phone me in the morning."

He could do nothing but blink. The dazzle of her eyes and her smile was a little blinding, and that haze still diffused all his efforts to focus upon her face. But he could see enough. They were exactly where they had started, at the curb before her apartment house.

"Good night," said Clarissa again, and the door closed behind her.

There was silence in the office after Lessing's last words.

Dyke sat waiting quietly, his eyes on Lessing's face, his shadow moving a little on the desktop under the swinging light. After a moment Lessing said, almost defiantly,

"Well?"

Dyke smiled slightly, stirring in his chair. "Well?" he echoed.

"What are you thinking?"

Dyke shook his head. "I'm not thinking at all. It isn't time yet for that--"

unless the story ends there. It doesn't, does it?"

Lessing looked thoughtful. "No. Not quite. We met once more."

"Only once?" Dyke's eyes brightened. "That must be when your memory went, then. That's the most interesting scene of all. Go on--what happened?"

Lessing closed his eyes. His voice came slowly, as if he were remembering bit by bit each episode of the story he told.

"The phone woke me next morning," he said. "It was Clarissa. As soon as I heard her voice I knew the time had come to settle things once and for all--if I could. If I were allowed. I didn't think--He--would let me talk it out with her, but I knew I'd have to try. She sounded upset on the phone. Wouldn't say why. She wanted me to come over right away."

She was at the door when he came out of the elevator, holding it open for him against a background of mirrors in which no motion stirred. She looked fresh and lovely, and Lessing marveled again, as he had marveled on waking, that the extraordinary drunkenness of last night had left no ill effects with either of them this morning. But she looked troubled, too; her eyes were too bright, with a blinding blackness that dazzled him, and the sweet serenity was gone from her face. He exulted at that. She was awakening, then, from the long, long dream.

The first thing he said as he followed her into the apartment was,

"Where's your aunt?"

Clarissa glanced vaguely around. "Oh, out, I suppose. Never mind her. Jim, tell me--did we do something wrong last night? Do you remember what happened? Everything?"

"Why, I... I think so." He was temporizing, not ready yet in spite of his decision to plunge into these deep waters.

"What happened, then? Why does it worry me so? Why can't I remember?" Her troubled eyes searched his face anxiously. He took her hands. They were cold and trembling a little.

"Come over here," he said. "Sit down. What's the matter, darling? Nothing's wrong. We had a few drinks and took a long ride, don't you remember? And then I brought you back here and you said good night and went in."

"That isn't all," she said with conviction. "We were--fighting something. It was wrong to fight--I never did before. I never knew it was there until I fought it last night. But now I do know. What was it, Jim?"

He looked down at her gravely, a tremendous excitement beginning to well up inside him. Perhaps, somehow, they had succeeded last night in breaking the spell. Perhaps His grip had been loosened after all, when they defied the pattern even as briefly as they did.

But this was no time for temporizing. Now, while the bonds were slack, was the moment to strike hard and sever them if he could. Tomorrow she might have slipped back again into the old distraction that shut him out. He must tell her now-- Together they might yet shake off the tightening coils that had been closing so gently, so inexorably about her.

"Clarissa," he said, and turned on the sofa to face her. "Clarissa, I think I'd better tell you something." Then a sudden, unreasoning doubt seized him and he said irrelevantly, "Are you sure you love me?" It was foolishly important to be reassured just then. He did not

know why.

Clarissa smiled and leaned forward into his arms, putting her cheek against his shoulder. From there, unseen, she murmured, "I'll always love you, dear."

For a long moment he did not speak. Then, holding her in one arm, not watching her face, he began.

"Ever since we met, Clarissa darling, things have been happening that--worried me. About you. I'm going to tell you if I can. I think there's something, or someone, very powerful, watching over you and forcing you into some course, toward some end I can't do more than guess at. I'm going to try to tell you exactly why I think so, and if I have to stop without finishing, you'll know I don't stop on purpose. I'll have been stopped."

Lessing paused, a little awed at his own daring in defying that Someone whose powerful hand he had felt hushing him before. But no pad of silence was pressed against his lips this time and he went on wonderingly, expecting each word he spoke to be the last. Clarissa lay silent against his shoulder, breathing quietly, not moving much. He could not see her face.

And so he told her the story, very simply and without references to his own bewilderment or to the wild conclusions he had reached. He told her about the moment in the park when she had been drawn away down a funnel of luminous rings. He reminded her of the vanishing of the summerhouse. He told of the dreamlike episode on the hallway here, when he called irrationally into the mirrored dimness, or thought he called. He told her of their strange, bemused ride uptown the night before, and how the pattern swung the streets around under their wheels. He told her of his two vivid dreams through which she--yet not she--had moved so assuredly. And then, without drawing any

conclusions aloud, he asked her what she was thinking.

She lay still a moment longer in his arms. Then she sat up slowly, pushing back the smooth dark hair and meeting his eyes with the feverish brilliance that had by now become natural to her.-

"So that's it," she said dreamily, and was silent.

"What is?" he asked almost irritably, yet suffused now with a sense of triumph because the Someone had not silenced him after all, had slipped this once and let the whole story come out into open air at last. Now at last he thought he might learn the truth.

"Then I was right," Clarissa went on. "I was fighting something last night. It's odd, but I never even knew it was there until the moment I began to fight it. Now I know it's always been there. I wonder--"

When she did not go on, Lessing said bluntly, "Have you ever realized that... that things were different for you? Tell me, Clarissa, what is it you think of when you... when you stand and look at something trivial so long?"

She turned her head and gave him a long, grave look that told him more plainly than words that the whole spell was not yet dissolved. She made no answer to the question, but she said,

"For some reason I keep remembering a fairy story my aunt used to tell me when I was small. I've never forgotten it, though it certainly isn't much of a story. You see--"

She paused again, and her eyes brightened as he looked, almost as if lights had gone on behind them in a dark room full of mirrors. The look of expectancy which he knew so well tightened the lines of her face for a moment, and she smiled delightedly, without apparent reason and not really seeming to know she smiled.

"Yes," she went on. "I remember it well. Once upon a time, in a kingdom in the middle of the forest; a little girl was born. All the people in the country were blind. The sun shone so brightly that none of them could see. So the little girl went about with her eyes shut too, and didn't even guess that such a thing as sight existed.

"One day as she walked alone in the woods she heard a voice beside her. 'Who are you?' she asked the voice, and the voice replied, 'I am your guardian.' The little girl said, 'But I don't need a guardian. I know these woods very well. I was born here.' The voice said, 'Ah, you were born here, yes, but you don't belong here, child. You are not blind like the others.' And the little girl exclaimed, 'Blind? What's that?'

" 'I can't tell you yet,' the voice answered, 'but you must know that you are a king's daughter, born among these humble people as our king's children sometimes are. My duty is to watch over you and help you to open your eyes when the time comes. But the time is not yet. You are too young--the sun would blind you. So go on about your business, child, and remember I am always here beside you. The day will come when you open your eyes and see.'"

Clarissa paused. Lessing said impatiently, "Well, did she?"

Clarissa sighed. "My aunt never would finish the story. Maybe that's why I've always remembered it."

Lessing started to speak. "I don't think--" But something in Clarissa's face stopped him. An exalted and enchanted look, that Christmas-morning expression carried to fulfillment, as if the child were awake and remembering what many-lighted, silver-spangled glory awaited him downstairs. She said in a small, clear voice.

"It's true. Of course it's true! All you've said, and the fairy tale too. Why; I'm the king's child. Of course I am!" And she put both hands to her eyes in a sudden childish gesture, as if half expecting the allegory of blindness to be literal.

"Clarissa!" Lessing said.

She looked at him with wide, dazzled eyes that scarcely knew him. And for a moment a strange memory came unbidden into his mind and brought terror with it. Alice, walking with the Fawn in the enchanted woods where nothing has a name, walking in friendship with her arm about the Fawn's neck. And the Fawn's words when they came to the edge of the woods and memory returned to them both. How it started away from her, shaking off the arm, wildness returning to the eyes that had looked as serenely into Alice's as Clarissa had looked into his. "Why-- I'm a Fawn," it said in astonishment. "And you're a Human Child!"

Alien species.

"I wonder why I'm not a bit surprised?" murmured Clarissa. "I must have known it all along, really. Oh, I wonder what comes next?"

Lessing stared at her, appalled. She was very like a child now, too enraptured by the prospect of--of what?--to think of any possible consequences. It frightened him to see how sure she was of splendor to come, and of nothing but good in that splendor. He hated to mar the look of lovely anticipation on her face, but he must. He had wanted her to help him fight this monstrous possibility if she could bring herself to accept it at all. He had not expected instant acceptance and instant rapture. She must fight it--

"Clarissa," he said, "think! If it's true... and we may be wrong... don't you see what it means? He... they... won't let us be together,

Clarissa. We can't be married."

Her luminous eyes turned to him joyously.

"Of course we'll be married, darling. They're only looking after me, don't you see? Not hurting me, just watching. I'm sure they'd never do anything to hurt me. Why darling, for all we know you may be one of us, too. I wonder if you are. It almost stands to reason, don't you think? Or why would They have let us fall in love? Oh, darling--"

Suddenly he knew that someone was standing behind him. Someone-- For one heart-stopping moment he wondered if the jealous god himself had come down to claim Clarissa, and he dared not turn his head. But when Clarissa's shining eyes lifted to the face beyond his, and showed no surprise, he felt a little reassurance.

He sat perfectly still. He knew he could not have turned if he wanted. He could only watch Clarissa, and though no words were spoken in that silence, he saw her expression change. The rapturous joy drained slowly out of it. She shook her head, bewilderment and disbelief blurring the ecstasy of a moment before.

"No?" she said to that standing someone behind him. "But I thought-- Oh, no, you mustn't! You wouldn't! It isn't fair!"

And the dazzling dark eyes flooded with sudden tears that doubled their shining. "You can't, you can't!" sobbed Clarissa, and flung herself forward upon Lessing, her arms clasping his neck hard as she wept incoherent protest upon his shoulder.

His arms closed automatically around her while his mind spun desperately to regain its balance. What had happened? Who--

Someone brushed by him. The aunt. He knew that, but with no sense of relief even though he had half-expected that more awesome

Someone at whose existence he could still only guess.

The aunt was bending over them, pulling gently at Clarissa's shaking shoulder. And after a moment Clarissa's grip on his neck loosened and she sat up obediently, though still catching her breath in long, uneven sobs that wrung Lessing's heart.

He wanted desperately to do or say whatever would comfort her most quickly, but his mind and his body were both oddly slowed, as if there were some force at work in the room which he could not understand. As if he were moving against the momentum of that singing machinery he had fancied he sensed so often--moving against it, while the other two were carried effortlessly on.

Clarissa let herself be pulled away. She moved as bonelessly as a child, utterly given up to her grief, careless of everything but that. The tears streaked her cheeks and her body drooped forlornly. She held Lessing's hands until the last, but when he felt her fingers slipping from his the loss of contact told him, queerly, as nothing else quite had power to tell, that this was a final parting. They stood apart over a few feet of carpet, as if inexorable miles lay between them. Miles that widened with every passing second. Clarissa looked at him through her tears, her eyes unbearably bright, her lips quivering, her hands still outstretched and curved from the pressure of his clasp.

This is all. You have sewed your purpose--now go. Go and forget.

He did not know what voice had said it, or exactly in what words, but the meaning came back to him clearly now. Go and forget.

There was strong music in the air. For one last moment, he stood in a world that glittered with beauty and color because it was Clarissa's, glittered even in this dark apartment with its many, many mirrors. All about him he could see reflecting Clarissas from every

angle of grief and parting, moving confusedly as she let her hands begin to drop. He saw a score of Clarissas dropping their curved hands--but he never saw them fall. One last look at Clarissa's tears, and then... and then-- Lethe.

Dyke let his breath out in a long sigh. He leaned back in his creaking chair and looked at Lessing without expression under his light eyebrows. Lessing blinked stupidly back. An instant ago he had stood in Clarissa's apartment; the touch of her fingers was still warm in his hands. He could hear her caught breath and see the reflections moving confusedly in the mirrors around them--

"Wait a minute," he said. "Reflections--Clarissa--I almost remembered something just then--" He sat up and stared at Dyke without seeing him, his brow furrowed. "Reflections," he said again. "Clarissa--lots of Clarissas--but no aunt! I was looking at two women in the mirror, but I didn't see the aunt! I never saw her--not once! And yet I... wait... the answer's there, you know... right there, just in reach, if I could only--"

Then it came to him in a burst of clarity. Clarissa had seen it before him; the whole answer lay in that legend she had told. The Country of the Blind! How could those sightless natives hope to see the king's messenger who watched over the princess as she walked that enchanted wood? How could he remember what his mind had never been strong enough to comprehend? How could he have seen that guardian except as a presence without shape, a voice without words, moving through its own bright sphere beyond the sight of the blind?

"Cigarette?" said Dyke, creaking his chair forward.

Lessing reached automatically across the desk. There was no further sound but the rustle of paper and the scratch of a match, for a little

while. They smoked in silence, eyeing one another. Outside feet went by upon gravel. Men's voices called distantly, muffled by the night. Crickets were chirping, omnipresent in the dark.

Presently Dyke let down the front legs of his chair with a thump and reached forward to grind out his unfinished cigarette.

"All right," he said. "Now--are you still too close, or can you look at it objectively?"

Lessing shrugged. "I can try."

"Well, first we can take it as understood--at least for the moment--that such things as these just don't happen. The story's full of holes, of course. We could tear it to pieces in ten minutes if we tried."

Lessing looked stubborn. "Maybe you think--"

"I haven't begun to think yet. We haven't got to the bottom of the thing, naturally. I don't believe it really happened exactly as you remember. Man, how could it? The whole story's still dressed up in a sort of allegory, and we'll have to dig deeper still to uncover the bare facts. But just as it stands--what a problem! Now I wonder--"

His voice died. He shook cut another cigarette and scratched a match abstractedly. Through the first cloud of exhaled smoke he went on.

"Take it all as read, just for a minute. Unravel the allegory in the allegory--the king's daughter born in the Country of the Blind. You know, Lessing, one thing strikes me that you haven't noticed yet. Ever think how completely childish Clarissa seems? Her absorption in trivial things, for instance. Her assumption that the forces at work about her must be protective, parental. Yes, even that glow you spoke of that affected everything you saw and heard when you were

with her. A child's world is like that. Strong, clear colors. Nothing's ugly because they have no basis for comparison. Beauty and ugliness mean nothing to a child. I can remember a bit from my own childhood--that peculiar enchantment over whatever interested me. Wordsworth, you know--'Heaven lies about us in our infancy,'and all the rest. And yet she was adult enough, wasn't she? Past twenty, say?"

He paused, eyeing the tip of his cigarette. "You know," he said, "it sounds like a simple case of arrested development, doesn't it? Now, now, wait a minute! I only said sounds like it. You've got sense enough to recognize a moron when you see one. I don't say Clarissa was anything like that, I'm just getting at something--

"I'm thinking about my own little boy. He's eleven now, and getting adjusted, but when he first started school he had an i. q. away above the rest of the class, and they bored him. He didn't want to play with the other kids. Got to hanging around the house reading until my wife and I realized something had to be done about it. High i. q. or not, a kid needs other kids to play with. He'll never learn to make the necessary social adjustments unless he learns young. Can't grow up psychically quite straight unless he grows up with his own kind. Later on a high i. q. will be a fine thing, but right now it's almost a handicap to the kid." He paused. "Well, see what I mean?"

Lessing shook his head. "I can't see anything. I'm still dizzy."

"Clarissa," said Dyke slowly, "might--in the allegory, mind you, not in any real sense--be the king's daughter. She might have been born of... well, call it royal blood... into a race of inferiors, and never guess it until she began to develop beyond their level. Maybe the... the king felt the same as I did about my own child--she needed the company of inferiors... of children--while she was growing up. She couldn't develop properly among--adults. Adults, you see, so far developed

beyond anything we know that when they're in the same room with you, you can't even remember what they looked like."

It took Lessing a good minute after Dyke stopped speaking to realize just what he meant. Then he sat up abruptly and said, "Oh, no! It can't be that. Why, I'd have known--"

"You ought," Dyke remarked abstractedly, "to watch my kid play baseball. While he's playing, it's the most important thing in life. The other kids never guess he has thoughts that go beyond the game."

"But... but the shower of gold, for instance," protested Lessing. "The presence of the god... even the--" -

"Wait a minute! Just wait, now. You remember yourself that you jumped at conclusions about the god. Made him up completely out of a glimpse of what looked like a golden shower, and the memory of the Danae legend, and the feeling of a presence and a purpose behind what happened. If you'd seen what looked like a burning bush instead of a shower, you'd have come up with a completely different theory involving Moses, maybe. As for the presence and the visions--" Dyke paused and gave him a narrowed look. He hesitated a moment. "I'm going to suggest something about those later on. You won't like it. First, though, I want to follow this... this allegory on through. I want to explain fully what might lie beyond this obvious theory on Clarissa. Remember, I don't take it seriously, But neither do I want to leave it dangling. It's fascinating, just as it stands. It seems very clearly to indicate--in the allegory--the existence of homo superior, here and now, right among us."

"Supermen?" Lessing echoed. With an obvious effort he forced his mind into focus and sat up straighter, looking at Dyke with a thoughtful frown. "Maybe. Or maybe-- Lieutenant, do you ever read Cabell? In one of his books somewhere I think he has a character

refer to a sort of super-race that impinges on ours with only one... one facet. He uses the analogy of geometry, and suggests that the other race might be represented by cubes that show up as squares on the plane geometric surface of our world, though in their own they have a cubic mass we never guess." He frowned more deeply, and was silent.

Dyke nodded. "Something like that, maybe. Fourth dimension stuff--people restricting themselves into our world temporarily, and for a purpose." He pulled at his lower lip and then repeated, "For a purpose. That's humiliating! I'm glad I don't really believe it's true. Even considering the thing academically is embarrassing enough. Homo superior, sending his children among us--to play."

He laughed. "Run along, children! I wonder if you see what I'm driving at. I'm not sure myself, really. It's too vague. My mind's human, so it's limited. I'm set in patterns of anthropomorphic thinking, and my habit-patterns handicap me. We have to feel important. That's a psychological truism. That's why Mephistopheles was always supposed to be interested in buying human souls. He wouldn't have wanted them, really--impalpable, intangibles, no use at all to a demon with a demon's powers."

"Where do the demons come in?"

"Nowhere. I'm just talking. Homo superior would be another race without any human touching points at all--as adults. Demons, in literature, were given human emotions and traits. Why? Muddy thinking. They wouldn't have them, any more than a superman would. Tools!" Dyke said significantly, and sat staring at nothing.

"Tools?"

"This... this world." He gestured. "What the devil do we know about

it? We've made atom-smashers and micro-scopes. And other things. Kid stuff, toys. My boy can use a microscope and see bugs in creek water. A doctor can take the same microscope, use stains, isolate a germ and do something about it. That's maturity. All this--world, all this--matter--around us, might be simply tools that we're using like kids. A super race--"

"By definition, wouldn't it be too super to understand?"

"In toto. A child can't completely comprehend an adult. But a child can more or less understand another child--which is reduced to the same equation as his own, or at least the same common denominator. A superman would have to grow. He wouldn't start out mature. Say the adult human is expressed by x . The adult superman is xy . A superchild--undeveloped, immature--is x . Or in other words, the equivalent of a mature specimen of homo sapiens. Sapiens reaches senility and dies. Superior goes on to maturity, the true superman. And that maturity--"

They were silent for awhile.

"They might impinge on us a little, while taking care of their own young," Dyke went on presently. "They might impose amnesia on anyone who came too close, as you did--might have done. Remember Charles Fort? Mysterious disappearances, balls of light, spaceships, Jersey devils. That's a side issue. The point is, a superchild could live with us, right here and now, unsuspected. It would appear to be an ordinary adult human. Or if not quite ordinary--certain precautions might be taken." Again he fell silent, twirling a pencil on the desk.

"Of course, it's inconceivable," he went on at last. "All pure theory. I've got a much more plausible explanation, though as I warned you, you won't like it."

Lessing smiled faintly. "What is it?"

"Remember Clarissa's fever?"

"Of course. Things were different after that--much more in the open. I thought--maybe she saw things in the delirium for the first time that she couldn't be allowed to see head-on, in normal life. The fever seemed to be a necessity. But of course--"

"Wait. Just possibly, you know, you may have the whole thing by the wrong end. Look back, now. You two were caught in a rainstorm, and Clarissa came out of it with a delirium, right? And after that, things got stranger and stranger. Lessing, did it ever occur to you that you were both caught in that storm? Are you perfectly sure that it wasn't yourself who had the delirium?"

Lessing sat quite still, meeting the narrowed gaze. After a long moment he shook himself slightly.

"Yes," he said. "I'm sure."

Dyke smiled. "All right. Just thought I'd ask. It's one possibility, of course." He waited.

Presently Lessing looked up.

"Maybe I did have a fever," he admitted. "Maybe I imagined it all. That still doesn't explain the forgetfulness, but skip that. I know one way to settle at least part of the question."

Dyke nodded. "I wondered if you'd want to do that. I mean, right away."

"Why not? I know the way back. I'd know it blindfolded. Why, she may

have been waiting for me all this time! There's nothing to prevent me going back tomorrow."

"There's a little matter of a pass," Dyke said. "I believe I can fix that up. But do you think you want to go so soon, Lessing? Without thinking things over? You know, it's going to be an awful shock if you find no apartment and no Clarissa. And I'll admit I won't be surprised if that's just what you do find. I think this whole thing's an allegory we haven't fathomed yet. We may never fathom it. But--"

"I'll have to go," Lessing told him. "Don't you see that? We'll never prove anything until we at least rule out the most obvious possibility. After all, I might be telling the simple truth!"

Dyke laughed and then shrugged faintly.

Lessing stood before the familiar door, his finger hesitating on the bell. So far, his memory had served him with perfect faith. Here was the corridor he knew well. Here was the door. Inside, he was quite sure, lay the arrangement of walls and rooms, where once Clarissa moved. She might not be there any more, of course. He must not be disappointed if a strange face answered the bell. It would disprove nothing. After all, two years had passed.

And Clarissa had been changing rather alarmingly when he saw her last. The fever had seemed to speed things up.

Well, suppose it were all true. Suppose she belonged to the superrace. Suppose she impinged upon Lessing's world with only one facet of her four-dimensional self. With that one facet she had loved him--they had that much of a meeting ground. Let her have a deeper self, then, than he could ever comprehend; still she could not yet be fully developed into her world of solid geometry, and while one facet remained restricted into the planar world which was all he

knew, she might, he thought, still love him. He hoped she could. He remembered her tears. He heard again the sweet, shy, ardent voice saying, "I'll always love you--"

Firmly he pressed the bell. -

The room was changed. Mirrors still lined it, but not--not as he remembered. They were more than mirrors now.

He had no time to analyze the change, for a motion stirred before him.

"Clarissa--" he said. And then, in the one brief instant of awareness that remained to him, he knew at last how wrong he had been.

He had forgotten that four dimensions are not the outermost limits of conceivable scope. Cabell had unwittingly led him astray: there are dimensions in which a cube may have many more than six sides. Clarissa's dimension-- Extensions are possible in dimensions not entirely connected with space--or rather, space is merely a medium through which these extensions may be made. And because humans live upon a three-dimensional planet, and because all planets in this continuum are three-dimensional, no psychic tesseract is possible--except by extensions.

That is, a collection of chromosomes and genes, arranged on earth and here conceived, cannot in themselves form the matrix for a superman. Nor can a battery give more than its destined voltage. But if there are three, six, a dozen batteries of similar size, and if they are connected in series--

Until they are connected, until the linkage is complete, each is an individual. Each has its limitations. There are gropings, guided fumbblings through the dark, while those in charge seek to help the

scattered organism in fulfilling itself. And therefore the human mind can comprehend the existence of a superbeing up to the point that the connection is made and the batteries become one unit, of enormous potential power.-

On earth there was Clarissa and her nominal aunt--who could not be comprehended at all.

On a remote planet in Cygnae Taurus, there was a Clarissa too, but her name there was something like Ezandora, and her mentor was a remote and cryptic being who was accepted by the populace as a godling.

On Seven Million Folk Twenty Eight of Center Galaxy there was Jandav, who carried with her a small crystal through which her guidance came.

In atmospheres of oxygen and halogen, in lands ringed with the shaking blaze of crusted stars--beyond the power of our telescopes--beneath water, and in places of cold and darkness and void, the matrix repeated itself, and by the psychic and utterly unimaginable power and science of homo superior, the biological cycle of a race more than human ran and completed itself and began again. Not entirely spontaneously, at the same time, in many worlds, the pattern that was Clarissa was conceived and grew. The batteries strengthened.

Or to use Cabell's allegory, the Clarissa Pattern impinged one facet upon earth, but it was not one facet out of a possible six--but one out of a possible infinity of facets. Upon each face of that unimaginable geometric shape, a form of Clarissa moved and had independent being, and gradually developed. Learned and was taught. Reached out toward the center of the geometric shape that was--or one day would be--the complete Clarissa. One day, when the last mirror-facet

sent inward to the center its matured reflection of the whole, when the many Clarissas, so to speak, clasped hands with themselves and fused into perfection.

Thus far we can follow. But not after the separate units become the complete and tremendous being toward which the immaturity of Clarissa on so many worlds was growing. After that, the destiny of homo superior has no common touching point with the understanding of homo sapiens. We knew them as children. And they passed. They put away childish things.

"Clarissa--" he said.

Then he paused, standing motionless in silence, looking across that dark threshold into that mirrory dimness, seeing--what he saw. It was dark on the landing. The staircases went up and down, shadowy and still. There was stasis here, and no movement anywhere in the quiet air. This was power beyond the need for expression of power.

He turned and went slowly down the stairs. The fear and pain and gnawing uneasiness that had troubled him for so long were gone now. Outside, on the curb, he lit a cigarette, hailed a taxi, and considered his next movements.

A cab swung in. Further along the street, the liquid, shining blackness of the East River glissaded smoothly down to the Sound. The rumble of an El train came from the other direction.

"Where to, sergeant?" the driver asked.

"Downtown," Lessing said. "Where's a good floorshow?"

He relaxed pleasantly on the cushions, his mind quite free from strain or worry now.

This time the memory block was complete. He would go on living out his cycle, complacent and happy as any human ever is, enjoying life to his capacity for enjoyment, using the toys of earth with profound satisfaction.

"Nightclub?" the driver said. "The new Cabana's good--"

Lessing nodded. "o. k. The Cabana." He leaned back, luxuriously inhaling smoke. It was the children's hour.

Humpty Dumpty"

Published in Astounding Science Fiction, Vol. 52, No. 1 (September 1953).

Collected with the other Baldy stories (and added interstitial material) in Mutant, Gnome Press: 1953.

Carry Me Home

Published in Planet Stories, Vol. 4, No. 9 (November 1950) under the pseudonym C. H. Liddell, with illustrations by Mayan. The issue also contained a "biographical sketch of Mr. Liddell," which I have placed after the story.

Rohan knew that the fog-shrouded Venusian mountaintop held an eternal Pool, where blood-red rubies, emerald idols and rich yellow gold sparkled in darkling depths. He knew also that the treasure had a Guardian: A Monster... or possibly a god....

On that fog-shrouded Venusian mountaintop lay an eternal Pool, where ley diamonds and blood-red rubies, emerald idols and rich yellow gold sparkled seductively in darkling depths... and striding confidently up the strange path toward that island in the sky came Red Rohan, thief of Venus. But the treasure, of course, had a Guardian: a Monster... or possibly a god.... The fog split and took fire like the blaze of a white-hot sun....

You could see the Mountain sometimes, on the clearer days, from as far away as the town called Foggy Morning. The unearthly lands between swam in jungle, stirring endlessly with the pale, restless foliage of Venus, garrulous jungle full of a continual murmur that had all the notes of human speech imperfectly heard.

The Quai told fabulous tales about the Mountain, drawing up the third eyelid dreamily over their yellow gaze and humming gently through their noses between words, in the disconcerting way of Quai. They said there was a pool up there, and something in the pool. They said the pool was blue--under a sky of unbroken, eternal cloud, the pool was blue.

They said there was a monster in it. Possibly a god. No Terrestrial understands Quai speech very clearly yet, so they may have said both monster and god. It sounded intriguing, but too remote to interest anyone in the frontier towns along the Terrestrial Highway. Terrestrial holdings on Venus are precarious yet, strung along a chain as narrow and perilous as Bifrost, and infringements against Venus and Quai have proved too dangerous for any man to commit more than once.

Three men slipped out of Foggy Morning just ahead of the vigilantes one day, getting the jungle equipment they needed by direct and deadly means. Frontier justice being what it always is, the vigilantes pursued them only far enough to make sure they would not return. If the vigilantes had caught them they would have hanged them. But when they had chased them past the turn-off that leads southwest toward Flattery and north toward Adam and Eve, and on along a little winding, diminishing path due west, they paused and looked at each other and began to laugh. The path went straight into forbidden Quai lands, and its far end was the Mountain. The vigilantes shrugged and went back to Foggy Morning.

There were d'vahnyan in the jungle. D'vahnyan is a complex term, but its basic import is death-dealer. The Quai were quite competent to look after their own lands. Hanging might have been preferable.

The cavern was reasonably dry, considering. It was reasonably safe, or as safe as any refuge could be in Quai territory. A small, soft fire burned in a hollow of sand near one wall, pale lavender flames licking up and whimpering in the annoying way all fire does on Venus.

A man named Rohan lay drowsily with his back to the cavern wall and his eyes shut, singing to himself.

"Swing low," he sang, "sweet chari-ot, comin'for to carry me home."

Condensing fog gathered in big drops along the outer brow of the cave and dripped continually as an obligato to the song and the whimper of the fire. One of the other men was sitting on his heels just inside the fringe of dripping water, gun across his knee, peering into the misty jungle. The third man threw down an emptied ration-tin with violence and said, "Red!"

Rohan did not open his eyes.

"Yes, my little friend?" he said.

"Red, I'm sick of it. I'm going back! You hear? There's no use waiting any longer. Barber isn't coming. Why should we sit here waiting for the police to come and get us? I tell you there's been a d'vahnyan on our trail since yesterday morning, and I don't like it. I'm going back. I'll take my chances--"

Rohan grinned sleepily.

"If you get there before I do," he sang, "tell all my friends I'm comin'too--"

"It's crazy," the other man said. "It isn't safe to wait around here any longer. I'm afraid of the d'vahnyan, if you're not. I'm going."

He made no further move. Rohan listened to the quiet complaint of the flames and thought of the d'vahnyan of Venus.

The d'vahnyan's place in Quai society is not comparable to any Terrestrial equivalent. He approximates police, judge, jury and executioner all in one, though his powers are not limited to the enforcing of justice; he also--for no reason Terrestrials have yet grasped--destroys trees or whole forests, burns occasional villages,

dams or diverts rivers, and at times sterilizes the soil of agricultural areas. His decree is never questioned. He is debarred from the fields of science, using the weapons the blue-clad ll'ghirae give him, without understanding the principles of the devices he wirls. The ll'ghirae correspond to scientists or priests of science, and are forbidden knowledge of the Realities. Exactly what the Quai mean by Realities is not yet known.

But a few of the more concrete realities of life on Venus the Terrestrials have learned fast, often the hard way. Foremost among them is the absolute power of the d'vahnyan. To wield it they seem to have surrendered much--perhaps the whole ego as we think of it. They rule by a sort of divine right, and no one dreams of questioning or disobeying them. Their lives are sacred and their decrees irrevocable.

"I don't trust them," Forsythe said again. "I'm going back."

"The Quai are a funny people," Rohan said cheerfully, opening his eyes a little to peer out past the watcher on the threshold and into the drifting mist. "They work in a mysterious way their wonders to perform. An amazing race, the Quai. All right, Forsythe. Goodbye. Jellaby and I are going to climb the Mountain."

Forsythe jerked around heavily, his dark face flushing with anger and incredulity. Even Jellaby, at the door, looked back over his shoulder and his freckled jaw dropped.

"What?" Forsythe demanded.

"You heard me."

"I won't do it," Forsythe said excitedly. "You're crazy. That wasn't what you told me. You said Barber Jones would pick us up at the clearing

and fly us out with the loot. The road toward the Mountain was just to fool the vigilantes. Oh no, Red! Oh no!"

Rohan rolled over lazily to face his companions.

"Did you really think," he inquired, "that Barber would bother with us if we didn't get away with the bank hold-up? We're in an interesting spot, Forsythe, my friend."

"I don't like it." Forsythe's voice was heavy. "We should have left the bank alone. There was pretty near as much money in the saloon safe. But no, we had to bust into the bank and set off the alarm in Police Headquarters clear over the bay at Swanport. How long do you figure before the police come for us, Red?"

Rohan closed his fist on a handful of moist, sandy soil and let it trickle slowly through his fingers. His look was gently marveling. Terrestrials were still so new on Venus that sometimes a man found himself struck with astonishment at the simple discovery that this world was made of soil. Plain dirt, rock, sand, prosaic as Earth itself. You expected something more glamorous of the Morning Star.

"A band of angels," Rohan sang, "comin'after me, comin'for to--"

"You can't go up the Mountain," Forsythe pursued doggedly. "What's the good of it? What's up there but some kind of devil-fish in a pool? I tell you, it's crazy!"

"What's up there, my friends," Rohan said, and in the violet firelight his face took on a sudden look like fever, "what's up there is a fortune! There's a pool, all right. There's a--well, some kind of a monster. And you know why it's there? To guard a treasure. Jewels, Forsythe. Rubies and diamonds, Jellaby. For a thousand years the Quai have been throwing offerings down to their monster-god. And

nobody knows it except us. Not a soul except us three. That's why we're going up the mountain, Forsythe."

Forsythe grunted.

"You been dreaming," he said.

"I had it straight," Rohan said, "from the horse's mouth." He laughed. "I got it from Crazy Joe."

Forsythe's head snapped around sharply and he caught his breath to hoot with angry derision. But Rohan saw the derision pause and heard the breath run out in an uncertain, half-reluctant sigh.

"Uh-huh," Rohan said. "Think it over. I did. I got him drunk, you see. First time I ever saw Crazy Joe drunk, but I happened to be the lucky guy who drank with him. And he talked...."

Rohan half shut his eyes and looked through his lids at the dim, complaining fire. Crazy Joe, he thought. How crazy? Babbling over his liquor about a treasure he'd seen and walked away from, not wanting it, not really caring. That was crazy. Only a crazy man would do it. But wise in his craziness, with strange threads of sanity twining through the warps of his mind. The Quai paid him a curious respect and abided by his owlish council. They told him things he was not too crazy to turn to account sometimes. It was probable that he knew much more than he ever admitted to. He wandered freely in Quai territory, and he knew what lay at the top of the Mountain....

"I saw him the next day," Rohan said. "I thought it might have been just drunken talk. But he claimed the whole thing was true. He told me all about it. I believed him." Rohan grinned. "Would I be here now, if I hadn't? Why, if even a part of it's true, half the jewels on Venus are lying right up there on top of the Mountain, just waiting for three guys

like us to come and get 'em."

Then he shut his lips together on a tight, secret smile and thought of the other thing Crazy Joe had said was up there. Forsythe and Jellaby were dubious enough about the jewels. What would they say if he told them about the d'vahnyan?

"You needn't be afraid of the d'vahnyan," Crazy Joe had said, combing his beard through his fingers thoughtfully, drawing down his thick, bleached brows. "I'm not. I know too much about 'em. I found out. Up there." He had chuckled, looking shrewdly at Rohan. "They're not so mysterious, once you know the secret. It's all up there. The treasure, the pool, the monster--and the secret of the d'vahnyan."

Rohan had regarded him dubiously, with rising excitement imperfectly tempered by reason. The strangest part of the whole strange business was that he believed Crazy Joe. You had to know Crazy Joe to understand why. Nobody knew what his real name was, or where he came from. Oddly, there were times when the part of his face that showed between ragged beard and ragged bangs had a distracting familiarity to Rohan, but he could not identify it. The man was unquestionably mad, but there was dignity in his madness, and he was not known to distort the truth.

Moreover, he could talk to the Quai. He had even been known to hold conversations with the d'vahnyan, at a distance, looking up into those cold, inhuman faces and stroking his beard as he spoke. They never exchanged an unnecessary word with sane humans, but to Crazy Joe they spoke with respect.

"What do you know about them?" Rohan had asked eagerly, all his own hatred and distrust of the d'vahnyan boiling up in him behind the question. The inhuman, the unspeaking, the terrible d'vahnyan, because of whom his one real success on Venus had been thwarted.

"What do you know?"

"The secret of the d'vahnyan," Crazy Joe had said mildly. "I can't tell you. I couldn't if I would. It isn't a thing you can tell. You have to see it."

"A weapon?" Rohan had asked urgently. "A machine? A book? Come on, Crazy Joe, give me an idea! What is it?"

"It's up there on the Mountain," was all Crazy Joe would say. "Go up and see for yourself. I did. I'm not afraid of 'em now. They talk to me. If you want to know about it, you'll have to go up the Mountain and find out. It won't be easy, but what is? Go ahead. Find out for yourself."

So Rohan was going.

His curiosity about the d'vahnyan was devouring. The death-dealers were such a terrifying class of people, if you could call them people at all. They weren't people. They weren't alive. They weren't dead. They were more like beings from another star than creatures of human stock.

What their powers were nobody knew, though Terrestrials made guesses. They could destroy at a distance in many changing ways, all of them explicable by analogy, though the analogies might be quite wrong. Ultra-sonic waves can focus invisibility to a point and destroy with heat and vibration. Did they kill with a power like that? Perhaps.

The intricate wrappings of gleaming black stuff they wore, interwoven with shining curled threads, might in themselves be some unearthly sort of weapon; as the winding of the armature on an electromagnet controls its efficiency, so these elaborately wound patterns woven with strange threads no Terrestrial had ever seen at close range might control the enormously efficient powers the d'vahnyan wielded.

The sciences of the Quai both paralleled and diverged from Terrestrial sciences. No Venusian has ever seen the stars, but from the structure of the atom the Quai evolved a very pretty picture of their own sun and sister planets. It was known that they drew upon the very short-wave radiations that filter through the clouds of Venus from the sun and stars, for example converting (in controlling the balance of food supply) starch to sugar with the aid of polarized infrared, as Terrestrials learned to do long ago. There can be biological converters as well as technological ones. So a converted energy drawn from without or from within, and probably controlled by the gleaming black wrappings of the d'vahnyan, was the weapon they wielded. But where they came from, nobody knew. Perhaps not even the Quai.

Perhaps Crazy Joe knew. Perhaps, if Rohan reached the Mountain, he too might know. He only knew now that his hatred of the d'vahnyan was an uncontrollable and an irrational thing, resembling more a man's deep, instinctive aversion to an alien life-form than his dislike of a fellow creature, however unpleasant. They did not suffer from the drives that made Rohan what he was, and he hated them for that. They were passionless, and he felt bewildered scorn for them. They were curiously selfless, and he felt contempt because of that. But his reasoning mind told him they were simply men, after all, men who followed orders in what they did, as most men do. He did not mean to let them thwart him this time. He was afraid of them, but he feared failure more than the d'vahnyan. He would not, this time, turn back for anything.

"I don't know," Forsythe grumbled. "I don't like it, Rohan. It isn't safe. That Mountain's a long way off."

"You like it here?" Rohan inquired, smiling. He rose limberly. He was a tall man, good-looking, pleasantly smiling. You had to look twice to see, underneath, the kind of a man he was and had been.

"You wait here," he said, "and the d'vahnyan will come and get you. You go back and the vigilantes will string you up, unless the police get there first. You come with me, and the chances are good that a genuine, authentic monster-god will eat you. But you'll see such a treasure before you die, Forsythe, I promise you'll die happy."

The man in the doorway had been watching the jungle all this while, but his large ears were alert. Now, without turning his head, he said hoarsely,

"Red, how much of this did you plan?"

Rohan's pleasant face went blank with guilelessness.

"Plan, Jellaby?"

"You wouldn't have told us about the treasure--if there is one--unless you'd needed us. Right? You knew we wouldn't run the risk on your say-so unless we had to. Right? So I'll ask again--how much did you really plan?"

Forsythe was slower on the uptake, but he got the idea after a moment.

"Yeah!" he said, and then, with gathering heat, "Yeah, Red--what about that? You figured the bank hold-up, didn't you? It couldn't be the saloon--it had to be the bank, so the Police would chase us if we muffed it. You wanted the Police after us, Red! So we couldn't turn back. So we'd have to come along on your crack-pot scheme into Quai territory. Well, here we are! We can't go back or forward. And all because you're as crazy as Crazy Joe when it comes to money! Red, I--"

"Shut up, Forsythe," Rohan said in a sudden whisper. "Look out

there--Jellaby! Is that something--something black?"

There was instant silence in the cave. The breathing of the three men seemed loud in the close confines of these rock walls which made up an alien planet. The dripping fog sang plangently on the sill and the fire whimpered thinly to itself.

Jellaby shifted the blaster in his hands and his whole position changed so that he seemed to become part of the weapon, lifting it toward the jungle path.

"No," Rohan breathed. "Careful, Jellaby. You don't know the Quai. Don't shoot. Just wait."

"Red, can you kill a d'vahnyan?" Forsythe asked in a faint voice.

"I don't know. I'd like to find out." Rohan's voice seemed to come through his teeth. His face had a touch of the fever tint again in the violet firelight, and his eyes looked bright and hard. "I'd like to know," he said. "Someday I'll find out. Maybe today. Maybe now. If there's anything I hate--"

The mists parted dramatically and out of the unveiled jungle aisle a tall, black figure with a white face came stalking straight toward them. Jellaby's finger crooked convulsively on the trigger. Forsythe swore under his breath. Rohan did not make a sound. He stared, eyes a little glazed, at the approaching figure.

A part of his mind reminded him that the d'vahnyan must be following orders in what they did. There had been nothing personal in the ruthlessness of the d'vahnyan who three weeks ago had stalked into Rohan's flourishing mine camp on the outskirts of Careless Love and with one gesture brought Rohan's whole investment crashing.

But he felt the heavy beat of anger throbbing above his ears as he

thought of it. The rich lands of Venus invited exploitation. No frontier was ever a place for the scrupulous, and Rohan had come because his talents flourished best where the law was weakest. He had the seed of greatness in him and he knew it unerringly. The knowledge had driven him all his life. But he needed a raw frontier to flourish in, and Venus had seemed so perfectly the place for him--until that d'vahnyan stepped out of the pale jungle and with one gesture dismissed all the toiling Quai.

"They're mine!" he had protested to the passionless figure in black. "They owe me more than they can pay! They've got to work it out!"

The d'vahnyan may not have heard at all. Barter is something the Quai society does not recognize. And so Rohan's budding empire crashed and he found himself empty-handed again, with empty pockets, with nothing but the driving knowledge of his own potential power and a corrosive hatred for the d'vahnyan who had come between him and all that Venus promised.

He smiled pelasantly into the face of the black-wrapped being before him. Of course it hadn't been this particular d'vahnyan, back in Careless Love--or had it been? How could you tell? You tend to think not of "them" but of "him" in every separate case when you think of the d'vahnyan. Perhaps because you never see more than one at a time, and there is no way whatever to tell them apart. Inevitably you come to feel that there is but one omnipresent, omnipotent d'vahnyan in all Venus, miraculously appearing in hundreds of places at once. Empty-eyed, remote, passionless, he stalks about his duties. His very name means one who is beyond life and death.

The d'vahnyan paused almost on the threshold of the cave, looking at them out of remote, indifferent yellow eyes. Behind him there was a soft flurry of motion among the pale trees and a little group of Quai in single file came out one by one into the clearing behind the

d'vahnyan and paused too, looking into the cave.

The Quai were tallish men, supple in intricate, tightly wrapped, white waterproof bindings that fitted them like a second skin. They looked like spectral mummies with triangular faces and seal-sleek fur for hair. A Quai is strikingly reminiscent of the little Venusian tree-chuck that slips quietly through the trembling foliage, looking down at you with a wondering gaze. While you are still an Earthlubber you may be reminded of a lemur or an owl, but after you know Venus the Quai will remind you of the tree-chuck and nothing else.

These four stood still and regarded the Terrestrials with an air of deprecating curiosity. The d'vahnyan, in glistening black, his remote gaze unfocused, stood facing the cavern, watching some vacancy in the air about six feet beyond the three Terrestrials. He laid his right hand under his left forearm, letting his left palm fall forward toward the cave. The black wrappings gloved him, and their glistening blinded the observer a little. You could never be sure if he really held a weapon or not.

In a totally expressionless voice the d'vahnyan said:

"The Mountain is forbidden. Go back."

Rohan smiled cheerfully. The four Quai blinked their mild yellow eyes.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Rohan said. "We seem to have lost our way. Hope we aren't trespassing." His smile was ingratiating.

All four Quai exposed their teeth in a sudden, unexpected snap at empty air. One of them said something that had the overtones of a Gregorian chant. He added a few words in ill-accented Spanish, all of them profane. Then the four looked at Rohan in grave, astonished inquiry and put their hands on top of their seal-sleek heads.

The d'vahnyan might not have heard. He stood silent, unmoving, waiting, Rohan was aware of a little chill down his back, and he swallowed hard, choking down anger.

"The Mountain is forbidden," the d'vahnyan said again. "Go--now."

Rohan grinned deliberately. "Certainly," he said. "Glad to."

You don't argue with the d'vahnyan. It was probably a great concession that this one had repeated himself even once. Rohan wondered if the thing--the man--felt anything at all. If he did, he was probably a little concerned about this rather delicate situation of trespass. Relations between Terrestrials and the Quai were not very easy.

It is extraordinarily hard for Terrestrials, reared in the severely practical, commercialized thinking of ancient Rome, to understand a society rooted in a world that never knew Rome. Thinking contacts might have proved literally impossible, if it had not been for the d'vahnyan.

It seems commentary enough on the problems of cooperation to point out that eccentrics like Crazy Joe appeared to find the Quai and the d'vahnyan far easier to understand than normal Terrestrials could. Wandering subnormals like Crazy Joe are inevitable in any frontier society, which attracts misfits by its lawlessness and wrecks them by its ruthless inflexibility. But it was in great measure thanks to the Crazy Joes of the Terrestrial Highway that a rough sort of working harmony had been achieved between the peoples of the neighboring worlds. They were cousin races at least, children of sister planets and sprung from human stock. But oh, the differences in their thinking!

Behind Rohan, Forsythe spoke in a low voice.

"We'd better go back, Red. He means business. You know you can't kill a d'vahnyan. It's been tried. I don't want any part of this. I'm going back." His boots grated on the cavern floor as he took a step forward. Rohan swept him back with an outstretched arm.

"We're going," he said aloud, in his pleasantest voice. "Hand me my pack, Forsythe. We're going." But in his mind, above the seething of controlled anger, he was saying, "Oh no, not this time! I gave in once, but not again. This time the risk's worth anything I have to do. Oh no, we won't go back!"

He shouldered his pack and stepped through the veil of dripping water, out of the cave. The d'vahnyan uttered a sudden sharp hiss, and the four Quai unexpectedly shivered and drew back. Some heavy burden of awareness seemed to come over them and the four slumped inside their wrappings. It occurred to Rohan suddenly that they must be prisoners--the d'vahnyan's prisoners for some obscure Quai crime. The d'vahnyan hissed again, without seeming to move a feature. The Quai bent their heads and filed on across the clearing. A billow of mist rolled out to meet them and they plodded into it and vanished. The last to pass turned one bright, anguished, hopeless glance toward the Terrestrials, then let his third eyelids film across the look, and the mist swallowed him up like death itself.

Rohan felt a sudden burning contempt for them. How spinelessly they gave in to the d'vahnyan, four against one, and never dreaming of resistance. It was the way on Venus, but it was not Rohan's way.

Forsythe, shrugging his pack into place, stepped out past Rohan.

"You were a fool," he said disagreeably, "to think you could get away with this. If Barber's ship came down right now, I wouldn't get aboard. I don't trust you, Rohan. You're crazier than Crazy Joe." He scowled and turned to the d'vahnyan. "Will you guide us back?" he asked.

"We were fools to come. I'd have left long ago if I'd known the way."

The d'vahnyan's slanting forearm with the enigmatic threat of the half open palm moved in the direction the Quai had vanished. Forsythe grunted and stepped down onto the path. Jellaby, awkwardly cradling his blaster in one arm, lumbered after. Rohan did not move.

The d'vahnyan's cool, implacable gaze rested upon him lightly. He lifted the threatening hand higher. There was no way to know what weapons he had--a flick of the finger might annihilate them all.

Rohan, looking into that expressionless face, deliberately let his banked anger rise. This was the turning point in his life on Venus, he thought. Give in now, and wind up like Crazy Joe. Face the d'vahnyan down, and the treasure on the Mountain would buy an empire. It might even buy the power to crush the d'vahnyan forever, and he knew that an empire would be valueless if he failed to crush them. He knew suddenly that it was neither the empire nor the treasure he yearned for now--it was the ruin of the whole d'vahnyan clan. The thousands of dead-faced replicas of the single d'vahnyan before whom a planet humbled itself. Confidence and power surged up in Rohan's mind. He could do it. He knew he could do it--if in this single showdown he could outface the d'vahnyan.

He saw Forsythe striding down the path toward the oncoming billows of mist which had already swallowed the submissive Quai. Jellaby paused uncertainly, looked after Forsythe, looked back at Rohan.

Rohan drew a deep breath. There was only one way to conquer, now. Had anyone ever really killed a d'vahnyan? Had anyone, before now, dared try? "Why not?" he thought. "What have I got to lose?"

He dropped his hand to the blaster at his side, tipped the holster up and fired very quickly, not drawing the gun, not giving the d'vahnyan

any warning or himself time to think.

This was a nightmare, Rohan thought. They were running, running, running, the three of them, through mist and pale trees wreathed in vines and fog, and the leaves talked continuously around them, trembling like a jungle in terror.

Rohan could scarcely see the pale foliage before his eyes. That flash, back there, had been so nearly blinding....

What flash?

"Oh yes," he thought casually. "The flash when I shot the d'vahnyan."

Reason suddenly took over in his spinning mind, and he seemed to be screaming a shocked and incredulous question at himself: Shot the d'vahnyan? I shot the d'vahnyan?

He stumbled and fell forward, clasping a tree-trunk to break the fall, and leaned there for a long moment, his cheek against the wet bark, water dripping down his neck from the trembling foliage above, while he wrestled with his own stunned and awakening memory.

"I shot the d'vahnyan," he told himself carefully. "Oh yes, I did it. I, Red Rohan, shot a d'vahnyan, and here I am, alive. So it can be done. I did it. But what happened then? Why am I here?"

His memory did not want to retrace its path, and he set his teeth and forced his mind back to the moment before the cave, when the gun jolted in his hand, and--

The flash. The blinding sun-flash, yellow white, the brightest light that had ever burned on Venus. No Venusian ever saw the sun. Even the fires burned lavender. Even gun-fire flashed pale violet. But this flash had been the color of the sun. Blinding. Stunning the eye and the

mind.

It engulfed the d'vahnyan. And the mist rolled forward to cloud the sun-color. Rainbows, he remembered, had shimmered for an instant in the mist, surely the first rainbows that had ever shone on Venus.

But had the d'vahnyan fallen? No man could stand against the discharge of a blaster fired into him from three feet away. But was the d'vahnyan a man? He asked himself the question, and the garrulous leaves whispered all around him, giving no answer. There was no answer. There was only the blinding flash, the mist, the rainbows, and--

And then they had run.

"Forsythe," Rohan called, his voice unsteady above the conversations of the leaves. "Forsythe. Jellaby!"

Dark figures looming up out of the trees behind him gasped and slowed in their forward plunge.

"Red?" Forsythe's uncertain voice inquired. "Red?"

"All right," Rohan said, forcing his tone toward normality. "All right, calm down now. We're okay. Everything's under control."

"Control!" Forsythe said bitterly, leaning against a tree and gasping for breath. "Oh, sure, everything's fine! You shot a d'vahnyan. I saw you do it! You know what the penalty is for that?"

"Do you?" Rohan managed a wry grin.

"Nobody knows. Maybe nobody ever tried it before. Maybe it's a brand new crime. But they'll work out some punishment to fit it. And we--"

"Shut up," Rohan said. He was striving hard to regain his lost composure. He said again, "Shut up, Forsythe," and his voice was almost pleasant. "What's done is done. Now you'll have to come along with me. If we reach the Mountain we won't have a thing to worry about. I promise you that."

"I won't do it," Forsythe said, still breathing hard. "I'm going back and wait for Barber. You got the message to him and I think he'll come. We didn't give him time enough, that's all. He--"

Rohan said wearily, "Barber's dead, Forsythe. He died two years ago."

There was a dreadful silence among the three men for a very long moment. Then Jellaby slowly unslung his rifle, his big hands moving almost unguided, his eyes beginning to burn upon Rohan.

"Don't do it," Rohan said. "I'm your only chance."

"Barber--dead?" Forsythe echoed blankly. "I don't believe it. You're lying. You--"

"I lied before, yes. I had to. I needed you two." Rohan's voice was assured, gently urgent. "No message ever went through to Barber because it couldn't. I haven't got any pipeline to hell. Barber lived a long, nasty life and he died in a crack-up in the jungle two years ago. I heard about it from Crazy Joe. I was afraid you might have, too, but I took the chance. I had to. I tell you, if we get to the Mountain you'll never regret what I've done. We'll be so rich no government can stop us. We'll carve an empire out of the Venusian jungle and we'll be three emperors who rule half a world. There's enough for all of us. This whole planet is just lying here waiting for men like us to take over. I know the way to do it. I'm going on. I need your help and I've made sure you'd have to give it. You can't go back now. The whole

planet's against us. All we can do is push on toward the Mountain, and if we get there, we can buy and sell the world!" He elbowed himself away from the tree. "I'm going on. You can follow if you want to."

The two in the path looked at him wordlessly, rage and terror stopping up their mouths. Forsythe coked a little and tried to speak, but the words died and his eyes went suddenly round, showing a circle of white around each iris. He was looking back the way they had come.

Rohan swung about and looked too. Distinctly in the murmuring silence they all heard the crunch of soft feet moving over pebbles. Rohan thought violently back along the way he had come, searching for a memory of crossing pebbles. He looked down. His feet were dark with moisture. Yes, a broad shoal of pebbles and then a rushing brook that wound through the trees. A long way back? He couldn't remember.

They heard pebbles roll and crunch, far off, hidden among the leaves. Then there was the sound of rapid water gurgling around an obstruction--such an obstruction as wading legs. Pebbles crunched again on the nearer bank. After that, silence.

It might be farther than it seemed. Sound carried strangely sometimes among these deflecting leaves.

Rohan sucked in breath, settled his pack with firm, decisive hands, checked his blaster.

"Come along," he said, and his voice was almost cheerful again. The pressure of danger was like a strong drink to him now. There could be no hesitating, no uncertainty. The only course was forward. "Come on--quick! We can make it if we keep ahead."

"Ahead of what?" Forsythe whispered, rolling his white-ringed eyes back toward the mist-hung jungle they had passed. "It's him, you know. I--I've been seeing flashes of black through the leaves. He's after us. He'll get us, Red. We killed him and he'll follow us till he gets us. Red, I--"

Rohan's big hand cracked sharply across the swarthy, sweating face.

"Shut up and get going. Ahead of me. Jellaby, you too. I don't trust you behind me. Go on--march!" He laughed on a note of exhilaration. "I'll come last, so if he catches us I'll be the first to go."

Uncertainly, on hurried, stumbling feet, the two plunged ahead of him. Rohan drew another long breath, grinned, let it out in a melodious whistle. The trembling, pale leaves conversing all around them shivered to the notes of defiance in his voice as he began to sing.

"Swing low," he sang to the mist and the vine-wreathed trees, "sweet chariot, comin'for to carry me home...."

The Mountain's tremendous shoulders loomed above the mists, monstrous, streaming with veils of cloud, naked above the clinging jungle. It was gray scoriac stone, smudged all up and down its sides with great soft blurs of color where lichens grew pink and amber, pale green, dusky blue. The peak was hidden. The pool, the treasure, the secret, drew cloud about themselves and pretended not to exist at all.

Rohan looked up at the peak warmly and lovingly, hardly believing he stood here, so close to the goal that would make all his dreams come true. He saw the steep road winding upward and half shut his eyes, picturing himself coming down it laden with treasure. With rubies and diamonds. And wiser than the Rohan who stood here at

the edge of the jungle: He would be stronger than the d'vahnyan when he came down that road. A Rohan would come down who knew the secret of the d'vahnyan who held a whole planet in submission. It would be Rohan who gave the orders, then.

He glanced back. The following feet still came on. They had seen nothing through the whispering leaves all the way, but the follower had not faltered. Nor had he tried, Rohan thought, to overtake them. It had been enough to follow. Rohan knew he ought to feel frightened. Forsythe and Jellaby were cold and shaking with long-sustained superstitious dread as they looked back. But Rohan felt so sure of the secret which was almost in his grasp that fear did not touch him. By the time that unhurrying follower caught up with him, he would know more than the d'vahnyan knew. He would be stronger than the d'vahnyan. If he hurried, now.

"All right," he said. "Get along. Up the Mountain, boys. I promise you, once we--"

"Listen!" Forsythe said. They stood frozen. The jungle babbled with mindless, lisping voices. A wind sighed down from the heights above. Somewhere far off, thunder rolled. And then the sound came again, hollow and thin, distorted by the leaves between.

"Ro-han," the voice was calling. "Ro-han. Red Ro-han!"

This time a cold shiver went sharply down Rohan's back.

"Go on!" he said. "Up the Mountain, quick!"

The voice called again, miraculously nearer. The follower seemed to be coming after them now in seven-league boots.

"Ro-han, Ro-han...."

Rohan broke into a leaden run, the pack bumping on his shoulders. The Mountain was so near. If he could get even a little way ahead, perhaps--

"Rohan?" the voice said from the edge of the trees. "Rohan, wait for me."

He turned in spite of himself. Then he let his breath out in a long, foolish gasp and said, "Crazy Joe!"

The old man grinned at him above the ragged beard. "Sure it's me. What did you think? Wait a minute."

He came striding confidently across the moss, swinging his arms. He was a stalwart old creature. No one knew how old, or how young. The bleached beard and hair might be white with age, or from some more obscure reason. Nobody knew much about Crazy Joe except that he came and went when he felt like it and answered no questions. His face was extraordinarily bland and peaceful. He did a great many very odd things at odd times, and it was probably quite true that he was mad.

He looked immaculate, which was an unexpected part of his eccentricity. His blue jeans were spotted with dew and rain, but he wore them tucked neatly into the tops of wrapped Quai sandals, and his denim shirt was Government Issue designed at Swanport for Terrestrial wear on Venus. He had stuck a pink flower in its pocket-flap and he was probably not aware that several spotted blossoms and a pale butterfly rested on his tousled hair.

"Thought I'd get here first," he said, grinning his rather foolish grin. "You must have come fast." He tilted his head back and peered up the steep road that wound about the Mountain. "Well, well," he said softly. "Hasn't changed a bit. Which one of you plans to go up first?"

Forsythe said unsteadily, ignoring the question, "Was that you behind us all the time? There wasn't--anybody else?"

"I dunno just what you mean, son," Crazy Joe said, blinking.

"Was there a--did you see any--" Forsythe could not quite get the word out.

"A d'vahnyan," Rohan said it for him. "We think one of them's after us, Joe. See anything?"

Crazy Joe turned and looked thoughtfully at the jungle, running his fingers through his beard. The pale butterfly struggled furiously and freed itself, blew away on a soft gust of wind.

"He followed down the labyrinthine way," Crazy Joe murmured, "of my own mind."

"What?" Forsythe asked impatiently.

Crazy Joe shook his head and his grin was vacant. "Which one of you plans to go up first?" he asked again.

"We'll all go, of course," Rohan said. "What about that d'vahnyan, Joe?"

"If he wants you, he'll catch you," Joe said. "I wouldn't worry if I were you. There was a band of angels comin'after me." He smiled at Rohan. "I heard a lot of singing about 'em. You going up first, Rohan? You can't all go together, you know. That's against the rules."

Rohan made an impatient gesture. "I make the rules from now on. Who's going to stop me? There's nobody up there, is there?"

"Oh yes. One Quai, always. Waiting."

"What for?"

"Waiting to be devoured," Crazy Joe said casually. "By the thing in the pool. You knew the treasure was guarded, didn't you?"

Forsythe looked at Rohan expectantly. Rohan looked away, and met Jellaby's tense gaze on the other side. The two men spoke simultaneously.

"So that's it!" Forsythe and Jellaby said with a single voice.

Rohan laughed. "Not what you're thinking, no. I'll dive for it if you're afraid to. I never said it would be easy. But you'll have to help. If somebody's standing by with a gun, I'll feel a lot--"

"No, Rohan," Crazy Joe said earnestly. "You can't do that, you know. Only one at a time. Think it over, Rohan. Remember what's up there." The eyes under the faded bushes of brows were keen. "That you won't discover unless you're alone."

"What's all this?" Forsythe demanded.

"It's a secret," Crazy Joe said childishly. "Rohan knows." He glanced back at the shivering jungle and his voice blended with its dreamlike soughing. "Behind, the vats of judgment brewing," he said, "Thundered, and thick the brimstone snowed." He looked at Rohan and smiled. "He to the hill of his undoing... Pursued his road...."

"Ah, you're two crackpots together," Forsythe said, turning abruptly away. His face was thoughtful. He seemed to be evolving some new idea, and that Rohan could not--dared not--allow. There was again, as always, only one solution.

Rohan stepped back from the little group, laying a hand on his

holstered gun, tipping it up ominously. He would not have to draw it. He could shoot well enough at this range from the holster. It was a trick he liked.

"All right, Forsythe," he said, not troubling any more to make his voice cheerful or pleasant. "Jellaby, over here. Both of you. We'll go up together, you two first. Crazy Joe--"

He looked speculatively at Crazy Joe. He was thinking that he would have to kill the old man, sooner or later. He was dangerous on too many counts. He could lead the two others back to the Terrestrial Highway, and only fear of the jungle kept them submissive to Rohan now. With Crazy Joe for a guide, they would be free of him. Also, Crazy Joe knew too much about the Mountain. What he had babbled once he might babble again, and Rohan did not intend for anyone else to stand where he stood now. He fingered the trigger meditatively, hesitated, decided the moment was not yet. "Crazy Joe," he said, "get back and don't bother me. I make the rules from now on."

Forsythe's heavy face wrinkled up in a thoughtful grimace. Rohan didn't like it. He jerked the holstered gun threateningly.

"Forsythe--" he said.

Forsythe squinted at him, lifted his upper lip and laughed harshly.

"Crazy Joe," he said, without taking his eyes from Rohan's, "is there another path down this mountain?"

"Only this one," Crazy Joe said tranquilly.

"No other way to get down?"

"No. It's all precipices except this side, where the road is."

Forsythe, still holding Rohan's gaze, stepped back deliberately, found a convenient rock and sat down, laughing his annoying harsh laugh, his eyes small and full of malice on Rohan's.

"Go on," he said goadingly. "Why don't you shoot?"

Jellaby barked out a sudden, understanding burst of amusement.

"He won't," he declared. "Not him."

"Why won't I?" Rohan demanded, struggling hard to keep his anger in check.

"Because you need us, that's why," Forsythe said flatly. "And we don't need you. You wouldn't have let us in on this at all if one man could have made that trip through the jungle alone. You needed us. When you come down the Mountain loaded with jewels you'll need us worse than ever. All right, you tricked us into coming. But it was your idea, not ours. You go right ahead and wrestle with your devil-fish up there. If you get the treasure, fine, we'll share it with you. If you don't come down, that's fine too. Crazy Joe will guide us back. Suit yourself, Red. You asked for it."

"We didn't shoot any d'vahnyan," Jellaby added. "We're clear. We'll help you carry your rubies and diamonds back, but we won't get 'em for you."

Rohan looked at Crazy Joe. The old man smiled impersonally.

"One at a time, Rohan," he murmured. "That's what I said. It isn't allowed any other way. Even if you shot me, it wouldn't make any difference. You'll have to go up alone."

The steep stone road curved around a leaning monolith and wind

poured downward along it like a stream of cool, invisible water. Below, through gaps in the mist, the trembling jungle showed. Stormclouds hung purple and laced with distant lightning. Rohan's feet as he climbed left stains of pale green and pink and violet on the road, the colors of crushed lichens.

He could not see the men below any longer. He knew what they were thinking, though. He knew what they were planning, for he would plan identically. Forsythe and Jellaby did not mean to risk the ascent, but when he came down loaded with jewels, they would shoot him as he came. Or try to.

He thought of Crazy Joe's mild, witless gaze, watching him up the road until mist blotted the lifted faces out. He thought of Crazy Joe's voice, babbling old poetry. "Oh youth that would attain, On, for thine hour is short, It may be thou shalt gain The hell-defended fort..."

He laughed a little. He felt very sure of himself. Continents of cloud rolled beneath him like the planet he was going to conquer when he had conquered the Mountain. It was odd, how sure he was of the treasure and the secret that would make the d'vahnyan vulnerable to him. He had only a madman's word for it, and yet he was very sure indeed. The breath burned in his chest, not wholly from the climb. He was brimmed with excitement, dread, a fierce anticipation. Crazy Joe had been right, after all—he had to be alone at this climax of his life. He must stand or fall by his own efforts. But he would not fall.

The road turned sharply. He had reached the top.

He stood quite still, looking about him with narrowed eyes, whistling through his teeth without being wholly aware of it. "Sweet chariot," he whistled, "comin'for to carry me home."

There was an island in the sky. A walled island with a wide, wide

gate like no gate he had ever seen before. through the strange, lacelike meshes of it he could see the flat summit of the mountain in a gray light that cast no shadows. A windy whispering sighed across the plateau. The scene was as still and colorless as a steel engraving except for the startling blue of the pool. Crazy Joe had not lied. It was sky-blue, on a world that had never seen the sky. Thirty feet across, lapping level with the smooth rim around it, colored like eternity, the pool lay waiting him.

He stood on the lip of a wide stone semicircle with the wall beyond it. Against the wall facing him was a rickety structure like something you might see in a bazaar near the Mediterranean, back home on Earth. A roof of tree-fronds on unsteady poles leaned against the wall, sheltering a fantastic clutter of objects beneath its dripping eaves. The hut was a jackdaw's nest of junk. Lying motionless in a huddle of fringed blankets on the ground, a Quai slept placidly.

Waiting to be devoured, Crazy Joe had said.

Rohan looked curiously over the bazaar-booth's contents, taking an inventory of the trivia in a Quai's life that had seemed important enough to bring with him to the hour of his death. Surrounded by the detritus of his incomprehensible Venusian life, the man slept on. He lay on his face and only the pink soles of his bare feet were visible beneath the tumble of blankets. His hands were clasped together on top of his seal-sleek head.

Above him fringes and braided ribbons fluttered from pins on the wall. There was a wire cage with a captive insect like a moth crawling about inside, chirping softly. A chain of bells hung from a carved globe of deep red wood. There were three totally incoherent paintings in irregular frames. A whistle hung by a long tassel. A pot of water held three colorless flowers, each with two petals creased down by a careful hand.

Rohan's feet did not make a sound on the rock, but he was aware after a moment that a round yellow eye had opened in the shadow of the Quai's uplifted arm and was regarding him without expression. The Quai did not move.

Rohan shrugged a little and went on toward the gate.

The road turned sharply... he had reached the top....

The wall was high and very thick, so thick that the gate aperture was really a passage about twenty feet long. The gate itself was a web which entirely filled the passage from end to end. Some spider who spun glittering, curled metal thread had been at work here. It reminded Rohan of something. What? Curled threads--yes, like the threads woven into the wrappings the d'vahnyan wore. His heart beat a little faster in triumph at this implied confirmation of Crazy Joe's promise.

How you passed the Gate was another matter. He squinted up at the wall. Far too high to scale. He glanced back at the Quai, and saw that the man was now sitting up, cross-legged, clasping his ankles and watching Rohan without expression. He was a little struck by the Quai's face. Arrogance was on it. This was a man who had wielded much power over a long period of time. The set of the mouth showed it, and the imperious gaze. How strange that such a man would forsake life among his people and climb the Mountain with his few small valued things to bear him company until the summons came....

Rohan looked back at the gate. This time it seemed to him that there was an opening which led a little way into the web, like the entry into a maze. He put out a cautious hand, tested the firm, curled lace of the metal, found a vacant space the size and shape of a man, stepped forward into it.

He stood there, peering intently before him, searching for the next open space. He was certain that it existed, but he had to keep his mind firmly fixed on the patterns to find it. Wind blowing through the gate sang faintly among the webbings. After a moment Rohan saw the next opening, squirmed to the left, squeezed between vibrating traceries of bright wire, and stood in another open space several paces inside the gate.

It was certainly, he thought, a machine. Some intricate Venusian mind had built it for some purpose no Terrestrial was likely to understand, but it was definitely a functioning mechanism. It took the most intent concentration to find one's way through, and, the moment the mind relaxed, the gate began to press the intruder back oward his starting point, gently, resiliently, almost imperceptibly.

Rohan pushed ahead, paused for long minutes, searching the dazzling confusion before him until suddenly the right perspective took shape and he saw the next passage opening, clear and unbarred, leading another three feet or so into the tangle. When he stepped into it, the way he had just come blended instantly into the labyrinth. Suddenly frightened, he searched for the way back, found it after a few minutes, and discovered he had lost the forward way. While he hunted again for it, he was aware of the pressure of the web, of bright curled wires moving past his face. The gate was pressing him toward its outer surface.

Resolutely he fixed his mind on the immediate problem, found the way forward; pushed into it, paused, searched again. Very slowly he made his way toward the plateau on the far side of the wall. The pool lay placid, waiting.

"Is this all?" he thought, looking around the empty mountain-top. Only the wet, sighing wind hissed in his ear for answer. It was all. The encircling wall hid nothing. Bare stone overgrown with blurs of

colored lichens and the pool itself, an unlidged eye staring up at infinity.

Rohan strolled toward it, paused on the brink, looking down.

His heart turned over.

This much at least of Crazy Joe's tale was true. There were stars down there in the deep sky-blue of the water, stars that winked up green and red, blue and amber. Great drifts of jewels set and unset, thicker than the sands of the pool's floor.

Then a shadow stirred, deep down. A vast, thick coil moved upon itself, turned over slowly, settled back to rest. It was only a part of a vaster shadow. He leaned to peer closer. But the water was milky. He could not see....

Not very much is really known about the fauna of Venus. Terrestrial exploration has been confined to narrow corridors, and if there are dangerous beasts in the jungles they generally shun the highways and the towns. What may dwell in the seas of Venus is as unknown as the deepest secrets of our own seas. This thing was vast and sluggish, dimly gleaming where light struck it strongest. Rohan measured its bulk as well as he could, considered it with a sort of reckless caution. It was slow. It was probably not hungry, or the Quai outside the gate would not be waiting here. Presumably some kind of summons would come when the Quai was wanted. Or did they operate on some private schedule of their own? At any rate Rohan was a strong swimmer. Also, he had a knife.

He thought, unfastening his shirt, "If I can get up only a load or two of what's down there, it'll be a start. I can hire a ship and come back here with enough artillery to kill the thing and clean out the pool. Maybe I won't even wake it up, if I'm careful."

Then he thought of the d'vahnyan, and glanced again, rapidly and with uneasiness, around the plateau. Had Crazy Joe told three truths and one lie about this place? The pool was blue, as he had said. It held treasure and a monster of some kind. But the greatest treasure, the secret behind the d'vahnyan--where was it? What was it? No, Crazy Joe did not tell lies. Unless it was unwittingly. Could that be it? Some vague fantasy he had dreamed up here, staring into the hypnotic eye of the pool? No, for he did know the secret. He did talk with the d'vahnyan, easily, with strong influence sometimes. Well, never mind. At least, the jewels were here. After that there would be time enough to explore further.

A curious sureness drove him on. The secret was here. He could see no tangible evidence but something deeper than reason told him Crazy Joe had not misled him. In its own time the secret would come to him, as it had come to Crazy Joe.

He stepped out of his trousers, settled the long knife on its thong around his wrist, poised on the pool's brink.

How soft and smooth the water was. Not like real water. Stroking strongly downward, Rohan marveled at the texture of the blue infinity he sank through. He kept his eyes open, enjoying the deepening blueness, watching for the flashes of color that struck upward like some sunken autumn from the bottom of the well. It was like swimming through blue air toward stars. He felt happy and light. It was strange to think how intimately he shared this water with the monster whose shape and nature he did not know. The water was full of death, but he did not fear it. It was full of life and light too, if a man had the courage to reach for them.

The jewels lay heaped in thick, bright hillocks, unevenly on the sand. It seemed to Rohan that they lay smoothest in a broad path across the pool's center, as if--something--had dragged a wide track across

the treasure many times. But the deep waters hid all sign of the dweller here. Perhaps it slept. Perhaps it had withdrawn.

Rohan shook out the strong, light sack he had brought for the treasure. It wrapped itself around his arm, clinging like seaweed. He reached for a heavy, half-submerged outcropping in the sand to hold himself down and found he was gripping a carved figure studded with slippery gems. It served the purpose.

What a lot of treasure there was, he thought warmly, riffling it over with his free hand. Big rubies like blood-drops, strings of half-dissolving pearls, linked diamonds set in imperishable yellow gold, corroded boxes spilling out colored drifts of stones. Little idols with enormous emerald eyes. Ivory furred with the swaying green hair of water-growths. Steel mirrors pitted with corruption that had once given back the yellow-eyed glances of pretty Quai girls, corruption now themselves. Steel daggers dissolving off studded gold hilts. So much of it, too much, richness pressed down and running over.

Happily Rohan brushed the surface, uncovering yet more treasure underneath. Working fast, he sorted out the largest and the best and thrust them into his sack. Great pale-eyed diamonds, globes of preciousness as live as stars, strings of lustrous rainbow color, faceted drops of congealed brightness. It was wonderful. It was Christmas morning. It was Easter, with all the dazzling eggs nested here awaiting him.

His lungs began to burn. He turned over and shot up through paling blueness toward the air, his heavy sack trailing. He began to laugh exultantly just before he broke the surface, and hung sputtering and choking for a while before he emptied his jewels on the bank and dived again.

The treasure flashed brighter than before. He dug into it, tossing it

over and over, filling the sack anew with the power and the glory of a planet. A second time he rose to the surface, emptied his bulging sack, dived.

This time he uncovered a drift of pure crimson drops, like a man unearthing a vein of clear gold in a mountain of crystals and silver. He dug with both hands into the rich heaps, blinking in the clouds of sand his digging had dislodged, reaching for the bigger and brighter jewels which always lay just an arm's length out of his grasp.

A long, slow coil of disturbed sand rose out of the milky distance past his face. The water stirred, deeply and slowly.

Then with great deliberation a grasp like marble closed around his ankle.

Rohan writhed over in the water convulsively, letting the rubies fly. They sank in a sluggish red rain about him through the blue water, turning over slowly, as he tugged in a moment's almost fatal panic at that relentless coil. It was heavy and hard and cold, like stone. And it was drawing him in....

It did not seem possible to him that a slow sun was beginning to burn through the clouds of blinding sand which he was raising in his struggles. He thought wildly that the light burned in his own mind, a symbol of shock and fear. But the tentacle drew him downward and inward toward the light, and as it grew and broadened with nearness it was the color of the sun itself, clear, bright white gold, shimmering in the waters that were colored like the blue skies of Earth. Blue skies and sunlight--two things no eye upon Venus had ever seen, except perhaps here.

His lungs burned. His vision blurred with sand and water and terror. He was not aware of himself as a reasoning creature at all in this

moment. He was only a wild, struggling thing frantic to escape.

The thong-hung dagger, following his falling motions faithfully, struck his palm finally and brought reason back. His fingers closed and with his last conscious strength he drove the dagger down hard, into the murk where the sunlight burned, into the heavy coil that was creeping higher around his ankle.

He felt the whole coil flinch. He slashed again. The water churned and the marble grasp slackened a little. Writhing double, blind with light and darkness, he stabbed once more into solid flesh which he could not see, and this time the heavy coil relaxed and slid slowly, slowly away.

Rohan shot up through foaming water, kuminous water that boiled with sand and sparkled with broken reflections from that strange sunlight which burned at the bottom of the well. He broke the surface with what seemed his last despairing effort, and hung there clutching the stone rim, his body swinging helplessly in the churning water, wondering how soon the coil would rise again and lay its marble weight around his legs.

A hand seized his wrist. Two hands. Without looking up he made feeble climbing motions against the side of the pool, but it was the strength of the two pulling hands that saved him. He stumbled, gasping and choking, over the edge at last, onto dry pavement, and lay there spent for an unmeasured space of time.

When breath and volition came back to him he opened his eyes and saw a pair of white sandal-wrapped feet on a level with his face, a tumbled heap of jewels kicked this way and that between them. Slowly, as exhaustion ebbed a little out of him, he pushed himself up until he was sitting beside the flashing heap of his treasure, looking into the face of the standing man. Imperceptibly he was working the

dagger forward around his wrist so that his fingers could close on it.

The Quai was not looking down at him. He knew the arrogant face, but its arrogance was not for him. The Quai's third eyelids were drawn across the round eyes and their gaze was focused remotely beyond Rohan and downward, into the pool. Automatically Rohan turned to follow that veiled gaze.

He had not imagined the light in the pool. It burned stronger now, very bright, very clear. And the water was troubled from deep underneath. A sudden turbulence rushed up, subsided, rushed higher, spilling blue trickles over the rim. Then a great bubble rose and burst, and just under it the shining light came floating, up, up from the bottom of the well and the center of the world. A cold, still brilliance that dazed the eye.

The Quai spoke in a hushed voice.

"Were you summoned?" he asked Rohan.

"Summoned?" Rohan echoed the question blankly. Then a little of his old confidence came back, and even in the face of this uprising mystery from the pool he found himself laughing. "Summoned? Oh no--I came!"

The two men looked at each other for a measuring moment. Even through the veiling lids Rohan saw the cold arrogance in the Quai's eyes and knew it for a remote echo of his own. But there was a difference... the Quai had come humbly, acolyte and sacrifice in one. Rohan laughed again and scrambled to his feet. Exhaustion still weighted him, but he could not rest--yet.

What was going to happen next he had no idea. He only knew that he could deal with whatever came.

His discarded clothing lay beside the pool. Shivering a little in the soft, wet wind that breathed across the Mountain, he got quickly into his shirt, pressing the seal-tapes with one rapidly moving hand while with the other he groped for his trousers. The cloth felt clammy against his wet skin.

He was buckling the reassuring weight of the gunbelt around him when the next great bubble burst. Another rose after it. And another. Rohan turned, settling the holster against his thigh. The Quai stood motionless, with the jewels in a glittering tumble around his feet. He too stared down into the pool. The water boiled. The light like the sun rose higher, higher....

Out of the seething blue waters lifted the monstrous head of the dweller in the well. Slowly, slowly it rose, water streaming from its shoulders, and over its head the flat, unwavering sun burned cold white gold, shimmering, shivering, sending out slow rings of light that eddied and faded, spread and paled to an embracing potency that was felt but not seen. They touched the mind. Delicately they touched the mind....

What did it look like? Rohan could not be sure, even while he stared. The light dazed him. He only knew the thing was monstrous. Mailed and shining, it drew its magnificent length over the verge of the pool, coil by coil. Before it, stealthy, slow, tentative as the first light of dawn, moved the rings of expanding radiation. The thoughts of Rohan and the Quai moved out from their skulls in measurable waves from each thinking brain, and the radiations from the flat white light met them and moved inward as if on concentric stepping-stones, inexorably toward the center and the source of all thought.

Gently, gently. But the storm was rising.

Rohan shut his mind tight, violently rejecting that touch. It drew back

slightly, puzzled. Then it came on again and there were no doors of the mind he could close against it.

A great many lightning thoughts rippled one after another through his head. The jewels. First and last and always, the jewels. And how he could hope to get to them, with that monstrous light-crowned thing rising so slowly from the pool. And how, even if he did get them, he could escape. For he felt very sure that the rings of expanding light were quiescent now, barely stirring. There was no way of guessing their full power if the creature were aroused, or how far down the mountain they could spread, burning and sinking, paralyzing the mind.

It was not immortal. He had struck it with his knife and it had let him go. Certainly it was not a normal creature by any Terrestrial judgment, but it was not supernatural, either. He had struck it, and--

The slow, upsurging coils hesitated. Out of the water a slash in the mailed side rose gingerly. The creature paused, swung its magnificently crowned head back to consider this twinge. And Rohan knew his chance....

The Quai never even heard him coming. Rohan's long knife flashed twice in the quiet air, hard, accurate blows to hasten the sacrifice which this man of Venus had come to offer his god. Rohan knew what he was doing. He knew how to guide the blows.

It takes perhaps three seconds for oblivion to come, when you strike deep at the right spots. In those three seconds the Quai had time for one quick look of blank amazement over his shoulder, and then no more.

Rohan was braced to catch the sagging body before it began to give at the knees. He caught it neatly and strongly over his bent shoulder,

letting its weight double across him, and surging forward in the same quick instant that he stooped.

His timing was perfect. When the sun-crowned head of the monster swung round again, the hurled body of the Quai sprawled limply against its gigantic face, hung there for unmoving seconds, and then slid very gently downward to lie flat upon the pavement in the pools of spilled blue water. The pools turned red.

Rohan wasted no glance at what was happening between the sacrifice and the god. He was moving with the rapid, accurate gestures of an automaton, scooping up gems with both hands, dropping them blindly into his pockets. He had hoped to go down from this pool laden heavily, pack and pockets, with treasure. But now he told himself rigidly that he could make these scooping gestures twice more--once more--no more--

Resolutely he poured the last double handful into his pockets and scrambled backward on his knees, ignoring the bruise and scrape of the stones, trying not to look at the monster and its victim as he went.

But when he stood panting before the gate he glanced back once, for just one quick, curious look, before he flung himself forward into the slow, intracta web that lay between him and freedom. It was for this, chiefly, that the Quai had had to die. The treasure was only part of it. Even if Rohan had had time to load himself with jewels, still a man must die to give him time to negotiate this gate.

He had one backward look only. The monster had halted half in the pool and half out of it. The great crowned head was bent, and light floated very lazily outward in slow, slow rings. The creature seemed to be inspecting the sprawled Quai leisurely. And Rohan saw one thing about it that struck his mind with stunning impact. He could not understand this. It was impossible. He had assumed all this while

that sacrifices between Quai and monster would be consummated in the time-honored way--that the god would devour its victim.

But he saw now that the god had no mouth.

The threads of the gateway shimmered like the intricate armature-wrapping of the d'vahnyan. Outside, in the leaf-thatched hut where the Quai had slept his last sleep in life, the caged moth chirped with plaintive sweetness. There was no other sound on the Mountain but the sigh of the grey wind and the soft chinking of the jewels in their pockets around Rohan's waist.

He went fast, down the steep road. He did not know how soon the rings of light might begin to pulse out and drop down after him, delicately touching the secret chambers of his mind, touching and pulling him back....

Part of him wanted to be pulled back. For he had accomplished only half his purpose. Or had Crazy Joe lied, after all? He had thought that when he came down this road he would carry a double treasure--jewels and knowledge. Something had gone wrong, somehow, somewhere. Tantalizingly, at the very edge of his mind, wisdom knocked for entry.

The curled threads of the gateway--the curled threads of the d'vahnyan's ominous wrappings. The gate, and the wrappings--each was certainly a sort of un-earthly machine. The latter controlled by the waves flowing from the strange, inhuman brain of the d'vahnyan, the former activated and shaped by Rohan's desire to enter, to pass through. Or by the monster.

Twice on Venus Rohan had seen the sun--once in the crowned monster's brilliance, once when he shot the d'vahnyan. Surely the link between the Mountain and the d'vahnyan was a strong one. But it was

not clear. He had missed its significance, somehow, somehow....

There was not time yet to worry about it. He had the jewels. Later, he would come back with weapons and reinforcements and take what he wanted from the pool. If the secret knowledge that could make all d'vahnyan vulnerable was there, and he thought it was, he would take that too, at his leisure. He could manage everything, with what he carried in his pockets.

There was only one last obstacle now. He touched his gun reflectively and watched the road below. Forsythe and Jellaby. They would be waiting for him... no, for what he carried. To their minds he knew he himself was only a vehicle now, for the delivery of treasure.

Somewhere on the path below they would meet him to dispute the treasure. He grinned, wondering which of them he would shoot first. That it would be Rohan who shot first seemed self-evident to him. And with Jellaby--or Forsythe--out of the way, the balance would shift once more and the survivor's return to civilization would depend solely on Rohan in the long jungle trek ahead. One man alone could not make the trip in safety, it took two at least.

"Forsythe," Rohan thought. "If there's any choice, I'll kill Forsythe."

It was curious in a way how totally he discounted Crazy Joe.

White fog swam lazily up to meet him as he descended. Looking out over the immeasurable miles of dissolving jungle, he thought he saw a glitter of light wink once and vanish, very far away. Foggy Morning, Flattery, Swanport, civilization. A long way off.

The fog closed around him. He walked half blinded, in white cloud. Rocks loomed like waiting figures at every bend. After a while he drew his gun and carried it ready, the safety off, knowing that he was

coming nearer and nearer to the danger area where almost certain ambush waited him. He went very cautiously now, searching every crevice he passed, all his senses tuned to a singing alertness. And presently, with no surprise, he heard a gentle click on metal on rock a little way ahead in the blankness, and knew that the moment was upon him.

Feet shifted on rock. A voice whispered a fierce warning. Rohan smiled. "Forsythe first," he thought. It was bravado and nothing more. He knew he would simply fire at the first moving shadow and hope for the best. He stood perfectly still, hugging the rock wall, his senses straining into this blank grey world where death waited him on the downward path.

Behind him, above him, quite clearly in the fog, footsteps sounded.

Rohan pressed flat against the rocks, turning his head sharply. That was impossible.

He told himself that acoustics must be confused in this heavy, blind dimness. He told himself he had imagined the sound. For there could not possibly be footsteps behind him. No one had passed him going up. There was no other way to the top. And he had left nothing alive on the Mountain. Only the moth in the cage and the monster in the pool.

But now the sound of footsteps rang clear again on the rock above, coming nearer. It was no trick of the echoes or the mind. Someone was following him down the steep road. Someone striding firmly on shod feet that struck loud on stone and muffled on lichens.

Suddenly the mist felt cold around him.

The Quai was dead. Surely, surely the Quai was dead. But there had

been no other human up there. For a disorienting moment he thought that the man who strode the path so confidently was himself, and he who pressed shivering against the rocks a stranger without a name.

He made himself lean out, peering urgently along the way he had come, cursing the mist and yet grateful to it, for he was not sure he really wanted to see the face of this follower at his heels. How confidently the footsteps rang upon the road. How fast they came.

The mists blew thicker still.

The men below him on the road heard the footfalls now. Metal clinked on stone as someone raised a rifle with awkward haste. A voice hissed angrily. Feet shifted on pebbles. The ambush was ready.

For whom? For what?

Rohan laid a hand on his heavy-laden pocket, lifted his gun tentatively, the beginnings of panic stirring uncontrollably in his mind. In seven-league boots the following footsteps strode down upon him.

At the last moment some quick instinct warned him to clear the path, to get out of the way. He flung himself flat against the high rock wall which was the road's inner edge.

Out of the mists and past him the d'vahnyan stalked. His black wrappings gleamed. His empty, remote, passionless eyes touched Rohan indifferently and moved away. From very far off the impersonal eyes saw and dismissed him, eyes which held no ego and no consciousness of self.

But Rohan knew the face.

There had been arrogance and pride upon it like his own, the last

time he had looked into it. But the man was dead now. He knew that. The man had to be dead, with Rohan's knife-thrusts in him, at the edge of the pool, and the monster nuzzling its sacrifice. The monster with no mouth....

It had received its sacrifice, then. And now a d'vahnyan came striding strongly down from the Mountain, his face stamped into the same imperishable matrix of selfless, dispassionate calm which every d'vahnyan bore.

Stamped--by what?

Rohan leaned, sick and shaking, against the rock, waves of cold revulsion pouring over him, knowing the secret at last. So that was the source of the d'vahnyan. So that was what the monster fed upon. Staring into the lost, ghostly, erased face of the d'vahnyan, he knew why the death-dealers of the Quai are beings beyond life and death.

But the two in ambush just below him did not know. Rohan held his breath, shivering, powerless to intervene in what came next, although he knew to the last spinning whirl of the brain in his skull exactly what would come. He had been through this before.

Below him he heard the whisper of an indrawn breath as the d'vahnyan strode by and was swallowed in cloud. It was the inhalation a man takes when he braces a blaster stock to his hip and holds until the finger finishes tightening on the trigger.

It finished. The sharp, echoing crack of gun-fire exploded stunningly in the fog as Jellaby fired at the half-seen, stalking figure which he disastrously mistook for Rohan--

The fog split and took fire and burned like the blaze of a white-hot sun, The eye and the mind went blind before it.

When Rohan could see again, the road was clear before him. Jellaby's blaster lay abandoned ten feet below. The fog had burned itself away for a broad half-mile around the sun-hot flash of expending energy. And time had burned away, too. How long a time he did not know.

Then scuttling motion, far below him at the foot of the road, told him the answer. Ten minutes? Fifteen? Thirty? Long enough for Jellaby and Forsythe to run blindly almost to the edge of the pale, garrulous forest at the Mountain's foot. Mindless panic still controlled them, and they ran like little mannikin figures jerking on strings, seen from far away. They ran, from no pursuer, driven by their own blind terror.

For the new-made d'vahnyan, unharmed, another mannikin far off, stalked away into the jungle at an angle divergent from their flight, moving steadily upon his own inhuman business, answering some soundless call which no human ears could hear. Who could guess what summons a d'vahnyan?

"You ought to know, Red," a voice said from very near by.

Rohan jumped convulsively, glaring. How could he possibly have missed seeing Crazy Joe?

The familiar figure leaned against a rock in full sight, six steps away on the downward path, ars folded, eyes on Rohan. He was smiling in his bush of beard.

"You were thinking out loud, Red," he said.

Rohan laughed shakily. His head was still buzzing and there was a misty, dreamlike quality over everything he thought or did. He moved, and his laden pockets jingled faintly. Thought of the jewels brought him back to something nearer sanity, and sudden cunning moved in

his mind.

The jewels in the pool were his. He had suffered much for them. He would go on down the Mountain, catch up with Forsythe and Jellaby, kill one of them and travel with the other to safety. After that—time enough to decide. But one thing he must do first. Crazy Joe had talked too much already about this Mountain and this treasure... now it was Rohan's and nobody else's. Forsythe and Jelaby knew. They must be silenced, eventually. Crazy Joe had better be silenced, too. Now.

Rohan felt for his gun. The holster was empty. He looked down in sudden panic. Far down the slope pale light glinted on steel. He must have dropped the blaster when the flash of sun-glare stunned them all.

He sighed, met Crazy Joe's eyes, thought of his knife. Yes, that would do. Crazy Joe never carried a weapon. The knife would do very well.

There was no use talking about this. Crazy Joe was smiling at him, and he smiled back, automatically, and with one smooth motion drew the knife from his belt and stepped forward, his lips still curved in the meaningless smile as he tipped the blade for that fatal spot just inside the collarbone, where life beats so near the surface that one quick thrust quenches it forever in the briefest count of seconds.

Moving like a man in a dream, he drove the knife straight home.

How strange, he thought remotely, that Crazy Joe made no move to defend himself. How irritating that calm smile was.

A streak of jagged lightning sprang up at the knife-point as it slid across Crazy Joe's chest. Not biting in, but sliding, and trailing cold

fire after it....

Stupidly Rohan blinked at the slit shirt-front. And at what he saw beneath the shirt. The tight black wrappings, glittering with curled metallic thread.

From a long way off Crazy Joe said quietly, "This wasn't my idea, Red. On Venus, when the summons comes, you go."

"Was I--summoned?" Rohan whispered, and hardly heard the answer because of the ringing in his ears.

"I told you about the Mountain, didn't I? That was the summons, Red. Only the strong men answer, Only the men it can use. Look up, Red."

Rohan looked up. A slow ring of light was dropping gently downward around the Mountain. Light like the sun, white gold, shivering in the dim air. It flickered by Rohan's face and faded. But another ring came after it, stronger and broader, touching the brain as it passed.

Crazy Joe, still smiling calmly and compassionately, nodded toward the upward road.

"Go on, Red," he said. "Get it over. There's work to be done on Venus. I know. I do it too. You were summoned. Go on."

The third ring of light floated down past Rohan's face, and his mind reeled in his skull. The fourth ring touched....

Suddenly Rohan's hands rose and clasped tight on top of his head. But under his defending fingers, under the cuirass of his skull, he felt movement. No, not movement--light. Brilliant and clear, white gold like the sun and the short, strong microwaves which the sun and the stars send out even through clouds, even to a world that ever sees the sun.

Rohan thought quite lucidly for an instant of the sun in a clear blue heaven, warm, shining. Quick nostalgia stirred in him at the memory of a world called Earth, a long way distant, dissolving in space and memory. A world called Earth, where a man named Rohan sued to live, a long, long time ago.

A man called--what?

He stamped once on the path, feeling rock solid under him, searching for reassurance in an eclipsed universe. There was a bearded face before him. He knew that face. It had always been hauntingly familiar, under the disguising beard, and something more concealing than the beard--a clam and passionless peace. The peace that comes when a strong ego drains out and--something else--flows in. Something else, like light, like blazing gold, like the white flame that was strung in his brain. This time he knew the erased identity that had dwelt once behind that face.

He said, "You were Barber. You were Barber Jones."

Crazy Joe smiled and nodded.

Rohan's hands clasped tighter on his head. He said painfully, "And I--
I'm--"

But he could not finish. He was no one. He had no name at all.

"Go on back," Crazy Joe said from infinite distances. "There's nothing else left for you now. Nothing at all."

A ring of clear bright light sank about him, widening and expanding, and the name of Rohan faded, the name of Earth dissolved. Jewels clinked as he turned obediently to face the rising path. Last of all the bright thought of power faded, and the use of treasure.

In the emptiness of his mind he searched remotely for a name that had dissolved irretrievably in the burning of the light of his brain. And after a moment or two he seemed to find it. D--it began with d--

D'vahnyan.

He leaned motionless against a rock for a long time, doing nothing. Once his lip drew back in a fading snarl of defiance. But then he moved, took an unsteady forward step, and then another, back along the way he had come. It was the way he had come all his life, toward this Mountain and this upward path.

Burning with light and color, the jewels dropped from his pockets one by one as he climbed, marking the stumbling stations of his return to the Mountain and the pool and the thing that waited for him.

PS's FEATURE FLASH

C. H. Liddell, whose novelet CARRY ME HOME is spotlighted in this issue, is one of our newest and most valued contributors. After reading--and swiftly buying--several of his tales, we got to wondering about the man himself... so we asked... so he answered. Meet the creator of Red Rohan:

"You are embarrassing me, you know, by inquiring into my quite ordinary way of life and what makes me tick. However, I will answer your specific questions the best I can, and as to my peculiarities, I can only say that I have had a terrific interest in science and fantasy literature ever since I can remember. Being an only child, I found a lot of time to read--and I read everything I could get my hands on. I remember that once my father gave me a paperback copy of THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND, by Jules Verne, to read. My mother, God love her, found that book in my room before I had finished reading it

and took it away from me, upbraiding Dad for letting me read such wild trash. Dad, ever a gentle man, mildly defended Mr. Verne to no avail. I believe this incident instilled in me a deadly curiosity to know more about such marvelous adventures which Dad said were scientific and Mother said were "trash." I fear the thirst has become an unquenchable flame.

"I do not have a great deal of time for interests outside of my work, but I consider writing science fiction and fantasy my hobby, avocation--relaxation. I think I first got started doing it because of my impatience with many radio programs which built up suspense and interest in their plays and then fizzled out miserably in the climax. And more recently the television shows have been doing the same thing. Only rarely have I found a fantasy play which builds up to a good climax and then has a decent one. I guess I grumbled too much, for my wife finally got exasperated and told me that if I didn't like the endings of the plays I listened to, to write some of my own.

"So I did. And to my unbounded amazement my stories are beginning to sell. I've been forbidden by my agent to give him a plug, so all I can say is that I am grateful to the editor and readers of Planet Stories for liking my material, and I'll try never to let you down."

There we have a thumbnail sketch of Charles H. Liddell, industrial research chemist of Kansas City, Missouri--one of the few writers who turns out science-fantasy because he loves it, and not because he has to eat. Still in his thirties, Charles H. Liddell is happily married to a Kansas City girl and commutes five days a week to K.C., Mo., to do laboratory research. On week-ends, when Mrs. Liddell hasn't other plans, he loses himself in the spinning of such stories as CARRY ME HOME.

Rite of Passage

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Phrater Stephen Rabb was pretending not to be afraid. He sat there, sullen-faced and black-browed, trying to ignore the sacred things in my office, but he couldn't keep his eyes away from the Eagle Totem in its alcove above me. It made him shiver. It was supposed to. I pretended to be looking through the papers on my desk.

Finally he said, "You are Mr. Cole?"

"That's right," I said pleasantly, and waited.

"You're the Black President?"

"Of Communications Corporation, Eagle Totem," I said, and waited again, trying not to smile because I felt so good. I'd waited for Phrater Rabb a long time now. Not Rabb himself, but a man with his mission.

"I want...." He looked up at the totem. "You know what I want."

"Yes," I said, patting the papers before me affectionately. I might have added, "And it's what I want too, Phrater Rabb. A lot more than you do, if you only knew it." But aloud I could only say, "It's all here in your application, Rabb. I know what you want. But you can't have it—not at the price you offer."

"Six years'service?" He sounded shocked. "That's not enough? You mean I put in six years living at bare subsistence, give the Corporation all that service practically for free, and it's not enough to

get rid of Jake Haliaia?"

"Stealing a soul is an expensive business," I told him, looking solemn. "And service is only as good as the skill you've got. You're rated point five seven in your field. What is it--electrical engineering? According to my dope sheet, there's an oversupply right now. You'd have to go in hock for twenty years of subsistence living in service to the Corporation before we'd break even. If it's worth that much to you--"

Rabb said angrily, "I could kill him myself a lot cheaper."

"You could, sure. But what then? One of his phraters would get the Black President of his clan to put a spell on you. It might be sickness or accident. We could cure that. But it might be soul-stealing. I think it would be. You ready to die that fast?"

Rabb pushed out his underlip sullenly and looked up at the Eagle in its little gold-lined alcove. He hesitated.

"What did Haliaia do to you, anyhow?" I asked, and then bit my tongue a little trying to take back that giveaway accent, with its frank implication. I knew damn well what he had done to me. But he'd been safe. He knew I couldn't touch him. Black Presidents have to give up personal animosities when they take office. Or at least, they have to go through the motions.

"He swindled me out of an inheritance," Rabb said. "He's a cousin of mine." He hit his knee with a doubled fist. "Twenty years' service just to wipe out a man like that," he said. "It isn't fair."

"You could always go to court," I suggested, and we both laughed. It would take more like a hundred years of service to pay out the bribes that solution would cost. Law courts have nothing to do with justice

anymore. With no salaries involved, the officials live on bribes. It's a survival, like trial by combat, and it'll die out presently. Social control is based on corporate magic today, each corporation formed of people chosen according to aptitude, training and interest. Rabb had far more in common with me, his phrater in the Communications Corporation, than with his blood-relative Haliaia, that big, brown, handsome, half-Polynesian who thinks he can get away with--well, not murder, or course. But it's worse than that to steal a man's wife.

Rabb was still sitting there considering.

"Twenty years is too long," he said. "I couldn't face it, not even to get back at Jake. Six years is my limit. What could you do to him for that?"

"Disease and injury," I said. "On the nonphysical plane, I could make him very unhappy. But I can't guarantee anything, of course. It all depends on how strong the White President of his clan is. Everything's curable except soul-stealing--if the other guy's White President is good enough."

"I know your reputation, Mr. Cole," Rabb said. "You're just about the biggest in the business. I know you'll do your best. And it's worth six years to me."

"No more?"

He shook his head slowly.

"All right, Rabb," I said. "Sign here, then." I pushed a contract and a pen across the desk. "And here--that's for your insurance. Can't have you die on us before your term's up."

He scribbled his name twice. "That's all," I said.

"But will I--"

"You'll be notified, in detail. Eyewitness reports on Haliaia's progress will be mailed to you weekly. That's part of the service. Okay, Rabb? Good afternoon."

He went out awkwardly, shuffling sidewise not to turn his back on the Eagle, whose strong, sacred wings theoretically carry the Communications Corporation in flight around the world. I shuffled his papers together and poised them over the slot in my desk that would suck them down to Administration.

Under my breath I said, "The damned fool." But I couldn't quite let go of the papers. I couldn't quite decide. On the one hand, some richer enemy of Jake Haliaia's might turn up eventually. On the other, Rabb was a bird in the hand. I'd waited six months even for this. Haliaia was a man who made enemies right and left, sure. But soul-stealing is an expensive business. Unless Haliaia antagonized somebody so high in rating that the investment of only a few years' service would do the job, I'd be no better off for waiting. Ideally, somebody else would turn up wanting what I wanted--Haliaia's death. Practically, it wasn't likely. I'd have to gimmick somebody's papers to get the man disposed of. Rabb's papers were as good as anybody's, for that purpose. But it's a risk. It's always a risk to tamper with corporate magic.

I'd gladly have paid Rabb's expenses out of my own pocket, if I'd dared. Did I dare? For months now I'd been telling myself that I risked nothing. I know how this so-called magic works. I know the truth. Magic can't affect a man if there's no such thing as magic. Or anyhow, not if he doesn't believe in it. My magic works, sure. But not because it's real.

Still, forty years of training leaves its compulsions. A Black President

who turns his powers to selfish ends has never been heard of. I'll bet it's been done, but not by anyone fool enough to get found out. At worst, I'd lose my job, which I spent fifteen years learning, and my prestige, which is always a good thing to have, and my pay, which is one of the highest in the Corporation. At worst, that is, from my enlightened viewpoint. From theirs, the worst is the soul-stealing spell, and I'd certainly get slapped with that. When they found it wouldn't work--what? A President, black or white, is immune to magic himself as long as his totem protects him--that is, as long as he doesn't break any major taboos, especially in public. But suppose I broke the biggest taboo, and it became known? My soul might be stolen. In that case, everyone would expect me to cooperate by dying.

When I didn't die at the appointed time, what then? Would there be a more realistic attempt to murder me, with a bullet or poison? I thought that would depend entirely on how superstitious my would-be executioners were. If they were skeptical enough, they'd certainly not depend on magic alone, after they saw it wasn't succeeding. But if they weren't skeptical, then they'd simply decide that my magic was stronger than theirs, and my prestige and power would rise higher than ever.

Was I the only President who wasn't blinded by superstitious belief in magic?

Well, there was one quick way to find out. I laid Rabb's papers on my desk and pushed the button that locked my office door. I didn't want any inquiring eyes to notice them before I made my mind up. I flipped the intercom switch and said to my secretary, "I'll be in Thornvald's office, Jan. Don't bother us unless it's urgent."

There is a private door in my office and in Thornvald's that opens on our connecting bridge. I always liked to cross over that way.

Communications headquarters building covers two square miles. Above it our twin towers rise impressively, for I'm the nominal head of the corporation, along with Karl Thornvald, the White President. Walking across the bridge, you can always hear the wind howling thinly through the steel structuring and sometimes a surprised bird looks wildly at you from beyond the glass. I used to wonder how we'd handle the embarrassment if an eagle ever came by and knocked itself senseless against our bridge. Probably nobody'd ever notice. It's amazing how much a person can train himself to ignore if his beliefs are contravened.

Crossing the bridge is almost like flying. You're so high in the blue air, all the rooftops far below and spreading out enormously to the ring of green fields a mile away in every direction. For a moment it reminded me of the hallucination of flight that comes with the Eagle ritual.

Thornvald's telltale showed he was alone. I knocked and went in. His desk is like mine, with the Eagle Totem on the wall, but otherwise the office is bright and cheerful, without the black-magic props I have to have around.

Karl is a plump, round-faced man with an air of impressive solemnity he can put on at will. Right now he put it on automatically as the door opened, and then shrugged and gave me a mild grin.

"Hello, Lloyd," he said. "What's up?"

"Coffee break," I said. He shook his head over the papers in his hand, laid them down, shrugged again and pushed the coffee button. Two coffee bulbs rose instantly out of a desk panel.

"Good idea," he said, biting his open in that irritating, unsanitary way of his. "I've been sweating out a cure for a tough case. A key sonar

man. The clan really needs him."

I opened my coffee with one hand and with the other reached for the paper he was handing me.

"Somebody in Food Corporation put a spell on him, eh?"

"Right. And you know Mumm. He's tricky, and getting trickier."

I knew him. Mumm is the new Black President of Foods, a young man and a very smart one, out to make a reputation for himself fast.

Thornvald said sadly, "I can't locate the real trouble. I thought it might be a foreign body, but the fluoroscope says no. And the man thinks he'll die."

"This says it's the Pneumonia Spell?"

"I think it is, but--"

"With pneumonia anybody'd feel lousy," I said. "Have you ever considered that what's wrong with your patient may not be magic, but germs?"

Thornvald blinked at me. "Well... now wait a minute, Lloyd. Of course it's germs. We know that, if it's the Pneumonia Spell. But who sends the germs? And who puts enough magic in them to eat up my patient's mana? I tell you, Mumm can make germs more virulent than any Black President I ever heard of. I've used five different blessings on the aureomycin, and I still can't cancel Mumm's magic."

"Maybe your patient's a skeptic," I said.

"Now, Lloyd," he said, pulling on his air of solemnity.

"Come off it, Karl," I said. "You know there are skeptics."

"Yes, I suppose so, poor souls. I'm happy to say I never met one. I've sometimes wondered how I'd handle it if I did."

I'd never met one either, barring myself, but I gave him a wise grin and said, "I know one. Smart man, too. Skeptics have their own power, Karl, some of them. Did you ever think one skeptic might be able to cure another, if your methods fail?"

He looked very shocked. His pink face actually went pale with it. "Be careful, Lloyd," he said. "That's getting close to blasphemy."

"I'm just stating facts," I said.

"If you know a skeptic, you know your duty." His voice was prim. "As for saving a patient at the expense of his soul, I'd rather have the man die in a state of grace, and so would you, Lloyd."

"Even a key man? Somebody the Corporation can't afford to lose?"

"Of course, Lloyd."

"Even if it means letting Mumm score a win, and our reputation going down?"

"Lloyd, I don't understand you in this mood." He looked up at the Eagle Totem and his lips moved slightly.

I sighed and got up, draining my coffee. "Forget it, Karl," I said. "I was just kidding."

"I certainly hope so," he told me stiffly. "I understand you, but others might get wrong ideas. If you really know a confessed skeptic, Lloyd, you have to report him. For his own good."

"I told you I was kidding. Sorry, Karl. I've been worrying, too."

"Trouble? Maybe I can help."

I looked at him. He really had gone pale at the thought of blasphemy. It had to be genuine. You can't put on an act like that. I drew a deep breath and plunged.

"No, not trouble exactly. I got a soul-stealing order today and it's going to be embarrassing for me, that's all."

He gave me one of his keen looks and then demonstrated in one word that he's really well qualified to be White President, however much I may underestimate the man sometimes.

"Haliaia?" he asked.

It scared me a little. He's almost too quick. But I couldn't back down now without losing a chance that might not come again for months.

"That's it," I said. "Haliaia."

He looked down at his hands, and then up again. His prim lips were firm.

"I know how you feel, Lloyd. There'll be talk. But you'll have to bear it. You know your duty. As long as you and I have the facts straight, what does it matter how people gossip?"

I gave him a stalwart, resolute look, Black President to White President, and the world well lost for duty's sake.

"You're right, Karl. Dead right."

"I know I am. Now stop worrying and put the papers through with a

clear conscience, Lloyd. It isn't always easy, being a President."

I thought, "There's nothing easier, Karl," but aloud I said, "All right, if you say so, I'll do it. I'll put them through right now."

I went back across the bridge, feeling exhilarated and only a little scared. I made the necessary changes in Rabb's request. Then I held Jake Haliaia over the slot and let go, and watched him go fluttering down the dark vacuum into infinity.

Afterward I turned and looked up at the Eagle Totem. It's just a stuffed bird. That's all.

Now there was no use in even trying to keep the secret. I sat down and put in a call to Florida. After a little while the wings of the stuffed eagle carried Communications Corporation's message across the continent and a woman's face appeared on the screen. She was looking lovelier than I had ever seen her look before. Her eyes were a little out of focus; obviously I wasn't registering yet on her screen. Or in her life, either, if you wanted to think about it that way.

A mechanical voice said, "Mr. Cole? We have Miami now. Mrs. Cole is on the screen."

Now the violet eyes focused. We looked at each other across many miles and enormous emotional distances that would never be bridged again.

"Hello, Lila," I said.

"What do you want?"

"Two things. First, congratulations. The divorce is final this week, isn't it?"

She simply waited.

I smiled at her. "Oh, yes," I said. "The other thing. Haliaia is going to die."

The ritual hallucination was the next step. It's meaningless, of course--a drug-induced dream which habit has shaped to an expected pattern. Thornvald goes through the same ritual for white magic, and he really believes the Eagle appears and talks to him. I'm not that gullible, but I follow the routine too. When I don't, it worries me, maybe because I feel if I vary in one thing I may get careless and vary in more public, and dangerous, ways.

This time I thought I'd skip the ritual. It hadn't even the validity of faith, now I'd broken the main taboo of my office. But I found I couldn't concentrate on my work. Habit, after all, was too strong for me. I made mistakes, punched the wrong buttons, got so irritated finally that that I gave up and went ahead with the routine mumbo-jumbo. I entered the ritual room with an odd sense of relief. I burned the necessary herbs, gave myself a shot of the holy drug and said the usual prayer to the Eagle. After that it was the same hallucination I've had so often.

I dreamed. The Eagle flew with me to Miami. I found Haliaia in a casino playing chuck-a-luck. He was big and brown and handsome. I knew he was due to get enormously fat in later life, like most Polynesians. Lila would be spared this, and Jake. But they wouldn't thank me for it.

I stunned him with my sacred spear and dragged him to a dark place. With the spear I made a circle on his forehead. Then I drove the spear through his chest and dropped three drops of his heart's blood on the Eagle Totem which I carried. I touched him with the Eagle and the wound closed. I whirled the totem around his head. He

opened his eyes and saw me.

I said to him, "You will live two weeks. For a day you will be well. Then you will be sick. On the fourteenth day you will die. The Eagle Totem will eat up your soul."

Then the dream ended.

What really happened was completely practical. Haliaia's sheaf of papers, sucked down into Administration, passed across various desks, were stamped, sorted, assigned, and then sat waiting my go-ahead. My assistants handle most of the black magic, but for a soul-stealing the Black President himself usually performs the honors.

So I sent down for the folder on Haliaia, made up some months ago by our spies in Haliaia's Corporation. He was a key man in the Food Company, and we try to keep folders on such people handy, just in case. I had to know just the right moment when the launching of a spell against the man would hit him where he lived.

Ordinary magic is easy to handle, run-of-the-mill stuff like bad luck, illness, accidents. You can handle it on the spiritual level as a rule, but you don't depend on that. Often you give a man a little push. You arrange to get him infected with a virus, say. You have spies in the restaurant where he eats to drop something mildly toxic in his soup. But you want to make sure he knows it. To make sure antibiotics won't lick the virus, you put a very public spell on the virus. Somehow, if the victim knows what you've done, the magic usually works. He's scared, and fear helps the bugs work. And of course if the bugs don't work, if antibiotics or something cure the victim, then everybody believes the black magic has been cured by white magic—the job of the White President of every clan.

But you have to study your victim carefully, his life charts and

psychological patterns and the reports from trained observers working quietly in the enemy's office or his home. (I don't doubt that observers usually had an eye on me, making notes for the files of other Black Presidents. You just can't do anything about the situation. Our whole social pattern is based on it.)

So you study your victim's charts. You pick exactly the right time to publicize your spell against him. It's always a time when the man's already down--in an emotional depression, or sick with some mild infection, or under stress of some kind. Then you reinforce the stress, make sure he knows he's under a spell and that all his associates know it, and he's apt to cooperate even against his will.

But the really big magic, the soul-stealing--that has to be handled more carefully. Plenty of deaths have been diagnosed as soul-stealing when they're really a burst appendix or thrombosis, or something medicine can't help. The White President of the dead man's clan can't admit his magic's too weak to save the victim. So he takes the obvious out of claiming an enemy used the soul-stealing spell against him. For that there is no cure.

Actually, few Black Presidents do it. Few people can pay for it. But simply because most deaths are diagnosed as the result of soul-stealing, people believe that if their souls are stolen, they'll inevitably die. It's affirming the consequent, of course, which isn't logically valid, but it works. You say, "If a man dies, his soul must have been stolen," so naturally, if his soul is stolen, he's got to die. There's nothing to magic but that.

So I went over Haliaia's charts very closely. I wanted to make sure. Everybody has cycles of worry and depression. Pick your moment and it often takes only one push to send a man over the edge. You play on his buried stresses, his hidden fears. I spent fifteen years learning how these things are done. I chose the moment carefully....

An emergency newscast broke into all the programs. Everything went off the air except the announcement that the soul of Jakob Haliaia of Food Corporation had been stolen. And that meant he was already half dead.

I liked to think about his reactions. He'd been worried a long time about what I'd do. No matter how confident he thought he felt, I was a Black President. He was worried, all right. And his charts showed that he was highly suggestible. I didn't need to wait for a physical illness or accident, or even to induce one. I simply set my date, and struck.

After that I closed my office and went away on a short vacation. In a sense it was cowardly and would look bad. Mumm, the young Black President of Haliaia's Corporation, would think I was afraid of him. Certainly he'd strike back if he could. That didn't worry me much, though it would be interesting to see what he'd do.

No, I had two reasons for going. The important one was that I meant to watch Jake Haliaia die. I wanted to spend two wonderful weeks as near him as I could get, seeing the spell take hold, seeing society draw away from him, seeing him move through a vacuum that gradually thickened into the murk of oblivion as the day of his death drew on. That would be worth any cost I might have to pay later for breaking the strongest taboo a Black President can face.

The unimportant reason was Phrater Rabb. He was the weak link in my chain, of course. There wasn't much I could do to cover my tracks. The plain fact was that I'd falsified his papers, given away fourteen years of the Corporation's money and violated my own sacred vows in striking down a personal enemy for private revenge. But what covering-up I could do, I did.

Specifically, I wrote Rabb a letter stating that the Black President had been called away on an extended trip before Rabb's application for soul-stealing could be confirmed. Therefore, in my absence, my assistant was putting the application through. Would Rabb kindly notify them if there was any error in this case? If not, Jakob Haliaia's soul-stealing would go into operation on schedule, and Rabb would be kept posted by eyewitness reports on the progress of his revenge.

I knew damned well Rabb wouldn't notify the Company that there'd been a mistake. For I'd studied Rabb's life charts and personality patterns very thoroughly before I'd decided to move. It was perfectly true that Rabb had been swindled out of an inheritance, but that's a commonplace event today. What was unusual was the man's reaction. He wanted revenge, because he'd been hit in his most vulnerable area. It was all laid out clearly in his charts--dominant trait: dysfunctional acquisitiveness. In our terminology, what that meant was that Rabb would be so delighted to get something for nothing that he'd keep his mouth shut. A man behaves as he's conditioned to behave, and this was Rabb's way. He wouldn't talk.

So I couldn't fail.

Florida's Food Corporation glitters from the air. The solar water vats make the roofs a dazzle of light, and the city stretches out into the Gulf on islands and floating platforms. Moving ways studded with cars cross the water and canals give back blue light and color through what seems to be dry land.

I took a taxi into the Corporation. I wasn't making the slightest effort at concealment. Both Mumm and Haliaia must know quite well who issued the spell that cut Haliaia off from the world. If Mumm found out I was here it would show him I wasn't afraid. If anyone asked me, it was quite natural that I should be here. A Black President is helpless

to defend himself against a personal enemy, but there isn't a rule in the book that forbids him to enjoy the spectacle of an enemy destroyed at someone else's orders.

I left my taxi at the door of Haliaia's office building and went up to the floor that wasn't his anymore. I didn't go into the office. It wasn't necessary. I just sat on the windowsill, lit a cigarette, and looked for about ten minutes at the door that didn't carry Jake Haliaia's name anymore. I thought about how it must have happened.

Where was he when the news broke? How had he first heard it? Was he watching the tv screen when his own broad brown face came on, and the voice intoning his death? Was he with Lila when he heard? And did she draw away from him, like everyone else, frightened and awestruck, knowing Haliaia was a dead man from that moment on?

It's a highly ritualized pattern, the ostracism of the living dead. The man's social personality is removed. The victim is completely isolated. The social fabric pulls away from the condemned man and from that moment he ceases to exist in the world of the living.

He must have hurried to his office--this building, this door--to call on his confederates in Food Corporation for help. Somehow at first, a man never believes this can possibly be happening to him. He always expects his friends can help....

When he got here, this was what he saw: Another man's name on his office door. Another man's face behind his desk. Eyes that turned away from his, nervous and embarrassed, fearful of contagion.

That's the first movement. Society assumes the man is dead. He may still be walking and talking and making hysterical demands, but everyone knows he is no longer a living being.

In the second movement society surges back over the victim like a returning wave, but it comes with a purpose. The man is dead--living, but not living--and he must now be removed, put into the spirit world of his totem, where he now belongs. He is sacred but dangerous. So the movement of society's return is the mourning rite. It is the funeral, which guides the victim into the spirit world. He attends his own funeral, in the place of honor, the bier. And by that time he cooperates fully. I've never seen it fail. The enormous compulsive force of the ritual is too strong to fight. The victim believes, and dies. At the end, his personality can be seen altering before your eyes. Sometimes they begin to act like their totem. Always they die--because they believe.

I took another taxi to Haliaia's home. It was a luxury place, big curved walls of translucent plastic ribbed with veins of its own fabric. Had he brought Lila here? She wouldn't be here now. The walls and windows were darkened, and hanging on the door was a big black wreath. I saw some dishes of food standing by the door in black containers. There would be nobody at all in the house now, except Haliaia.

I crossed the street and waited in the shadow of a doorway. After a long time I saw the black wreath of the big house shiver slightly, and the door opened quite slowly. Haliaia looked out.

He was still big, but he looked shrunken. He was still brown, but very pale under the brown. He looked all around, without seeing me, and then down at the funeral dishes. He was wearing the sacred garment of his clan, green, with his Fish Totem on the breast. All of his other clothing had, of course, been sold or given away by now. At his funeral the robe he wore would be changed for the shroud, white, with his totem on it.

Oh, yes, Haliaia believed. He had allowed the sacred garment to be put on him, and he was still wearing it. He wasn't fighting against the

spell. The obsession was too strong for him.

I felt an odd little rush of relief when I saw that. Recognizing it. I knew suddenly why I had really come to Florida. I no longer believed in my own magic, or anyone else's. Not believing, I didn't feel entirely sure that anyone else did either. Especially Jake Haliaia. He too might have become a skeptic, though he never could have got access to the forgotten and forbidden microfilms which gave me my new knowledge.

So that was why I had come. I had to see with my own eyes that Haliaia still believed. No, he'd never have got to the microfilms, but I thought he knew what was in them as surely as if he himself had seen them spin up the glowing glass screen like time winding up. For Lila knew, and Lila would have told him.

Because I'd told Lila.

I'd told her the truth. I'd told her that no magic really existed, and what was really happening, and why it had happened this way. And then, free of the fear of magic, she had done what she'd always wanted to do--she'd left me and gone to Haliaia. There's no law against that. There isn't even a taboo, which is stronger than any law. Only it was almost unprecedented, because, somehow, no one divorces a President--a magician. No one who believes in magic.

And I was the one who'd swept the shadows of superstition from Lila's mind and let her see the truth.

I'd done that--I could reverse the process. I could make Lila a believer in magic again. In fact, I had to. For I'd told her too much, and that made her dangerous, if she talked enough, long enough, to enough people. Rumor spreads. If it became commonly known that I, Black President of the Eagle Clan, didn't believe in corporate magic,

where would I be?

Probably dead.

All right. She'd never loved me, though I'd thought she had. She'd married me against her will, partly because of her family, partly because she was afraid to refuse a Black President's offer. But she loved Haliaia.

When she saw her lover die--by magic--the powerful, unconscious forces in her mind, the enormous invisible pressure of society would force her back into the darkness of superstition from which I'd brought her. Against her will, she would succumb, since reason cannot fight against emotion when the stress is powerful enough. If I'd used magic against Lila herself, I think I would have failed. But Haliaia was her vulnerable point, and I struck at him, and now he was already following the compulsive ritual which would end in the Rite of Passage and his death.

Oh, yes--Lila would believe in magic again. And then I'd get her back....

A man came down the street slowly, lounging on the rail of the moving way. Haliaia shouted, "Ed! Ed!" and waved frantically. As his head turned I saw the red ring stamped in the brownness of his forehead--the mark of my sacred spear in the hallucination. The clan undertakers stamp that indelible ring at the same time they change the victim's clothing.

The man on the moving way twitched a little when he heard the call, but he did not turn. I saw Haliaia surge forward, as if he meant to run out and force an answer from the man. He almost ran--almost. I saw his foot reach out for the next step. But something stopped him. He hesitated, drew back, opened his mouth to call again, but he made

no sound at all.

I looked away down the length of the street. Far off on the Gulf I could see the fishing fleet, copter-guided, driving the shoals of food into the nets. A queer thought struck me. Long ago, in primitive groups, the totem animal had been taboo, or so my research in the microfilm libraries had told me. But today we eat our totems. Perhaps all life today is a ritual condition, not just the totem itself but all life....

I realized I was avoiding looking at Haliaia. I made myself look back. He wasn't there any longer, and the black dishes of food had disappeared.

There would be about a ten-day interval now before Haliaia died. I meant to be there to watch. In the meantime I enjoyed a vacation, the first I'd had in nearly five years. Partly I felt I needed it, and partly I wanted to keep out of everybody's way until Haliaia was irrevocably dead. I had an uneasy feeling that Black President Mumm was looking for me. There wasn't a thing he could do, but I would have been just as happy to avoid him entirely until the thing was over.

One of the things I did was revisit the microfilm library where I had first learned the truth about magic and the past. Never mind where it is. Never mind how I found out about it. I showed my pass at the door, went down to the lowest level of all, and found in the dark corner the same dusty door which nobody had passed since I found it last. I thought I must be the only man alive who had ever stumbled across it. It isn't strange--the library is a very hard one to get entry to at all, and these levels of the stacks are forbidden to all but a few of the very highest officials in the Corporations.

I filled my pockets with ancient rolls of film and went calmly up to a scanner booth and shut the door behind me. And for the next hour I took a heady plunge into the quaint, terrible old days of the twentieth

century.

Some of the films were books on social psychology, anthropology, medicine. Some of them were old newspapers of the 1980s. Unsteadily under the slanting, greenish glass of the screen, the print and the pictures swam as I turned the controls that unreeled them and brought them into focus. It was eerie, reading the columns of forgotten news that men first read during the terrible wars of the twentieth century. Everything about their way of life seems so incredible, now.

They had national boundaries then, instead of corporations. The wars between totalitarian states and monopolistic corporations hadn't yet been fought out to a synthesis which resulted in today's gigantic companies that kept society alive. Much of their way of life seems unbelievable now, but some of it makes very good sense.

Belief in magic, then, was something for the primitives of the world. I looked it up in the anthropology books. In a way, it all seems very plausible. You can see how magic regained control.

In the early days, you believed in magic only if you had no control over your environment. Naturally, you didn't need magic if you could control your life without it. But the uncivilized peoples, at the mercy of nature, had to use magic because it was their own refuge from despair. And along with them, groups in civilized society who still had to fight with the unpredictable also believed. Fishermen, for instance, in conflict with the sea, believed in luck and charms. Hunters, sportsmen, actors all believed. Everyone at the whim of nature or society clung to superstitions in a frantic effort to believe they could control by luck or magic what they could not control by their greatest skill.

So when society broke down, after the Great Wars, mankind quite

naturally reverted to magic. And the organized, vested interests in magic kept control when society climbed back up the steep slopes down which it had skidded at the end of the Wars. Some sciences were allowed to progress. Not all. Nothing that might weaken faith in magic is practiced by the Corporation today.

It's amazing how much you can believe if you're brought up in the conviction that magic really works. Even I had believed, in a sort of split-minded way, in a lot of things I actually knew weren't true. I had learned the rigamarole. I performed the rituals. People sickened or died when I leveled my spells at them. Sometimes people sickened whom I'd never heard of, and I accepted the magical responsibility, knowing I lied about those, wondering if I lied even to myself about others. But I acted as if it were all true, and after a while I really began believing I'd worked the magic I claimed, just as everyone else believed.

But always a part of my mind must have rebelled. So it was a wonderful feeling to learn the truth. I wasn't really mad, or blasphemous, to doubt my own powers. I could give up the long inward struggle, trying to force myself to believe impossible things. I felt a relief so tremendous it made me a little lightheaded, the first time I ran these microfilms under the greenish glass and read the things my mind had always known were true.

After that I was free. Or as free as society would allow. The tremendous power of public belief still restricted me externally, but in my own mind I could think as I chose. I could behave as I chose, so long as I stayed careful. I could send out a spell that would strike Jake Haliaia down in his tracks, and nobody could stop me, because the truth had set me free....

But it was no good to be free alone.

I looked at the columns of forgotten news on the screen before me, and wished that I had lived then instead of now, in a world and time that seemed far more real to me than my own. I had been born into a world of wrongness, a time that was out of joint. I was a skeptic, the one-eyed man in the country of the blind. It was as if I alone could see a great leaning crag far overhead, swaying, ready to topple and crush us all, while all around me the blind men made their futile magic and never knew the real danger.

I didn't know either, really. There was nothing as tangible as a toppling cliff. But I, the one-eyed man, had always seen a shadow, sensed an insecurity, felt a dim and hovering terror. I had never found out what it was. Not the Eagle--the totem was only a superstition. Magic? There was none. But somehow, somewhere, something existed that cast its shadow of fear, a monster I had been trying to identify all my life. And perhaps that was really why I first began to search the forbidden microfilms. Perhaps I had thought that in the past I could find the monster's genesis, and learn its name.

I never had. I had learned truth, and skepticism, and I had come to understand why corporate magic was the basis of my own culture. Back in the twentieth century, the troubles--stresses--dangers had grown until they merged into one great terror--a death-fear--which left no room in life for anything else. There had been real dangers, certainly. Society could have destroyed itself. And it nearly did. Then the death-fear grew too great, and reality could not be faced anymore. Men were afraid of men. Society, somehow, had to be protected against itself, and so magic became the safeguard. Or, rather, a belief in magic, indoctrinated early, self-perpetuating, until now society felt safer--under some unnamed monster's terrifying shadow.

What monster?

I didn't know. But I was alone, in the country of the blind, and I think that was why I had to open Lila's superstition-blinded eyes. So I wouldn't be alone anymore. And I'd done it, and I'd lost her.

And in the end I'd get her back--blind again. She'd come back to me, after Haliaia died and the great forces of ritual had driven her into blindness, no matter how much her reason might fight against it. She was already learning that, even though magic was a lie, I was very far from powerless.

She would come back blind. If that was the only way I could get her back--and it was--then let her eyes be sealed again.

I sat there, staring at the glowing screen that opened into time. I sat there for a long while, thinking about Lila.

On the fourteenth day I went to watch Haliaia die. I was just leaving my hotel room for his home when the bell rang and the face I had been expecting for two weeks flashed into sight on the visiphone screen. My hand, outstretched for the doorknob, began to shake. My heart pumped. I felt like a schoolboy caught in some act of guilt. My first impulse was to run. But then I pulled myself together and remembered who I was, and how well I was covered. I turned back to the screen and pushed the button that would bring me into focus for Mumm of Food Corporation.

He had a sharp young face, not too scrupulous, and that frightening brashness that comes from the confidence of youth, before it has ever known a major defeat. I remembered him dimly from our school days, he just entering the university as candidate for training when I was graduating. His eyes came into quick focus on mine as my face shaped on his screen.

"Hello," he said. "Mumm. I remember you from school, don't I, Cole?"

"Yes, I know you," I said. "How are you, Mumm?" And I touched three fingers to the corner of the screen in the same moment he extended his to the same spot, which is as close as you can come to a handshake on television.

"I heard you were in town," he said rather cagily.

"I'll bet," I murmured. "What can I do for you?"

He eyed me sharply and closely. "We're losing a good man today," he said.

I didn't pretend not to understand. "You can't expect me to be sorry," I said.

"I know." He paused. "Quite a coincidence," he said, his eyes searching my face. "Convenient for you," he added.

I let my voice sharpen. "Maybe the rules have changed since I left the university. Used to be out of line to ask what you're asking."

"I'm not asking any questions," he told me. "I don't need to. All I'm saying is it's very convenient for you, having Haliaia die so soon after your... falling-out. Coincidence, your turning up for the funeral. You a relative, Cole?"

I paused long enough to be sure my voice wouldn't shake. I was repressing a strong impulse to smash the screen in his face.

"Not precisely a relative," I told him when my voice was under control. "I wanted to watch him die. Does that surprise you?"

"I know it was you," he said flatly. "I'm not asking. I know. What I wonder is whether you had a valid client, or if you acted for yourself."

"I could bring you up before the university for that," I said.

"You won't."

"I may. I'll talk it over with Thornvald. If you have any doubts about my ethics, you'd better take it up with him, not me. Do you think I'd show up here if I knew I'd blasphemed?"

He grimaced very slightly. "You might. If you stole Haliaia's soul for the reason I think you did, you wouldn't stop at anything. I'll talk with Thornvald."

"Then do it, and stop annoying me." I drew a deep breath. "You talk like a skeptic when you break your vows this way. I'll have a word with your White President after the funeral, Mumm. You and I haven't got a thing to say to each other." I flipped the switch and cut him off in the middle of whatever he was about to say next. His mouthing face, gone silent, shrank to a bright pinpoint and vanished.

Shaking a little, I whirled around, snatched up my funeral robe and hurried out. It didn't matter a damn what Mumm believed, because I was covered. Even if he moved illegally against me, I wasn't afraid of his magic. But if he talked to Thornvald....

Suddenly I saw what a fool I'd been. I would have to get rid of Rabb. I couldn't see how I could possibly have overlooked something so obvious so long. With Rabb's mouth shut, the only possible evidence against me would be gone. I couldn't afford to take any further chances.

Thinking over what viruses I had on hand in the lab, I hurried into a taxi and gave Haliaia's address.

The house was crowded. For the first time since the spell against Haliaia was announced, his friends and relatives returned. Society

flowed back over the living dead man to celebrate his funeral and the receiving of his soul by the totem of his clan. Voices were singing the second funeral hymn as my taxi drew up. I pulled the funeral robe on over my street clothing and joined the crowds moving through the house. Nobody here was likely to know me, and I didn't care if they did.

I followed the mourners up the escalator to Haliaia's bedroom, where he lay on the black-draped bed. The Fish Totem had been set up where he could see it. His half-closed eyes blinked slowly, gazing at the stuffed fish on its gold board as if he saw the vision of eternity before him. Maybe he did. Belief can do strange things even to the intelligent mind.

Against the wall were his relatives in the clan, and his closest friends, kneeling on little pneumatic pads and singing the death song. I didn't see Lila, but two of Haliaia's wives were present. I hadn't realized he had gone through marriage and divorce that often. I wondered how Lila liked being third.

Around the bed, back and forth, hands folded over a little green plastic fish figure, walked a man I knew must be Haliaia's father, his closest living relative. He sang in a deep soft voice.

On the bed Haliaia lay wrapped in the white shroud with the Fish Totem. His half-shut eyes were dull. I thought he saw nothing but the stuffed figure above the bed. His mouth gaped and closed. His arms were pressed close to his sides. He lay like the totem of his clan, straight and rigid on the bed.

Suddenly his whole body twisted in a convulsive arc, and then wrenched itself back. Three times he did this, and lay motionless again.

The song rose solemnly.

A fourth time Haliaia twisted himself back and forth. He was imitating his totem. He lay still. But his feet moved a little, slowly, as if they moved through water....

The bad luck began two months later. There was nothing magical about it. Just one of these things--everybody has runs of bad luck.

I kept a very close watch on Mumm and on my own safety. And on my own White President, just in case Mumm proffered charges against me. Nothing happened there. Thornvald's behavior was perfectly normal. I tried to put myself in Mumm's place and see what he would do. I couldn't figure it. What could he do? He might not be able to resist sending out a stray virus or two, just in the hope of a hit. I watched myself very carefully for that. He might even hire a thug to shoot me or to arrange an accident. I watched for that, too, as much as any man can. You have to take your chances in this world, and you don't get something for nothing. I had got Haliaia's death and it was worth the risk.

Once I called Lila. She wouldn't talk to me. I let it slide. Time enough later to try again. In the meantime I got a girl with the theatrical name of Flamme to live with me, I didn't intend to marry again for a while, and I needed someone to keep my establishment operating. It has to be done on a big scale, and I need a wife for social purposes. Flamme was of the hetera class, which meant she could act as wife in everything except the spiritual link, which is part of the magical system. Like our ancestors, we have serial polygamy, so after a divorce I could marry again, but on the spiritual level the polygamy is cumulative. There can be no spiritual divorce. So in the magical world I was still married to Lila. And she wouldn't talk to me--yet.

Rabb, incidentally, had an accident about a week after Haliaia's

death, and unfortunately, in the hospital, he got an overdose of sedation and died. The clan gave him a very respectable funeral.

Otherwise nothing unusual happened, at first--except for one irrational, nonsensical thing that I'd never anticipated. Everything conscious, everything controllable and rational, I knew I could handle. But what began to go wrong was the ritual dream.

I told you how it works. Herbs are burnt, there's the shot of so-called holy drug, ritual prayer, hallucination. The average magician's belief in himself is reinforced by the hallucination. Even after I lost the belief I went on with the window-dressing ritual, because I felt that if I began to vary from the conventional routine even in small matters, I might get careless and vary too much, in ways that would be noticeable.

So I went on as usual. People came to me to get spells put on their enemies in other clans, and I got their signatures on the necessary contracts and publicized the magic in the communication channels. I had no trouble until another case of soul-stealing came up.

The man was a Communications executive and his enemy was in Entertainment, the Lion Totem. My man's skill was rated high enough so he had to sign up for only nine years of service on minimum subsistence. I got his signature, sent him away, and burned the herbs. I gave myself an injection and said the Eagle Totem prayer. The hallucination began.

I found the victim in my dream and was just about to stun him with the sacred spear when--I woke up.

I was back in my office, with the herbs smoking in their burner and my arm still tingling from the hypodermic spray. It was the first time since I'd been an acolyte this had ever happened. I sat there, wondering. Wondering and worrying.

It was idiotic, but what kept running through my head was the thought that unless I had the ritual hallucination, I couldn't visit the taboo microfilm library anymore. There was no logical connection at all. And yet I couldn't get the idea out of my mind. The more I thought about it the more worried I felt, without any reason at all.

At last I realized that the drug must have been weak, or the herbs--well, not the herbs, they're part of the window-dressing. All the same. I sent them down for chemical analysis, along with the drug. I sat waiting for the results. Once, I remember, I glanced back over my shoulder at the stuffed eagle on the wall. He gave me a glassy look. The report said the drug and the herbs were the same as usual.

Not that it mattered. I could start the soul-stealing telecast at any time, and the magic would work whether or not I had the hallucination, since the magic was in the mind of the victim, not in my mumbo jumbo. But I didn't like this. It was a symptom, and I needed to understand its meaning.

Finally I decided I'd gradually built up immunity to the drug, and what I needed was a stronger dose. Well, I was right, up to a point. When I doubled the dose I got further into the hallucination. But I still woke up before I'd completed the ritual dream. This time I woke with a sense of near panic, a feeling that something had gone very wrong indeed, and the knowledge that I had to do something about it fast.

What I did was dangerous, but I wasn't thinking clearly, and little waves of anxiety kept starting around my stomach and spreading out until--well, I tried again, with a still stronger dose, and I finished the hallucination. But I woke up with two doctors working on me, and Thornvald hovering behind them adjusting his silly totem symbols.

"Get the hell out of here, Karl," I said. "This is medical, not magical. I just got an overdose of the holy drug."

"Now, Lloyd," Thornvald said, trying to look impressive. "The medics are taking care of their business. Just let me take care of mine."

"Well, it isn't around here," I said, and fell back, gasping, my heart fluttering till I was afraid it would stop altogether. One of the doctors gave me a shot of something and told me to relax. Remembering Rabb, I was really scared as I drifted off in spite of myself into sleep. But I woke feeling better. Thornvald had gone, leaving word that while he hadn't finished his diagnosis, no magic seemed involved.

I still felt terrible, but I went back to my desk and finished the job, purely routine now, luckily. Then I went home, canceling my other appointments, and told Flamme to keep the house quiet.

The next day I still felt terrible. Flamme wanted me to stay home, but once a man gets sick it's assumed there's magic at work, and I couldn't afford to have people start wondering why a Black President should feel bad. So I started for the office, with a splitting headache and a slight temperature.

Only I didn't get there. As I stepped onto a moving way I felt dizzy and misjudged the distance when I reached for the back of a lounge chair. I fell flat. If I hadn't tried to catch myself it would have been all right. But I threw out my arms and landed at just the proper angle to break my left thumb.

That did it. The medics x-rayed and tested, and finally put my left hand in a cast that left the fingers free, but was a damned nuisance. It would take more than a month to heal, too. In a quiet rage I went home, got into bed and yelled at Flamme to bring me liquor. Finally I collapsed into happy forgetfulness, drunk as hell. So drunk I even forgot to take alcohol-neutralizing pills before I went to sleep.

So I woke up with a cold as well as a hangover.

The cold went into influenza almost immediately.

I remember medics working on me, and Flamme hovering in the background, and Thornvald, Thornvald, Thornvald eternally coming to bother me. Thornvald with his silly gadgets supposed to diagnose magic. Thornvald saying, "I'll do my best, Lloyd. You know that. I'll cure the spell if I possibly can...."

And then suddenly silence, and waking with the fever gone and nothing to remind me of my sickness but the cast on my hand, and weakness. Silence.

I rang the bell, and no one came. The room seemed very dim. The windows had been partially opened. I lay there wondering.

I wondered if I were strong enough to get up. Apparently I'd have to. Angrily I threw back the covers and found I was pretty strong after all. I was shaping a few choice phrases in my mind about firing half a dozen servants and maybe Flamme too, when I swung my feet out of bed and saw the blue tunic stretched across my knees. I didn't have any blue nightwear. Blue is a sacred color. I looked down at my chest....

Everything came to a dead stop.

I was wearing the sacred blue tunic with the Eagle Totem, wings outspread, embroidered across the front. My hand, without any direction from my mind, flew up to touch my forehead. It was as if I could feel the red circle traced there by somebody's ritual spear in a hallucinatory dream. Somebody's--whose? Whose?

"Flamme!" I shouted.

No answer anywhere.

I jumped out of bed. I didn't feel weak at all. I ran out of the room and down the silently gliding escalator, feeling the blue tunic catch between my knees. I kept calling for Flamme and the servants. All I heard were echoes. I jerked open the front door and there on the threshold were the black dishes of food. A black wreath swung against the door panel.

I ripped it down. I saw people passing in the street and I shouted to them. No one looked at me. Not a head turned.

I realized what I was wearing, and very quickly stepped back and shut the door. There was a mirror in the front entry. I stepped over and looked at myself. The red ring on my forehead was fluorescent in the dim light. I scrubbed at it with both hands. I whirled and ran through the house to the nearest lavatory, and with soap and nail brush I rubbed at the dye until my skin was almost as red as the ring. But nothing would take it off. I knew nothing would even cover it. That fluorescence shines through the heaviest makeup, and no known substance will remove it.

At least I could take off the tunic. Awkwardly, because of the cast on my hand, I pulled it over my head and left it in a heap on the tiled floor. Naked, I searched the house.

It was empty. Everything personal was gone. No clothing anywhere. My special cigarettes were gone. My books. My writing paper with my name on it was gone, and blank black-bordered sheets had replaced it. Every closet, every drawer, every shelf was empty.

Walking around naked, feeling like a ghost, I tried the visiphone. It was dead. The tv entertainment channels were dead too. The house resounded with silence and the feel of death.

I had to get out. So I had to have clothing. I tried a sheet, toga-fashion. It looked idiotic. But I wasn't going to wear the Eagle Totem tunic again. Not in public. Not even in private.

There was no money in the house.

Wrapped in the sheet, I went out. Nobody looked at me. The red ring on my forehead told everyone all they needed to know. No taxis would stop for me, so I had to take the moving way. At the first clothing store I stepped off and walked in, took what I wanted off the racks and shelves. No one interfered. I dressed in a booth and went back to the moving way, feeling a little better, but madder than I'd ever been in my life.

I went directly to my office. The secretaries ignored me, even when I spoke to them. I didn't waste time, I pushed past them and opened the door of my office.

Another man sat behind my desk. Above him on the wall, the Eagle Totem looked down with its glassy stare.

I said, "Who the hell are you?"

"The Black President." He was just a little defensive.

"Get out of my office," I said.

He looked at my clothes, a bit shocked at the sight of them.

"You shouldn't be wearing--" he started to say. There was a small explosion of rage and confusion in my head. I lunged across the desk and grabbed for his shirt, meaning to haul him out of his chair and--and do something, I don't know what, something violent.

But he rolled his chair backward just far enough. I sprawled across

the desk, out of balance, clutching at air. And he didn't say a word. He simply watched me, with some pity on his face and some horror. I was dead, to his mind, and I ought to stay dead.

The violence went out of me. I knew what a fool I looked, sprawling there on the desk when by rights it should be I on the other side of it, perfectly safe, with people coming in afraid of me, and trying not to show it.

I straightened up and pulled down my cuffs, settled my illegal clothing around me. Quietly I said, "A Black President can be appointed only if his predecessor dies. You know that. What does it make you?"

"You're not alive," he said, and added, "holy one."

"Stop that!" I said impatiently. After a moment I added, "I suppose the publicity went out while I was unconscious. Who stole my soul? You?"

He nodded.

"Who ordered it?"

"This isn't getting us anywhere, holy one," he said. "You'd better see the White President."

I breathed out slowly. So that was it. When either President dies, the survivor appoints his successor. When either President breaks a taboo, the other one administers justice. So Thornvald had taken matters into his own hands, without a word to me, behind my back, while I was sick and unconscious....

"I'll see him," I said, and turned away toward the door to the bridge. With my hand on the knob, I looked back. It was a strange feeling. Nothing had changed in my office except the man behind the desk.

Everything was just as I'd always had it, all the things in a person's office that he gets used to, that become a part of him finally. And they were still a part of me. But they were also linked now, to the man in my chair. It was like a webwork with two centers, and sometimes one set of strands seemed real, sometimes the other.

"I'll be back," I said, and went out across the bridge.

Again, as always, it was like walking the eagle's way above the two-mile sprawl of Communications Center. At the other end of it was Thornvald, standing by a window looking down. All the anger boiled up in me at the sight of him, and perhaps there was fear with the anger now.

I slammed the door behind me as hard as I could.

He jumped and whirled.

"Does that sound like a ghost, you bastard?" I asked him.

He opened his mouth, raised his eyebrows, and let out his breath with a resigned sound. I told him what I thought of him, loud and fast. It took a couple of minutes. But when I ran out of breath his expression hadn't changed.

I walked over to his desk, yanked out the chair behind it and sat down. Thornvald watched me.

"Now, I said. "Let's get a few things straight. There's somebody in my office who thinks he's the Black President. What's the idea? How did you ever make such a mistake, Karl? When I was flat on my back and unconscious, too!"

"It's no mistake, holy one," Thornvald said.

"Don't call me that! You know my name."

His round face looked at me sadly.

"I'm sorry to see this attitude in you, holy one. It shows a lack of faith that may be dangerous to your soul. I'm afraid--"

"Never mind my soul. I'll be around for a long time yet. I want to know why you double-crossed me when I couldn't defend myself."

"There was no double cross, holy one. I take my orders from the Eagle. Surely you don't think I'd do such a thing on my own responsibility? You broke the taboo of the clan, and the Eagle has taken you."

"The Eagle has not taken me!" I yelled at him. "And what taboo did I break? Name one. Just one!"

"I felt uneasy from the first about it," Thornvald said obliquely. "About Haliaia, I mean. But even when Mumm made a formal accusation against you, I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't think any man who knew the dangers as well as you do could risk his soul for personal gain like that."

"I wouldn't. I didn't!" Thornvald just shook his head sadly again. "Why do you think I did?" I shouted at him, wanting to beat sense into him with my fists. He was so damned dogmatic about it. "Did you look up Rabb's papers? Did you find the least scrap of evidence that I'd break a sacred taboo? Prove it, Thornvald! Prove it!"

He pointed to my forehead where I could feel the red circle as if it were a tangible burn on the skin.

"There's proof," he said. "Would the Eagle move against you if you weren't guilty?"

I almost choked on all the things I wanted to say. But I had to keep my head.

"That's a result, not a cause, Karl," I said in a strangled voice. "The Eagle didn't move against me. You did. You accepted a lot of malicious gossip from an enemy of mine, and then you sneaked up behind me and stabbed me when I was too sick to defend myself. You--"

"I accepted the evidence of my own eyes," Thornvald said tartly. "I suspected the Eagle was punishing you when you had all the trouble with the sacred drug. And of course when you broke your thumb, and then the Eagle sent the influenza germs--"

"The Eagle didn't send anything! That was probably Mumm, if it was--"

"Mumm?" He looked shocked. "A President knowingly casting a spell on another President? I'm surprised at you, holy one. He wouldn't dare. His totem would strike him down in his tracks. No, it was the Eagle, holy one. And I knew when the Eagle allowed these curses to fall on you one after another what the truth must be. I knew it even before the Eagle came to me in the night and gave me my orders."

"So you appointed a new Black President, and his first job was my death sentence," I said.

Thornvald nodded.

"Karl, have you ever made a mistake?" I asked.

"Often, holy one. But never about sacred things, because I act only when the Eagle commands me. A President has to renounce his

own desires. You should have remembered that."

"Have you ever mistaken the Eagle's commands?"

I think that shook him a little. Such a thought had obviously never hit him before. But he shook his head decisively.

"Never in my life. Never! How could I?"

"You could," I said grimly. "You just have." I stood up and leaned over to slam the desk hard with my fist. "I'll tell you exactly what happened, Karl. You wanted to get rid of me. You had a personal motive. Not me, but you. You know the dogma, Karl. We accuse others of the sin we most want to commit ourselves. Ask yourself, isn't it true? No, don't answer me, Karl--just ask yourself in your own mind. And listen! You heard jealous gossip against me. You watched your chance. When I had a run of bad luck you took it for magic because you wanted to believe that way. You injected a drug or inhaled hemp or hypnotized yourself, and you had a dream. Just a plain dream, not a sacred vision. But you took this dream for a fact because you wanted to. For your selfish reasons you misused your holy power against me! And you won't get away with it, Thornvald! The Eagle won't let you!"

His fat face was pale as he gaped at me, horrified.

"It isn't true! It can't be true!"

"It can and is, and I'll prove it!" I hit the desk again, feeling fine. I had him this time. "Magic can't touch me!" I said. "Magic based on sift can't hurt a man when the Eagle protects him. The Eagle came to me last night, and gave me his sacred promise. I won't die, Thornvald. You may as well call off your soul-stealing spell right now, because it isn't going to work. I won't die."

The color flooded back into his fat cheeks. He was shaking.

"You have to die. Once a spell's under way, there's no process for undoing it." His voice was shaky.

I shrugged. He was probably right. I'd never heard of a reversal, once the spell's been publicized.

"It's your funeral," I said. "Either way, you lose. Because I'm not going to die."

He shut his eyes and gripped his hands together.

"The Eagle told me," he said, his voice a little desperate. "I know! I've committed no sin. You'll see for yourself, holy one, when you've finished your journey to the spirit world."

"You'll get there before I do," I told him.

He put his hand over his eyes and recited a short formula against totemic sin. Without looking at me, his hand still up, he said: "Go home, holy one. Leave me. You've disturbed me very much, but I know you're unhappy. I must allow for that. Go back and put on your sacred tunic and prepare for the funeral ceremony. You'll see more clearly when you have flown with the Eagle."

I laughed at him and went out.

Halfway home, on the moving way, reaction hit me. Dizziness and exhaustion made my head go around and around. The next thing I knew I was waking in my own bed, draped in black, in the darkened and empty house. I had on that damned blue tunic with the Eagle on the chest and the clothes I had taken were gone.

I lay there for quite a while, thinking. Finally I got up and made my

way unsteadily down the escalator to the front door. Black dishes of food on the doorstep, black wreath on the door. Nobody looking at me as I stood on the step in the sunshine.

Before I took in the food I did something I hadn't thought of the last time I stood here. I checked the date of my proposed funeral on the wreath. Anyone who cared to read it could see it written in large figures among the decorations. I was scheduled to die in ten days.

Technically I wasn't a spirit yet. I was moving toward the spirit world in a sort of social limbo, separated from society, partaking more and more of the sacredness of my totem. For ten more days nobody would speak to me or hear me if I spoke. There wasn't much I could do--until the funeral.

But then, when the guests arrived and the ceremonies began, and the corpse refused to lie down and die....

How would Thornvald handle it? What would he do? In his shoes, I'd make very sure the corpse died on schedule by adding a little something to his food. I wondered about Thornvald. Somehow it didn't seem in character, but I had better take no more chances than I could help. The incubation period of germs is too chancy, if you've got to hit a certain date right on the nose. A poison administered later on, toward the critical day, would be the obvious thing. I thought it was fairly safe to go on eating the dead man's dinner they set on my doorstep for a few days longer, if I had to. Right now I had no choice. I was still weak.

Later on, feeling much better, I went out again, helped myself to another suit of clothes, rode the moving way to a theater and relaxed, dozing, in one of the best cushioned seats until the performance was over. It was all right, except that all the seats for ten rows around me emptied the moment I settled in. The circle on my forehead shone in

the dark, and even the actors on the screen seemed almost aware of me. I felt very self-conscious.

On the way home I stopped in a restaurant. The waiters wouldn't come near me. I had to find a cafeteria to get food. Everywhere I moved in a little eddy of shocked surprise, because while people were not technically aware of me at all, they couldn't help reacting to the blasphemous behavior of a dead man who wouldn't wear the sacred tunic or restrict himself to his house of mourning and his sacred food. It was a very discouraging day. I warmed myself with thoughts of the funeral, and the repercussions throughout the clan when something unheard-of happened.

I slept that night like the--no, put it that I slept very well. And woke feeling stronger and nearer to normal. As usual, I found myself back in the blue tunic and with the street clothes gone again. It was a little alarming to think of those silent, unseen undertakers who moved so confidently through the house when I was unconscious. I had never before wondered just how they operated, but it seemed likely they used some kind of soporific gas to make sure I stayed asleep while they undressed and dressed me. A vague twinge of alarm in my mind dissipated as I considered that they were almost certainly not corruptible to the point of poisoning me while I slept. Even if Thornvald wasn't afraid of the Eagle, he'd hardly dare lay himself open to blackmail.... And what was to prevent his coming in while I slept and doing the job himself? Nothing. Nothing at all, except his own superstitions. Everything would depend on that--on how much the magicians believed in their own magic.

I got up and shrugged off the problem. What I could guard against, I would. For the rest, that was on the wings of the Eagle. I might as well enjoy my remaining nine days.

They were a very long nine days. Did you ever think how little there is

a man can do alone? I've read that Robinson Crusoe didn't have a personality until Friday arrived on the island. Well, I felt that I was losing my personality. I wasn't the Black President anymore, my name itself was taboo, and I wasn't even alive, according to society's viewpoint. I was a spirit, though not a very cooperative one--not as cooperative as Haliaia had been, certainly.

A man can't do much alone. He thinks too much. And he worries. And when he worries, fear comes....

At first, I thought of Flamme. It took me a while to find her. tv information wouldn't help, because the operator saw my face on the screen, and the red circle on my forehead, and cut me off. I tried a robot directory, but that cut me off too; apparently even the electronic calculators had been informed that my serial number was no longer the property of a living man. Finally I gave a false serial number and got Flamme's new address.

She had gone back to her old job, modeling.

... There's no use thinking about that. I found her, all right. She walked right past me, obviously not hearing a word I said to her. I followed her into a corner, grabbed her by the shoulder. She twisted partly away because I had only one good hand, and couldn't hold her.

"I'm alive!" I said. "Wait, Flamme. See? I'm alive. It's all been a mistake. After the funeral, everyone will know it. Flamme, I--"

Her eyes rolled back in her head and she slid out from under my hand to the floor. She's a good solid girl, and she fell with such a thump I knew the faint was genuine. Nobody paid any attention to me as they tried to revive her, but someone must have called for Thornvald, because presently he arrived with his mumbo-jumbo paraphernalia.

"Contagion, eh?" he said, and shook his head solemnly at me. His eyes were uneasy, but he was determined to go through with the routine to the bitter end, and neither of us said a word about our little set-to in his office.

He said to me in a reproving, official voice, "You shouldn't do this, holy one. I can cast the devil out of this poor girl, I think, but only the Eagle can cast the evil spirit out of you. Go home, put on the sacred robe. Stop eating the food of the living. Why fight against the power of the Eagle?"

"Don't be a fool, Thornvald," I said distinctly. "I'm not going to die." There was a subdued gasp from those who heard, trying to pretend they didn't hear. But I saw no point in following it up. I turned and went out, and a broad path opened up to let me go.

That night, at home, I lay on a downstairs couch to think, and when I got drowsy I realized I hated the idea of the black-draped bed in my room. I decided I would not sleep in it again. I couldn't begin too soon, I realized, to resist the pressure of custom in every way open to me. I dozed off on the couch.

Sometime in the night I dimly remember turning uncomfortably on the hard upholstery. Very faintly, I remember getting up and walking in the dark through the familiar rooms. Riding the escalator was like flying in the night. When I woke I was in my own bed, stretched out on my back, very much like a corpse under the black draperies.

And of course I was again wearing the blue tunic, which meant the undertakers had been about their work in the darkness. Had they led me upstairs? Or had they needed to?

The days went by very slowly. The wait seemed much longer than nine days. You can't do much alone. The worst was not having

anyone to talk to. I even went back to my office again, knowing Thornvald at least would have to recognize me, but this time they saw me coming and he wasn't there.

Once I had a talk with a child, not old enough yet to understand I didn't exist. We had a very interesting conversation, though somewhat one-sided, until his mother came and dragged him away. He didn't want to go. He told her he'd been talking to a nice man.

"No, son," she said, hurrying him, while he looked back over his shoulder. "That wasn't a man. That was a spirit. You must never talk to spirits."

"Oh. It looked like a man."

"No, it was a spirit."

"Oh," he said, believing her.

She probably took him to Thornvald to get him decontaminated.

There was nothing in the house to read. I went out and helped myself to books and magazines, but the next morning they would be gone. I brought in food, but the undertakers removed that too, as soon as I fell asleep. I slept in other beds in the house, but always I woke in my own.

Pretty soon I found I was spending most of my time in bed, wearing the sacred blue tunic because it was a lot more convenient than anything I had to go out for, and dozing the days and night away, waking like a nocturnal animal at intervals and prowling around the house, and then dozing again. I had gone back to eating the dead man's food they brought me. There were so many ways Thornvald could get at me if he wanted, it didn't seem worthwhile to put myself to the trouble of worrying about food.

I had to outwait society. That was all I could do.

One day I glanced in a mirror and saw how haggard and unshaven my face was, with the red circle burning brilliantly on the forehead. I was scared.

"They're getting at you, Lloyd," I said to myself in a voice that echoed hollowly through the house. "Pull yourself together, Lloyd." And I put both hands up on the sides of the mirror and looked myself in the eye. My own were the only human eyes I had met in what seemed an infinitely long time. I touched three fingers to the three fingers on my image in the glass, in the visiphone handshake which is as close as two people can get, with distance between them. I was too far away from my own kind to touch hands even with myself, even with my own image in the glass. There was only the cold feel of the mirror against my fingers.

I shook myself. This was dangerous. I squeezed my hands together, needing the pain of my bandaged thumb to remind me I wasn't yet a spirit. Then I went upstairs and shaved for the first time in days. I took a shower and threw the blue tunic down the laundry chute. Wrapped in a sheet, I went back downstairs.

I opened the door and looked out. The street was empty. Society had almost visibly shrunk away from me, the whole fabric detaching itself from the one fragment which was myself. Soon society would return. I had to be ready for them. My only defense was knowledge. I knew that magic had no reality. Objective, logical reasoning power protected me from the mindless emotions of this world of mine. But reason can be attacked by obsession.

Obsession--a persistent idea which I knew was irrational, but which I couldn't get rid of. I knew what the word meant, all right. And its next-

door neighbor, compulsion, which is the second step. An irresistible impulse to perform an act without the will of the performer. Magic works because of things like these operating in the minds and bodies of believers. It had worked on Jake Haliaia. I remembered him twisting like a fish on his funeral bed writhing like the Fish Totem he thought had entered him.

Obsession, like belief in magic.

Compulsion, like imitating the Fish Totem.

Like dying.

But Haliaia had cooperated with his society in accepting his death by magic. I wasn't going to cooperate. They could isolate me, yes. The mark on my forehead labeled me as a man without a soul, a man moving to the land of the Eagle Totem and the dead. But when they came back to perform the funeral rites, they wouldn't find a willing believer.

I thought what I would do, when the moment came. It would be best, probably, to go along with them, up to a point. Less effective if they found me wandering around the house than if they saw the potential corpse laid out conventionally--until Thornvald spoke the funeral pronouncement.

That would be the moment.

I rehearsed in my mind the familiar anathema every Black President has to learn, the one by which the most terrible curse of the Totem is called down on the most terrible sinner. Thornvald was nearer his last moments than he realized. Or perhaps he did realize. I hoped so. I like to think of him, worrying and wondering.

It was up to me to depose a White President who made too great an

error, just as it had been up to Thornvald to move against me. I could appoint his successor, just as he had tried to appoint mine. I turned over possibilities in my mind, promising young fellows who might do. I felt stimulated and happy--almost happy.

I had a little trouble remembering the anathema. It would have been convenient to have my books at hand to look the wording up. But it didn't matter. Any impressive words would do. It was the effect on the listener that mattered, not anything magic inherent in the phrasing. I felt tired, but relaxed and at peace, having decided all this. I knew what to do. I pictured the faces of the people when I sat up on the funeral bed and hurled the anathema in the face of the funeral orator....

I had been standing there for a long time in the doorway, looking out. Now for the first time a man came into sight along the moving way. I thought I knew him. As he came nearer I was sure. I couldn't recall his name, but he was a member of a club I belonged to. I pushed the door wider and leaned out, calling to him.

At first I thought he didn't hear. Then I realized the truth. For a moment, odd as it seems, I'd forgotten.

Terror and rage and immense loneliness flooded through me as I stood there. Dressed or not dressed, I thought, I'll make him listen. I'll run after him and make him listen....

I thought I was running down the steps and along the way after him, and it was like running into the wrong end of a telescope, with the distant vision getting no larger no matter how fast I ran. Then I saw I hadn't moved. My foot was poised on the edge of the step and I hadn't moved at all.

I looked down at my motionless foot, and something swam clearer

and clearer into my consciousness. Nearer than my foot. Nearer, and just as much a part of me. I couldn't identify it for a while. But at last I knew what it was. And that was strange--very strange. What I saw was the Eagle Totem on my breast. I saw it as clear as the texture of the sheet, every stitch vivid.

But I wasn't wearing the Eagle Totem tunic at all. I was wearing a plain bed sheet....

I was absolutely alone.

I lay in bed and tried to think. It was hard to think, because of the sense of blueness around me, and the feeling of weightlessness, of flight, of air rushing strongly past my face. I must have just wakened from a dream.

I thought: Wait. Outwait them. They'll--

The Eagle Totem.

They'll find out the magic doesn't work on a man who doesn't believe. And I don't--

The Eagle.

And I don't believe in it. Even though it was hammered into me since infancy, since I was younger than the child I talked to when I was more alive than I am now--

The Eagle.

Stop it. It's obsession. Here in the half-dark, in the lonely funeral house, with the fabric of society ripped completely away, there aren't any anchors anymore. There's nothing except--

The Eagle.

But not so isolated anymore, not quite so isolated, because here in the blue, moving like flight, there is... stop it!

From the thought comes the act. From the obsession comes the compulsion. But that wouldn't happen. I couldn't quite control my thoughts, but at least, somehow, somehow, I knew my own body would not betray me. I could control my own body. If I couldn't, I was no longer myself. I was controlled by--no, not magic. Not the totem. But the terrible force of the society of which I was born a part.

And yet, here, moving through the blue....

I've got to stop. I've got to think. I've got to get out of this bed.

I've got to move!

It's easy. One hand. Lift it a little.

Lift it!

The Eagle, the Eagle, the Eagle.

There was a sound of singing. Robed figures moved back and forth in the room. I had a sense the house was crowded.

Move. Move your hand, your arm. If you can move, you can sit up, speak the anathema, break the spell.

Around the wall people knelt, singing. At the foot of the bed--and I could not take my eyes from it--stood the Eagle Totem.

Someone was walking around the bed, chanting. I knew the voice. Lila.

She had come back. She was a believer again. She believed in magic, as she had in the days before I told her too much of the truth, and now, as I had known would happen when I stole Haliaia's soul, the terrible force of society's power had snuffed out the small flame of reason I had lighted in her mind. I had killed her lover by magic. She believed that now. And she believed in all the rest of the ritual too--the spiritual marriage which can never be dissolved, in spite of temporal divorce. So she was here, my closest kin, to chant the death song at the Rite of Passage.

She moved like a puppet, without will, the light of truth in her mind gone out forever.

I couldn't speak. But I had to move. I'd got Lila back now, but I knew, at last, that I did not want her back on these terms, without her soul. I tried to tell her to go. I tried to tell her that there was no magic here or anywhere, there was only suggestibility and fear, smothering reality and truth.

I could not speak or move.

I had to move. To save myself and to save Lila. Not from death; that did not matter. Men have always died. But to live in darkness--to stumble mindlessly through an imitation world of false idols....

I had to move. Then I could break the spell. Then I could pronounce the anathema and these fools would believe my magic was the strongest. I could live again, and this time I would tell the truth, though I died for it. I would light the flame of reason and knowledge in Lila's mind again, and spread that flame in other minds until, God willing, it might sweep around the whole world and burn away the false idols whose shadows kept the world in darkness.

But first I had to move.

Why couldn't I move? I didn't believe.... I knew the truth....

Yet waves of power beat through me, from the puppet woman walking around the bed, from the death chanters along the wall, from everyone in the crowded house... from everyone in the world. They believed.

I didn't believe, but they believed.

No, I didn't believe. Unless part of me did, my deep, unconscious, very ancient memories, solid as granite now, first laid down before I could even speak or walk. But there was no Eagle Totem... there were no totems... no magic. I knew that. Yet I couldn't move, for when I tried, a black and paralyzing horror made me weak and faint, as though I faced the Eagle, as though I believed in the Eagle.

Lila was a puppet that moved to and fro. The funeral chanters wailed and swayed. The robed figures moved faceless through the house. I could see the walls, transparent as glass, with every figure under my roof clearly in sight, upstairs and down. I could see beyond the house, all through the city, where all the thousands of men and women faced toward me and thrust me into darkness with the power of their belief. And beyond the city and the clan, the other cities and clans... millions of men and women blending into a great living organism mightier and more terrible than any god.

This is the monster. Society is the monster. Society that took the small wrong turning which led us all to the here and the now. Fear drives us all. Fear makes us blind to truth and opens our inward vision to the falsehood in which alone we could find safety.

I was no better than the rest. No, I was worse, for knowing the truth, I let fear destroy me. Fear of losing Lila, fear of what society would do if I spoke what I knew. What I knew? There is no Eagle, no magic, but

there is terror and a juggernaut of monstrous power. Before that monster I lay paralyzed with the fear that centuries had nourished.

Nothing else is real. Everything else has vanished. Only the monster remains. Reality itself is corrupted until only falsehood is real now. And like the juggernaut, our society drives headlong into the abyss, and like the juggernaut it crushed Lila and me as it has already crushed truth.

And so....

I am the Eagle.

Am I? Is it too late? No--Lila, we aren't puppets! We can fight... I'll fight for you. I'll save you... save myself. The monster isn't real. The truth can destroy it. If I can only speak the truth--if I can move!

The monster sweeps forward, hovers over me. The Rite of Passage wails across the room, the city, the world. My Rite of Passage, and mankind's. A light is going out, somewhere.

Lila....

I can move.

Now I can move.

My arms are moving, beating against my sides, faster and faster through the empty blueness.... The beating of great wings.

"The Prisoner in the Skull"

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He felt cold and weak, strangely, intolerably, inhumanly weak with a weakness of the blood and bone, of the mind and soul. He saw his surroundings dimly, but he saw--other things--with a swimming clarity that had no meaning to him. He saw causes and effects as tangible before him as he had once seen trees and grass. But remote, indifferent, part of another world.

Somehow there was a door before him. He reached vaguely-- It was almost wholly a reflex gesture that moved his finger toward the doorbell.

The chimes played three soft notes.

John Fowler was staring at a toggle switch. He felt baffled. The thing had suddenly spat at him and died. Ten minutes ago he had thrown the main switch, unscrewed the wall plate and made hopeful gestures with a screwdriver, but the only result was a growing suspicion that this switch would never work again. Like the house itself, it was architecturally extreme, and the wires were sealed in so that the whole unit had to be replaced if it went bad.

Minor irritations bothered Fowler unreasonably today. He wanted the house in perfect running order for the guest he was expecting. He had been chasing Veronica Wood for a long time, and he had an idea this particular argument might tip the balance in the right direction.

He made a note to keep a supply of spare toggle switches handy. The chimes were still echoing softly as Fowler went into the hall and opened the front door, preparing a smile. But it wasn't Veronica Wood on the doorstep. It was a blank man.

That was Fowler's curious impression, and it was to recur to him often in the year to come. Now he stood staring at the strange

emptiness of the face that returned his stare without really seeming to see him. The man's features were so typical they might have been a matrix, without the variations that combine to make up the recognizable individual. But Fowler thought that even if he had known those features, it would be hard to recognize a man behind such utter emptiness. You can't recognize a man who isn't there. And there was nothing here. Some erasure, some expunging, had wiped out all trace of character and personality. Empty.

And empty of strength, too--for the visitant lurched forward and fell into Fowler's arms.

Fowler caught him automatically, rather horrified at the lightness of the body he found himself supporting. "Hey," he said, and, realizing the inadequacy of that remark, added a few pertinent questions. But there was no answer. Syncope had taken over.

Fowler grimaced and looked hopefully up and down the road. He saw nobody. So he lifted his guest across the threshold and carried him easily to a couch. Fine, he thought. Veronica due any minute, and this paperweight barging in.

Brandy seemed to help. It brought no color to the pale cheeks, but it pried the eyelids open to show a blank, wondering look.

"o.k. now?" Fowler asked, wanting to add, "Then go home."

There was only the questioning stare. Fowler stood up with some vague intention of calling a doctor, and then remembered that the televisior instrument hadn't yet been delivered. For this was a day when artificial shortages had begun to supplant real ones, when raw material was plentiful but consumers were wary, and were, therefore, put on a starvation diet to build their appetites and loosen their purse strings. The televisior would be delivered when the company thought

Fowler had waited long enough.

Lucidly he was versatile. As long as the electricity was on he could jury-rig anything else he needed, including facilities for first aid. He gave his patient the routine treatment, with satisfying results. Until, that is, the brandy suddenly hit certain nerve centers and emesis resulted.

Fowler lugged his guest back from the bathroom and left him on the bed in the room with the broken light switch to recuperate. Convalescence was rapid. Soon the man sat up, but all he did was look at Fowler hopefully. Questions brought no answers.

Ten minutes later the blank man was still sitting there, looking blank.

The door chimes sang again. Fowler, assured that his guest wasn't in articulo mortis, began to feel irritation. Why the devil did the guy have to barge in now, at this particular crucial moment? In fact, where had he come from? It was a mile to the nearest highway, along a dirt road, and there was no dust on the man's shoes. Moreover, there was something indefinably disturbing about the--lack in his appearance. There was no other word that fitted so neatly. Village idiots are popularly termed "wanting," and, while there was no question of idiocy here, the man did seem--

What?

For no reason at all Fowler shivered. The door chimes reminded him of Veronica. He said: "Wait here. You'll be all right. Just wait. I'll be back--"

There was a question in the soulless eyes.

Fowler looked around. "There're some books on the shelf. Or fix this--" He pointed to the wall switch. "If you want anything, call me." On

that note of haphazard solicitude he went out, carefully closing the door. After all, he wasn't his brother's keeper. And he hadn't spent days getting the new house in shape to have his demonstration go haywire because of an unforeseen interruption.

Veronica was waiting on the threshold. "Hello," Fowler said. "Have any trouble finding the place? Come in."

"It sticks up like a sore thumb," she informed him. "Hello. So this is the dream house, is it?"

"Right. After I figure out the right method of dream-analysis, it'll be perfect." He took her coat, led her into the livingroom, which was shaped like a fat comma and walled with triple-seal glass, and decided not to kiss her. Veronica seemed withdrawn. That was regrettable. He suggested a drink.

"Perhaps I'd better have one," she said, "before I look the joint over."

Fowler began battling with a functional bar. It should have poured and mixed drinks at the spin of a dial, but instead there came a tinkle of breaking glass. Fowler finally gave up and went back to the old-fashioned method. "Highball? Well, theoretically, this is a perfect machine for living. But the architect wasn't as perfect as his theoretical ideas. Methods of construction have to catch up with ideas, you know."

"This room's nice," Veronica acknowledged, relaxing on airfoam. With a glass in her hand, she seemed more cheerful. "Almost everything's curved, isn't it? And I like the windows."

"It's the little things that go wrong. If a fuse blows, a whole unit goes out. The windows--I insisted on those."

"Not much of a view."

"Unimproved. Building restrictions, you know. I wanted to build on the top of a hill a few miles away, but the township laws wouldn't allow it. This house is unorthodox. Not very, but enough. I might as well have tried to put up a Wright house in Williamsburg. This place is functional and convenient--"

"Except when you want a drink?"

"Trivia," Fowler said airily. "A house is complicated. You expect a few things to go wrong at first. I'll fix 'em as they come up. I'm a jerk of all trades. Want to look around?"

"Why not?" Veronica said. It wasn't quite the enthusiastic reaction for which Fowler had hoped, but he made the best of it. He showed her the house. It was larger than it had seemed from the outside. There was nothing super about it, but it was--theoretically--a functional unit, breaking away completely from the hidebound traditions that had made attics, cellars, and conventional bathrooms and kitchens as vestigially unfunctional as the vermiform appendix. "Anyway," Fowler said, "statistics show most accidents happen in kitchens and bathrooms. They can't happen here."

"What's this?" Veronica asked, opening a door. Fowler grimaced.

"The guest room," he said. "That was the single mistake. I'll use it for storage or something. The room hasn't any windows."

"The light doesn't work--"

"Oh, I forgot. I turned off the main switch. Be right back." He hurried to the closet that held the house controls, flipped the switch, and returned. Veronica was looking into a room that was pleasantly furnished as a bedroom, and, with tinted, concealed fluorescents,

seemed light and airy despite the lack of windows.

"I called you," she said. "Didn't you hear me?"

Fowler smiled and touched a wall. "Sound-absorbent. The whole house is that way. The architect did a good job, but this room--"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing--unless you're inside and the door should get stuck. I've a touch of claustrophobia."

"You should face these fears," said Veronica, who had read it somewhere. Fowler repressed a slight irritation. There were times when he had felt an impulse to slap Veronica across the chops, but her gorgeousness entirely outweighed any weakness she might have in other directions.

"Air conditioning, too," he said, touching another switch. "Fresh as spring breeze. Which reminds me. Does your drink want freshening?"

"Yes," Veronica said, and they turned to the comma-shaped room. It was appreciably darker. The girl went to the window and stared through the immense, wall-long pane.

"Storm coming up," she said. "The car radio said it'll be a bad one. I'd better go, Johnny."

"Must you? You just got here."

"I have a date. Anyway, I've got to work early tomorrow." She was a Korys model, much in demand.

Fowler turned from the recalcitrant bar and reached for her hand.

"I wanted to ask you to marry me," he said.

There was silence, while leaden grayness pressed down beyond the window, and yellow hills rippled under the gusts of unfelt wind. Veronica met his gaze steadily.

"I know you did. I mean--I've been expecting you to."

"Well?"

She moved her shoulders uneasily.

"Not now."

"But-- Veronica. Why not? We've known each other for a couple of years--"

"The truth is--I'm not sure about you, Johnny. Sometimes I think I love you. But sometimes I'm not sure I even like you."

He frowned. "I don't get that."

"Well, I can't explain it. It's just that I think you could be either a very nice guy or a very nasty one. And I'd like to be quite certain first. Now I've got to go. It's starting to rain."

On that note she went out, leaving Fowler with a sour taste in his mouth. He mixed himself another drink and wandered over to his drawing board, where some sketches were sheafed up on a disorderly fashion. Nuts. He was making good dough at commercial art, he'd even got himself a rather special house--

One of the drawings caught his eye. It was a background detail, intended for incorporation later in a larger picture. It showed a

gargoyle, drawn with painstaking care, and a certain quality of vivid precision that was very faintly unpleasant. Veronica--

Fowler suddenly remembered his guest and hastily set down his drink. He had avoided that room during the tour of inspection, managing to put the man completely out of his mind. That was too bad. He could have asked Veronica to send out a doctor from the village.

But the guest didn't seem to need a doctor. He was working on the wall-switch, at some danger, Fowler thought, of electrocuting himself. "Look out!" Fowler said sharply. "It's hot!" But the man merely gave him a mild, blank stare and passed his hand downward before the panel. The light went out.

It came on again, to show the man finishing an upward gesture.

No toggle switch stub protruded from the slot in the center of the plate. Fowler blinked. "What--?" he said. Gesture. Blackout. Another gesture. "What did you do to that?" Fowler asked, but there was no audible reply.

Fowler drove south through the storm, muttering about ham electricians. Beside him the guest sat, smiling vacantly. The one thing Fowler wanted was to get the guy off his hands. A doctor, or a cop, in the village, would solve that particular problem. Or, rather, that would have been the solution, if a minor landslide hadn't covered the road at a crucial point.

With difficulty Fowler turned the car around and drove back home, cursing gently.

The blank man sat obediently at his side.

They were marooned for three days. Luckily the larder was well-

stocked, and the power lines, which ran underground, weren't cut by the storm. The water-purifying unit turned the muddy stream from outside into crystalline nectar, the film set wasn't much bothered by atmospheric disturbances, and Fowler had plenty of assignments to keep him busy at his drawing board. But he did no drawing. He was exploring a fascinating, though unbelievable, development.

The light switch his guest had rigged was unique. Fowler discovered that when he took the gadget apart. The sealed plastic had been broken open, and a couple of wires had been rewound in an odd fashion. The wiring didn't make much sense to Fowler. There was no photo-electric hookup that would have explained it. But the fact remained that he could turn on the lights in that room by moving his hand upward in front of the switch plate, and reverse the process with a downward gesture.

He made tests. It seemed as though an invisible fourteen-inch beam extended directly outward from the switch. At any rate, gestures, no matter how emphatic, made beyond that fourteen-inch distance had no effect on the lights at all.

Curious, he asked his guest to rig up another switch in the same fashion. Presently all the switches in the house were converted, but Fowler was no wiser. He could duplicate the hookup, but he didn't understand the principle. He felt a little frightened.

Locked in the house for three days, he had time to wonder and worry. He fed his guest--who had forgotten the use of knife and fork, if he had ever known it--and he tried to make the man talk. Not too successfully.

Once the man said: "Forgotten... forgotten--"

"You haven't forgotten how to be an electrician. Where did you come

from?"

The blank face turned to him. "Where?" A pause. And then--

"When? Time... time--"

Once he picked up a newspaper and pointed questioningly at the date line--the year.

"That's right," Fowler said, his stomach crawling. "What year did you think it was?"

"Wrong--" the man said. "Forgotten--"

Fowler stared. On impulse, he got up to search his guest's pockets. But there were no pockets. The suit was ordinary, though slightly strange in cut, but it had no pockets.

"What's your name?"

No answer.

"Where did you come from? Another--time?"

Still no answer.

Fowler thought of robots. He thought of a soulless world of the future peopled by automatons. But he knew neither was the right answer. The man sitting before him was horribly normal. And empty, somehow--drained. Normal?

The norm? That non-existent, figurative symbol which would be monstrous if it actually appeared? The closer an individual approaches the norm, the more colorless he is. Just as a contracting line becomes a point, which has few, if any, distinguishing

characteristics. One point is exactly like another point. As though humans, in some unpleasant age to come, had been reduced to the lowest common denominator.

The norm.

"All right," Fowler said. "I'll call you Norman, till you remember your right name. But you can't be a... point. You're no moron. You've got a talent for electricity, anyhow."

Norman had other talents, too, as Fowler was to discover soon. He grew tired of looking through the window at the gray, pouring rain, pounding down over a drenched and dreary landscape, and when he tried to close the built-in Venetian shutters, of course they failed to work. "May that architect be forced to live in one of his own houses," Fowler said, and, noticing Norman made explanatory gestures toward the window.

Norman smiled blankly.

"The view," Fowler said. "I don't like to see all that rain. The shutters won't work. See if you can fix them. The view--"

He explained patiently, and presently Norman went out to the unit nominally called a kitchen, though it was far more efficient. Fowler shrugged and sat down at his drawing board. He looked up, some while later, in time to see Norman finish up with a few swabs of cloth. Apparently he had been painting the window with water.

Fowler snorted. "I didn't ask you to wash it," he remarked.

"It was the shutters--"

Norman laid a nearly empty basin on a table and smiled expectantly. Fowler suffered a slight reorientation. "Time-traveling, ha," he said.

"You probably crashed out of some booby hatch. The sooner I can get you back there the better I'll like it. If it'd only stop raining.... I wonder if you could rig up the televisor? No, I forgot. We don't even have one yet. And I suspect you couldn't do it. That light switch business was a fluke."

He looked out at the rain and thought of Veronica. Then she was there before him, dark and slender, smiling a little. "Wha--" Fowler said throatily.

He blinked. Hallucinations? He looked again, and she was still there, three-dimensionally, outside the window-- Norman smiled and nodded. He pointed to the apparition. "Do you see it too?" Fowler asked madly. "It can't be. She's outside. She'll get wet. What in the name of--"

But it was only Fowler who got wet, dashing out bareheaded in the drenching rain. There was no one outside. He looked through the window and saw the familiar room, and Norman.

He came back. "Did you paint her on the window?" he asked. "But you've never seen Veronica. Besides, she's moving--three-dimensional. Oh, it can't be. My mind's snapping. I need peace and quiet. A green thought in a green shade." He focused on a green thought, and Veronica faded out slowly. A cool, quiet, woodland glade was visible through the window. After a while Fowler figured it out. His window made thoughts visible.

It wasn't as simple as that, naturally. He had to experiment and brood for quite some time. Norman was no help. But the fact finally emerged that whenever Fowler looked at the window and visualized something with strong emphasis, an image of that thought appeared--a protective screen, so to speak.

It was like throwing a stone into calm water. The ripples moved out for a while, and then slowly quieted. The woodland scene wasn't static; there was a breeze there, and the leaves glittered and the branches swayed. Clouds moved softly across a blue sky. It was a scene Fowler finally recognized, a Vermont woodland he had seen years ago. Yet when did sequoias ever grow in Vermont?

A composite, then. And the original impetus of his thoughts set the scene into action along normal lines. When he visualized the forest, he had known that there would be a wind, and that the branches would move. So they moved. But slower and slower--though it took a long while for the action to run down.

He tried again. This time Chicago's lake shore. Cars rushed along the drive. He tried to make them run backwards, but got a sharp headache and a sense of watching a jerky film. Possibly he could reverse the normal course of events, but his mind wasn't geared to handle film running backward. Then he thought hard and watched a seascape appear through the glass. This time he waited to see how long it would take the image to vanish. The action stopped in an hour, but the picture did not fade completely for another hour.

Only then did the possibilities strike him with an impact as violent as lightning.

Considerable poetry has been written about what happens when love rejected turns to hate. Psychology could explain the cause as well as the effect--the mechanism of displacement. Energy has to go somewhere, and if one channel is blocked, another will be found. Not that Veronica had definitely rejected Fowler, and certainly his emotion for the girl had not suffered an alchemic transformation, unless one wishes to delve into the abysses of psychology in which love is merely the other face of hatred--but on those levels of semantic confusion you can easily prove anything.

Call it reorientation. Fowler had never quite let himself believe that Veronica wouldn't fall into his arms. His ego was damaged. Consequently it had to find some other justification, some assurance--and it was unfortunate for Norman that the displacement had to occur when he was available as scapegoat. For the moment Fowler began to see the commercial possibilities of the magic windowpane, Norman was doomed.

Not at once; in the beginning, Fowler would have been shocked and horrified had he seen the end result of his plan. He was no villain, for there are no villains. There is a check-and-balance system, as inevitable in nature and mind as in politics, and the balance was beginning to tip when Fowler locked Norman in the windowless room for safekeeping and drove to New York to see a patent attorney. He was careful at first. He knew the formula for the telepathically-receptive window paint by now, but he merely arranged to patent the light-switch gadget that was operated by a gesture. Afterwards, he regretted his ignorance, for clever infringements appeared on the heels of his own device. He hadn't known enough about the matter to protect himself thoroughly in the patent.

By a miracle, he had kept the secret of the telepathic paint to himself. All this took time, naturally, and meanwhile Norman, urged on by his host, had made little repairs and improvements around the house. Some of them were impractical, but others were decidedly worth using--short-cuts, conveniences, clever methods of bridging difficulties that would be worth money in the open market. Norman's way of thinking seemed curiously alien. Given a problem, he could solve it, but he had no initiative on his own. He seemed satisfied to stay in the house--

Well, satisfied was scarcely the word. He was satisfied in the same sense that a jellyfish is satisfied to remain in its pool. If there were

quivers of volition, slight directional stirrings, they were very feeble indeed. There were times when Fowler, studying his guest, decided that Norman was in a psychotic state--catatonic stupor seemed the most appropriate label. The man's will was submerged, if, indeed, he had ever had any.

No one has ever detailed the probable reactions of the man who owned the goose who laid the golden eggs. He brooded over a mystery, and presently took empirical steps, afterwards regretted. Fowler had a more analytical mind, and suspected that Norman might be poised at a precarious state of balance, during which--and only during which--he laid golden eggs. Metal can be pliable until pressure is used, after which it may become work-hardened and inflexible. Fowler was afraid of applying too much pressure. But he was equally afraid of not finding out all he could about the goose's unusual oviparity.

So he studied Norman. It was like watching a shadow. Norman seemed to have none of the higher reflexes; his activities were little more than tropism. Ego-consciousness was present, certainly, but--where had he come from? What sort of place or time had it been? Or was Norman simply a freak, a lunatic, a mutation? All that seemed certain was that part of his brain didn't know its own function. Without conscious will or volition, it was useless. Fowler had to supply the volition; he had to give orders. Between orders, Norman simply sat, occasionally quivering slightly.

It was bewildering. It was fascinating.

Also, it might be a little dangerous. Fowler had no intention of letting his captive escape if he could help it, but vague recollections of peonage disturbed him sometimes. Probably this was illegal. Norman ought to be in an institution, under medical care. But then, Norman had such unusual talents!

Fowler, to salve his uneasiness, ceased to lock the door of the windowless room. By now he had discovered it was unnecessary, anyhow. Norman was like a subject in deep hypnosis. He would obey when told not to leave the room. Fowler, with a layman's knowledge of law, thought that probably gave him an out. He pictured himself in the dock blandly stating that Norman had never been a prisoner, had always been free to leave the house if he chose.

Actually, only hunger would rouse Norman to disobey Fowler's commands to stay in his room. He would have to be almost famished, even then, before he would go to the kitchen and eat whatever he found, without discrimination and apparently without taste.

Time went by. Fowler was reorienting, though he scarcely knew it yet, toward a whole new set of values. He let his illustrating dwindle away until he almost ceased to accept orders. This was after an abortive experiment with Norman in which he tried to work out on paper an equivalent of the telepathic pictures on glass. If he could simply sit and think his drawings onto bristol board--

That was, however, one of Norman's failures.

It wasn't easy to refrain from sharing this wonderful new secret with Veronica. Fowler found himself time and again shutting his lips over the information just in time. He didn't invite her out to the house any more; Norman was too often working at odd jobs around the premises. Beautiful visions of the future were building up elaborately in Fowler's mind--Veronica wrapped in mink and pearls, himself commanding financial empires all based on Norman's extraordinary talents and Norman's truly extraordinary willingness to obey.

That was because of his physical weakness, Fowler felt sure. It

seemed to take so much of Norman's energy simply to breathe and eat that nothing remained. And after the solution of a problem, a complete fatigue overcame him. He was useless for a day or two between jobs, recovering from the utter exhaustion that work seemed to induce. Fowler was quite willing to accept that. It made him even surer of his--guest. The worst thing that could happen, of course, would be Norman's recovery, his return to normal--

Money began to come in very satisfactorily, although Fowler wasn't really a good business man. In fact, he was a remarkably poor one. It didn't matter much. There was always more where the first had come from....

With some of the money Fowler started cautious inquiries about missing persons. He wanted to be sure no indignant relatives would turn up and demand an accounting of all this money. He questioned Norman futilely.

Norman simply could not talk. His mind was too empty for coherence. He could produce words, but he could not connect them. And this was a thing that seemed to give him his only real trouble. For he wanted desperately sometimes to speak. There was something he seemed frantic to tell Fowler, in the intervals when his strength was at its peak.

Fowler didn't want to know it. Usually when Norman reached this pitch he set him another exhausting problem. Fowler wondered for awhile just why he dreaded hearing the message. Presently he faced the answer.

Norman might be trying to explain how he could be cured.

Eventually, Fowler had to face an even more unwelcome truth. Norman did seem in spite of everything to be growing stronger.

He was working one day on a vibratory headset gimmick later to be known as a Hed-D-Acher, when suddenly he threw down his tools and faced Fowler over the table with a look that bordered on animation--for Norman.

"Sick--" he said painfully. "I... know... work!" It was an anathema. He made a defiant gesture and pushed the tools away.

Fowler, with a sinking sensation, frowned at the rebellious nonentity.

"All right, Norman," he said soothingly. "All right. You can rest when you finish this job. You must finish it first, though. You must finish this job, Norman. Do you understand that? You must finish--"

It was sheer accident, of course--or almost accident--that the job turned out to be much more complicated than Fowler had expected. Norman, obedient to the slow, repeated commands, worked very late and very hard.

The end of the job found him so completely exhausted he couldn't speak or move for three days.

As a matter of fact it was the Hed-D-Acher that turned out to be an important milestone in Fowler's progress. He couldn't recognize it at the time, but when he looked back, years later, he saw the occasion of his first serious mistake. His first, that is, unless you count the moment when he lifted Norman across his threshold at the very start of the thing.

Fowler had to go to Washington to defend himself in some question of patent infringement. A large firm had found out about the Hed-D-Acher and jumped in on the grounds of similar wiring--at least that was Fowler's impression. He was no technician. The main point was that the Hed-D-Acher couldn't be patented in its present form, and

Fowler's rivals were trying to squeeze through a similar--and stolen--Hed-D-Acher of their own.

Fowler phoned the Korys Agency. Long distance television was not on the market yet and he was not able to see Veronica's face, but he knew what expression must be visible on it when he told her what he wanted.

"But I'm going out on a job, John. I can't just drop everything and rush out to your house."

"Listen, Veronica, there may be a hundred thousand bucks in it. I... there's no one else I can trust." He didn't add his chief reason for trusting her--the fact that she wasn't over-bright.

In the end, she went. Dramatic situations appealed to her, and he dropped dark hints of corporation espionage and bloody doings on Capitol Hill. He told her where to find the key and she hung up, leaving Fowler to gnaw his nails intermittently and try to limit himself to one whiskey-soda every half hour. He was paged, it seemed to him, some years later. "Hello, Veronica?"

"Right. I'm at the house. The key was where you said. Now what?"

Fowler had had time to work out a plan. He put pencil and note pad on the jutting shelf before him and frowned slightly. This might be a risk, but--

But he intended to marry Veronica, so it was no great risk. And she wasn't smart enough to figure out the real answers.

He told her about the windowless room. "That's my house-boy's--Norman. He's slightly half-witted, but a good boy on mechanical stuff. Only he's a little deaf, and you've got to tell him a thing three times before he understands it."

"I think I'd better get out of here," Veronica remarked. "Next you'll be telling me he's a homicidal maniac."

Fowler laughed heartily. "There's a box in the kitchen--it's in that red cupboard with the blue handle. It's pretty heavy. But see if you can manage it. Take it in to Norman and tell him to make another Hed-D-Acher with a different wiring circuit."

"Are you drunk?"

Fowler repressed an impulse to bite the mouthpiece off the telephone. His nerves were crawling under his skin. "This isn't a gag, Veronica. I told you how important it is. A hundred thousand bucks isn't funny. Look, got a pencil? Write this down." He dictated some technical instructions he had gleaned by asking the right questions. "Tell that to Norman. He'll find all the materials and tools he needs in the box."

"If this is a gag--" Veronica said, and there was a pause. "Well, hang on."

Silence drew on. Fowler tried to hear what was happening so many miles away. He caught a few vague sounds, but they were meaningless. Then voices rose in loud debate.

"Veronica!" Fowler shouted. "Veronica!" There was no answer.

After that, voices again, but softer. And presently:

"Johnny," Veronica said, "if you ever pull a trick like that on me again--"

"What happened?"

"Hiding a gibbering idiot in your house--" She was breathing fast.

"He's... what did he do? What happened?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. Except when I opened the door your houseboy walked out and began running around the house like a... a bat. He was trying to talk--Johnny, he scared me!" She was plaintive.

"Where is he now?"

"Back in his room. I... I was afraid of him. But I was trying not to show it. I thought if I could get him back in and lock the door--I spoke to him, and he swung around at me so fast I guess I let out a yell. And then he kept trying to say something--"

"What?"

"How should I know? He's in his room, but I couldn't find a key to it. I'm not staying here a minute longer. I... here he comes!"

"Veronica! Tell him to go back to his room. Loud and--like you mean it!"

She obeyed. Fowler could hear her saying it. She said it several times.

"It doesn't work. He's going out--"

"Stop him!"

"I won't! I had enough trouble coaxing him back the first time--"

"Let me talk to him," Fowler said suddenly. "He'll obey me. Hold the phone to his ear. Get him to listen to me." He raised his voice to a shout. "Norman! Come here! Listen to me!" Outside the booth

people were turning to stare, but he ignored them.

He heard a faint mumble and recognized it. "Norman," he said, more quietly but with equal firmness. "Do exactly what I tell you to do. Don't leave the house. Don't leave the house. Don't leave the house. Do you understand?"

Mumble. Then words: "Can't get out... can't--"

"Don't leave the house. Build another Hed-D-Acher. Do it now. Get the equipment you need and build it in the living room, on the table where the telephone is. Do it now."

A pause, and then Veronica said shakily: "He's gone back to his room. Johnny, I... he's coming back! With that box of stuff--"

"Let me talk to him again. Get yourself a drink: A couple of 'em." He needed Veronica as his interpreter, and the best way to keep her there would be with the aid of Dutch courage.

"Well--here he is."

Norman mumbled.

Fowler referred to his notes. He gave firm, incisive, detailed directions. He told Norman exactly what he wanted. He repeated his orders several times.

And it ended with Norman building a Hed-D-Acher, with a different type of circuit, while Veronica watched, made measurements as Fowler commanded, and relayed the information across the wire. By the time she got slightly high, matters were progressing more smoothly. There was the danger that she might make inaccurate measurements, but Fowler insisted on check and double-check of each detail.

Occasionally he spoke to Norman. Each time the man's voice was weaker. The dangerous surge of initiative was passing as energy drained out of Norman while his swift fingers flew.

In the end, Fowler had his information, and Norman, completely exhausted, was ordered back to his room. According to Veronica, he went there obediently and fell flat on the floor. "I'll buy you a mink coat," Fowler said. "See you later."

"But--"

"I've got to hurry. Tell you all about it when I see you."

He got the patent, by the skin of his teeth. There was instant litigation, which was why he didn't clean up on the gadget immediately. He was willing to wait. The goose still laid golden eggs....

But he was fully aware of the danger now. He had to keep Norman busy. For unless the man's strength remained at a minimum, initiative would return. And there would be nothing to stop Norman from walking out of the house, or--

Or even worse. For Fowler could, after all, keep the doors locked. But he knew that locks wouldn't imprison Norman long once the man discovered how to pose a problem to himself. Once Norman thought: Problem how to escape--then his clever hands would construct a wall-melter or a matter-transmitter, and that would be the end for Fowler.

Norman had one specialized talent. To keep that operating efficiently--for Fowler's purpose--all Norman's other faculties had to be cut down to minimum operation speed.

The rosy light in the high-backed booth fell flatteringly upon Veronica's face. She twirled her martini glass on the table and said: "But John, I don't think I want to marry you." The martini glass shot pinpoints of soft light in his face as she turned it. She looked remarkably pretty, even for a Korys model. Fowler felt like strangling her.

"Why not?" he demanded.

She shrugged. She had been blowing hot and cold, so far as Fowler was concerned, ever since the day she had seen Norman. Fowler had been able to buy her back, at intervals, with gifts or moods that appealed to her, but the general drift had been toward estrangement. She wasn't intelligent, but she did have sensitivity of a sort, and it served its purpose. It was stopping her from marrying John Fowler.

"Maybe we're too much alike, Johnny," she said reflectively. "I don't know. I... how's that miserable house-boy of yours?"

"Is that still bothering you?" His voice was impatient. She had been showing too much concern over Norman. It had probably been a mistake to call her in at all, but what else could he have done? "I wish you'd forget about Norman. He's all right."

"Johnny, I honestly do think he ought to be under a doctor's care. He didn't look at all well that day. Are you sure--"

"Of course I'm sure! What do you take me for? As a matter of fact, he is under a doctor's care. Norman's just feeble-minded.

"I've told you that a dozen times, Veronica. I wish you'd take my word for it. He... he sees a doctor regularly. It was just having you there that upset him. Strangers throw him off his balance. He's fine now. Let's forget about Norman. We were talking about getting married,

remember?"

"You were. Not me. No, Johnny, I'm afraid it wouldn't work." She looked at him in the soft light, her face clouded with doubt and--was it suspicion? With a woman of Veronica's mentality, you never knew just where you stood. Fowler could reason her out of every objection she offered to him, but because reason meant so little to her, the solid substratum of her convictions remained unchanged.

"You'll marry me," he said, his voice confident.

"No." She gave him an uneasy look and then drew a deep breath and said: "You may as well know this now, Johnny--I've just about decided to marry somebody else."

"Who?" He wanted to shout the question, but he forced himself to be calm.

"No one you know. Ray Barnaby. I... I've pretty well made up my mind about it, John."

"I don't know the man," Fowler told her evenly, "but I'll make it my business to find out all I can."

"Now John, let's not quarrel. I--"

"You're going to marry me or nobody, Veronica." Fowler was astonished at the sudden violence of his own reaction. "Do you understand that?"

"Don't be silly, John. You don't own me."

"I'm not being silly! I'm just telling you."

"John, I'll do exactly as I please. Now, let's not quarrel about it."

Until now, until this moment of icy rage, he had never quite realized what an obsession Veronica had become. Fowler had got out of the habit of being thwarted. His absolute power over one individual and one unchanging situation was giving him a taste for tyranny. He sat looking at Veronica in the pink dimness of the booth, grinding his teeth together in an effort not to shout at her.

"If you go through with this, Veronica, I'll make it my business to see you regret it as long as you live," he told her in a harsh, low voice.

She pushed her half-emptied glass aside with sudden violence that matched his. "Don't get me started, John Fowler!" she said angrily. "I've got a temper, too! I've always known there was something I didn't like about you."

"There'll be a lot more you don't like if you--"

"That's enough, John!" She got up abruptly, clutching at her slipping handbag. Even in this soft light he could see the sudden hardening of her face, the lines of anger pinching downward along her nose and mouth. A perverse triumph filled him because at this moment she was ugly in her rage, but it did not swerve his determination.

"You're going to marry me," he told her harshly. "Sit down. You're going to marry me if I have to--" He paused.

"To what?" Her voice was goading. He shook his head. He couldn't finish the threat aloud.

Norman will help me, he was thinking in cold triumph. Norman will find a way.

He smiled thinly after her as she stalked in a fury out of the bar.

For a week Fowler heard no more from her. He made inquiries about the man Barnaby and was not surprised to learn that Veronica's intended--if she had really been serious about the fellow, after all--was a young broker of adequate income and average stupidity. A nonentity. Fowler told himself savagely that they were two of a kind and no doubt deserved each other. But his obsession still ruled him, and he was determined that no one but himself should marry Veronica.

Short of hypnosis, there seemed no immediate way to change her mind. But perhaps he could change Barnaby's. He believed he could, given enough time. Norman was at work on a rather ingenious little device involving the use of a trick lighting system. Fowler had been impressed, on consideration, by the effect of a rosy light in the bar on Veronica's appearance.

Another week passed, with no news about Veronica. Fowler told himself he could afford to remain aloof. He had the means to control her very nearly within his grasp. He would watch her, and wait his time in patience.

He was very busy, too, with other things. Two more devices were ready for patenting--the Magic Latch keyed to fingerprint patterns, and the Haircut Helmet that could be set for any sort of hair trimming and would probably wreak havoc among barbers. But litigation on the Hed-D-Acher was threatening to be expensive, and Fowler had learned already to live beyond his means. Far beyond. It seemed ridiculous to spend only what he took in each day, when such fortunes in royalties were just around the corner.

Twice he had to take Norman off the lighting device to perform small tasks in other directions. And Norman was in himself a problem.

The work exhausted him. It had to exhaust him. That was necessary.

An unpleasant necessity, of course, but there it was. Sometimes the exhaustion in Norman's eyes made one uncomfortable. Certainly Norman suffered. But because he was seldom able to show it plainly, Fowler could tell himself that perhaps he imagined the worst part of it. Casuistry, used to good purpose, helped him to ignore what he preferred not to see.

By the end of the second week, Fowler decided not to wait on Veronica any longer. He bought a dazzling solitaire diamond whose cost faintly alarmed even himself, and a wedding band that was a full circle of emerald-cut diamonds to complement it. With ten thousand dollars worth of jewelry in his pocket, he went into the city to pay her a call.

Barnaby answered the door.

Stupidly Fowler heard himself saying: "Miss Wood here?"

Barnaby, grinning, shook his head and started to answer. Fowler knew perfectly well what he was about to say. The fatuous grin would have told him even if some accurate sixth sense had not already made it clear. But he wouldn't let Barnaby say it. He thrust the startled bridegroom aside and shouldered angrily into the apartment, calling: "Veronica! Veronica, where are you?"

She came out of the kitchen in a ruffled apron, apprehension and defiance on her face.

"You can just get right out of here, John Fowler," she said firmly. Barnaby came up from behind him and began a blustering remonstrance, but she slipped past Fowler and linked her arm with Barnaby's, quieting him with a touch.

"We were married day before yesterday, John," she said.

Fowler was astonished to discover that the cliché about a red swimming maze of rage was perfectly true. The room and the bridal couple shimmered before him for an instant. He could hardly breathe in the suffocating fury that swam in his brain.

He took out the white velvet box, snapped it open and waved it under Veronica's nose. Liquid fire quivered in the myriad cut surfaces of the jewels and for an instant pure greed made Veronica's face as hard as the diamonds.

Barnaby said: "I think you'd better go, Fowler."

In silence, Fowler went.

The little light-device wouldn't do now. He would need something more powerful for his revenge. Norman put the completed gadget aside and began to work on something new. There would be a use for the thing later. Already plans were spinning themselves out in Fowler's mind.

They would be expensive plans. Fowler took council with himself and decided that the moment had come to put the magic window on the market.

Until now he had held this in reserve. Perhaps he had even been a little afraid of possible repercussions. He was artist enough to know that a whole new art-form might result from a practical telepathic projector. There were so many possibilities--

But the magic window failed.

Not wholly, of course. It was a miracle, and men always will buy miracles. But it wasn't the instant, overwhelming financial success Fowler had felt certain it would be. For one thing, perhaps this was

too much of a miracle. Inventions can't become popular until the culture is ready for them. Talking films were made in Paris by Melies around 1890, but perhaps because that was a double miracle, nobody took to the idea. As for a telepathic screen-- It was a specialized luxury item. And it wasn't as easy or as safe to enjoy as one might suppose. For one thing, few minds turned out to be disciplined enough to maintain a picture they deliberately set out to evoke. As a mass entertaining medium it suffered from the same faults as family motion pictures--other peoples'memories and dreams are notoriously boring unless one sees oneself in them.

Besides, this was too close to pure telepathy to be safe. Fowler had lived alone too long to remember the perils of exposing one's thoughts to a group. Whatever he wanted to project on his private window, he projected. But in the average family it wouldn't do. It simply wouldn't do.

Some Hollywood companies and some millionaires leased windows--Fowler refused to sell them outright. A film studio photographed a batch of projected ideations and cut them into a dream sequence for a modern Cinderella story. But trick photography had already done work so similar that it made no sensation whatever. Even Disney had done some of the stuff better. Until trained imaginative projective artists could be developed, the windows were simply not going to be a commercial success.

One ethnological group tried to use a window to project the memories of oldsters in an attempt to recapture everyday living customs of the recent past, but the results were blurred and inaccurate, full of anachronisms. They all had to be winnowed and checked so completely that little of value remained. The fact stood out that the ordinary mind is too undisciplined to be worth anything as a projector. Except as a toy, the window was useless.

It was useless commercially. But for Fowler it had one intrinsic usefulness more valuable than money--

One of the wedding presents Veronica and Barnaby received was a telepathic window. It came anonymously. Their suspicions should have been roused. Perhaps they were, but they kept the window. After all, in her modeling work Veronica had met many wealthy people, and Barnaby also had moneyed friends, any of whom might in a generous mood have taken a window-lease for them as a goodwill gesture. Also, possession of a magic window was a social distinction. They did not allow themselves to look the gift-horse too closely in the mouth. They kept the window.

They could not have known--though they might have guessed--that this was a rather special sort of window. Norman had been at work on it through long, exhausting hours, while Fowler stood over him with the goading repetitious commands that kept him at his labor.

Fowler was not too disappointed at the commercial failure of the thing. There were other ways of making money. So long as Norman remained his to command the natural laws of supply and demand did not really affect him. He had by now almost entirely ceased to think in terms of the conventional mores. Why should he? They no longer applied to him. His supply of money and resources was limitless. He never really had to suffer for a failure. It would always be Norman, not Fowler, who suffered.

There was unfortunately no immediate way in which he could check how well his magic window was working. To do that you would have to be an invisible third person in the honeymoon apartment. But Fowler, knowing Veronica as he did, could guess.

The window was based on the principle that if you give a child a jackknife he'll probably cut himself.

Fowler's first thought had been to create a window on which he could project his own thoughts, disguised as those of the bride or groom. But he had realized almost immediately that a far more dangerous tool lay ready-made in the minds of the two whose marriage he meant to undermine.

"It isn't as if they wouldn't break up anyhow, in a year or two," he told himself as he speculated on the possibilities of his magic window. He was not justifying his intent. He didn't need to, any more. He was simply considering possibilities. "They're both stupid, they're both selfish. They're not material you could make a good marriage of. This ought to be almost too easy--"

Every man, he reasoned, has a lawless devil in his head. What filters through the censor-band from the unconscious mind is controllable. But the lower levels of the brain are utterly without morals.

Norman produced a telepathic window that would at times project images from the unconscious mind.

It was remotely controlled, of course; most of the time it operated on the usual principles of the magic window. But whenever Fowler chose he could throw a switch that made the glass twenty miles away hypersensitive.

Before he threw it for the first time, he televised Veronica. It was evening. When the picture dawned in the television he could see the magic window set up in its elegant frame within range of the televisor, so that everyone who called might be aware of the Barnaby's distinction.

Luckily it was Veronica who answered, though Barnaby was visible in the background, turning toward the 'visor an interested glance that darkened when Fowler's face dawned upon the screen. Veronica's

politely expectant look turned sullen as she recognized the caller.

"Well?"

Fowler grinned. "Oh, nothing. Just wondered how you were getting along."

"Beautifully, thanks. Is that all?"

Fowler shrugged. "If that's the way you feel, yes."

"Good-by," Veronica said firmly, and flicked the switch. The screen before Fowler went blank. He grinned. All he had wanted to do was remind her of himself. He touched the stud that would activate that magic window he had just seen, and settled down to wait.

What would happen now he didn't know. Something would. He hoped the sight of him had reminded Veronica of the dazzling jewelry he had carried when they last met. He hoped that upon the window now would be dawning a covetous image of those diamonds, clear as dark water and quivering with fiery light. The sight should be enough to rouse resentment in Barnaby's mind, and when two people quarrel wholeheartedly, there are impulses toward mayhem in even the most civilized mind. It should shock the bride and groom to see on a window that reflected their innermost thoughts a picture of hatred and wishful violence. Would Veronica see herself being strangled in effigy in the big wall-frame? Would Barnaby see himself bleeding from the deep scratches his bride would be yearning to score across his face? Fowler sat back comfortably, luxuriating in speculation.

It might take a long time. It might take years. He was willing to wait.

It took even longer than Fowler had expected. Slowly the poison built up in the Barnaby household, very slowly. And in that time a different

sort of toxicity developed in Fowler's. He scarcely realized it. He was too close.

He never recognized the moment when his emotional balance shifted and he began actively to hate Norman.

The owner of the golden goose must have lived under considerable strain. Every day when he went out to look in the nest he must have felt a quaking wonder whether this time the egg would be white, and valuable only for omelets or hatching. Also, he must have had to stay very close to home, living daily with the nightmare of losing his treasure--

Norman was a prisoner--but a prisoner handcuffed to his jailer. Both men were chained. If Fowler left him alone for too long, Norman might recover. It was the inevitable menace that made travel impossible. Fowler could keep no servants; he lived alone with his prisoner. Occasionally he thought of Norman as a venomous snake whose poison fangs had to be removed each time they were renewed. He dared not cut out the poison sacs themselves, for there was no way to do that without killing the golden goose. The mixed metaphors were indicative of the state of Fowler's mind by then.

And he was almost as much a prisoner in the house as Norman was.

Constantly now he had to set Norman problems to solve simply as a safety measure, whether or not they had commercial value. For Norman was slowly regaining his strength. He was never completely coherent, but he could talk a little more, and he managed to put across quite definitely his tremendous urge to give Fowler certain obscure information.

Fowler knew, of course, what it probably was. The cure. And Norman seemed to have a strangely touching confidence that if he could only

frame his message intelligibly, Fowler would make arrangements for the mysterious cure.

Once Fowler might have been touched by the confidence. Not now. Because he was exploiting Norman so ruthlessly, he had to hate either Norman or himself. By a familiar process he was projecting his own fault upon his prisoner and punishing Norman for it. He no longer speculated upon Norman's mysterious origin or the source of his equally mysterious powers. There was obviously something in that clouded mind that gave forth flashes of a certain peculiar genius. Fowler accepted the fact and used it.

There was probably some set of rules that would govern what Norman could and could not do, but Fowler did not discover--until it was too late--what the rules were. Norman could produce inconceivably intricate successes, and then fail dismally at the simplest tasks.

Curiously, he turned out to be an almost infallible finder of lost articles, so long as they were lost in the confines of the house. Fowler discovered this by accident, and was gratified to learn that for some reason that kind of search was the most exhausting task he could set for his prisoner. When all else failed, and Norman still seemed too coherent or too strong for safekeeping, Fowler had only to remember that he had misplaced his wristwatch or a book or screwdriver, and to send Norman after it.

Then something very odd happened, and after that he stopped the practice, feeling bewildered and insecure. He had ordered Norman to find a lost folder of rather important papers. Norman had gone into his own room and closed the door. He was missing for a long time. Eventually Fowler's impatience built up enough to make him call off the search, and he shouted to Norman to come out.

There was no answer. When he had called a third time in vain, Fowler opened the door and looked in. The room was empty. There were no windows. The door was the only exit, and Fowler could have sworn Norman had not come out of it.

In a rising panic he ransacked the room, calling futilely. He went through the rest of the house in a fury of haste and growing terror. Norman was not in the kitchen or the living room or the cellar or anywhere in sight outside.

Fowler was on the verge of a nervous collapse when Norman's door opened and the missing man emerged, staggering a little, his face white and blank with exhaustion, and the folder of papers in his hand.

He slept for three days afterward. And Fowler never again used that method of keeping his prisoner in check.

After six uneventful months had passed Fowler put Norman to work on a supplementary device that might augment the Barnaby magic window. He was receiving reports from a bribed daily maid, and he took pains to hear all the gossip mutual friends were happy to pass on. The Barnaby marriage appeared to suffer from a higher than normal percentage of spats and disagreements, but so far it still held. The magic window was not enough.

Norman turned out a little gadget that produced supersonics guaranteed to evoke irritability and nervous tension. The maid smuggled it into the apartment. Thereafter, the reports Fowler received were more satisfactory, from his point of view.

All in all, it took three years.

And the thing that finally turned the trick was the lighting gadget which Fowler had conceived in that bar interlude when Veronica first told

him about Barnaby.

Norman worked on the fixtures for some time. They were subtle. The exact tinting involved a careful study of Veronica's skin tones, the colors of the apartment, the window placement. Norman had a scale model of the rooms where the Barnabys were working out their squabbles toward divorce. He took a long time to choose just what angles of lighting he would need to produce the worst possible result. And of course it all had to be done with considerable care because the existing light fixtures couldn't be changed noticeably.

With the help of the maid, the job was finally done. And thereafter, Veronica in her own home was—ugly.

The lights made her look haggard. They brought out every line of fatigue and ill-nature that lurked anywhere in her face. They made her sallow. They caused Barnaby increasingly to wonder why he had ever thought the girl attractive.

"It's your fault!" Veronica said hysterically. "It's all your fault and you know it!"

"How could it be my fault?" Fowler demanded in a smug voice, trying hard to iron out the smile that kept pulling up the corners of his mouth.

The television screen was between them like a window. Veronica leaned toward it, the cords in her neck standing out as she shouted at him. He had never seen that particular phenomenon before. Probably she had acquired much practice in angry shouting in the past three years. There were thin vertical creases between her brows that were new to him, too. He had seen her face to face only a few times in the years of her marriage. It had been safer and pleasanter to create her in the magic window when he felt the need

of seeing her.

This was a different face, almost a different woman. He wondered briefly if he was watching the effect of his own disenchanting lighting system, but a glimpse beyond her head of a crowded drugstore assured him that he was not. This was real, not illusory. This was a Veronica he and Norman had, in effect, created.

"You did it!" Veronica said accusingly. "I don't know how, but you did it."

Fowler glanced down at the morning paper he had just been reading, folded back to the gossip column that announced last night's spectacular public quarrel between a popular Korys model and her broker husband.

"What really happened?" Fowler asked mildly.

"None of your business," Veronica told him with fine illogic. "You ought to know! You were behind it--you know you were! You and that half-wit of yours, that Norman. You think I don't know? With all those fool inventions you two work out, I know perfectly well you must have done something--"

"Veronica, you're raving."

She was, of course. It was sheer hysteria, plus her normal conviction that no unpleasant thing that happened to her could possibly be her own fault. By pure accident she had hit upon the truth, but that was beside the point.

"Has he left you? Is that it?" Fowler demanded.

She gave him a look of hatred. But she nodded. "It's your fault and you've got to help me. I need money. I--"

"All right, all right! You're hysterical, but I'll help you. Where are you? I'll pick you up and we'll have a drink and talk things over. You're better off than you know, baby. He never was the man for you. You haven't got a thing to worry about. I'll be there in half an hour and we can pick up where we left off three years ago."

Part of what he implied was true enough, he reflected as he switched off the television screen. Curiously, he still meant to marry her. The changed face with its querulous lines and corded throat repelled him, but you don't argue with an obsession. He had worked three years toward this moment, and he still meant to marry Veronica Barnaby as he had originally meant to marry Veronica Wood. Afterward--well, things might be different.

One thing frightened him. She was not quite as stupid as he had gambled on that day years ago when he had been forced to call on her for help with Norman. She had seen too much, deduced too much--remembered much too much. She might be dangerous. He would have to find out just what she thought she knew about him and Norman.

It might be necessary to silence her, in one way or another.

Norman said with painful distinctness: "Must tell you... must--"

"No, Norman." Fowler spoke hastily. "We have a job to do. There isn't time now to discuss--"

"Can't work," Norman said. "No... must tell you---" He paused, lifted a shaking hand to his eyes, grimacing against his own palm with a look of terrible effort and entreaty. The strength that was mysteriously returning to him at intervals now had made him almost a human being again. The blankness of his face flooded sometimes with

almost recognizable individuality.

"Not yet, Norman!" Fowler heard the alarm in his own voice. "I need you. Later we'll work out whatever it is you're trying to say. Not now. I.. look, we've got to reverse that lighting system we made for Veronica. I want a set of lights that will flatter her. I need it in a hurry, Norman. You'll have to get to work on it right away."

Norman looked at him with hollow eyes. Fowler didn't like it. He would not meet the look. He focused on Norman's forehead as he repeated his instructions in a patient voice.

Behind that colorless forehead the being that was Norman must be hammering against its prison walls of bone, striving hard to escape. Fowler shook off the fanciful idea in distaste, repeated his orders once more and left the house in some haste. Veronica would be waiting.

But the look in Norman's eyes haunted him all the way into the city. Dark, hollow, desperate. The prisoner in the skull, shut into a claustrophobic cell out of which no sound could carry. He was getting dangerously strong, that prisoner. It would be a mercy in the long run if some task were set to exhaust him, throw him back into that catatonic state in which he no longer knew he was in prison.

Veronica was not there. He waited for an hour in the bar. Then he called her apartment, and got no answer. He tried his own house, and no one seemed to be there either. With unreasonably mounting uneasiness, he went home at last.

She met him at the door.

"Veronica! I waited for an hour! What's the idea?"

She only smiled at him. There was an almost frightening triumph in

the smile, but she did not speak a word.

Fowler pushed past her, fighting his own sinking sensation of alarm. He called for Norman almost automatically, as if his unconscious mind recognized before the conscious knew just what the worst danger might be. For Veronica might be stupid but he had perhaps forgotten how cunning the stupid sometimes are. Veronica could put two and two together very well. She could reason from cause to effect quite efficiently, when her own welfare was at stake.

She had reasoned extremely well today.

Norman lay on the bed in his windowless room, his face as blank as paper. Some effort of the mind and will had exhausted him out of all semblance to a rational being. Some new, some overwhelming task, set him by--Veronica? Not by Fowler. The job he had been working on an hour ago was no such killing job as this.

But would Norman obey anyone except Fowler? He had defied Veronica on that other occasion when she tried to give him orders. He had almost escaped before Fowler's commanding voice ordered him back. Wait, though--she had coaxed him. Fowler remembered now. She could not command, but she had coaxed the blank creature into obedience. So there was a way. And she knew it.

But what had the task been?

With long strides Fowler went back into the drop-shaped living room. Veronica stood in the doorway where he had left her. She was waiting.

"What did you do?" he demanded.

She smiled. She said nothing at all.

"What happened?" Fowler cried urgently. "Veronica, answer me! What did you do?"

"I talked to Norman," she said. "I... got him to do a little job for me. That was all. Good-by, John."

"Wait! You can't leave like that. I've got to know what happened. I--"

"You'll find out," Veronica said. She gave him that thin smile again and then the door closed behind her. He heard her heels click once or twice on the walk and she was gone. There was nothing he could do about it.

He didn't know what she had accomplished. That was the terrifying thing. She had talked to Norman-- And Norman had been in an almost coherent mood today. If she asked the right questions, she could have learned--almost anything. About the magic window and the supersonics and the lighting. About Norman himself. About--even about a weapon she could use against Fowler. Norman would make one if he were told to. He was an automaton. He could not reason; he could only comply.

Perhaps she had a weapon, then. But what? Fowler knew nothing at all of Veronica's mind. He had no idea what sort of revenge she might take if she had a field as limitless as Norman's talents offered her. Fowler had never been interested in Veronica's mind at all. He had no idea what sort of being crouched there behind her forehead as the prisoner crouched behind Norman's. He only knew that it would have a thin smile and that it hated him.

"You'll find out," Veronica had said. But it was several days before he did, and even then he could not be sure. So many things could have been accidental. Although he tried desperately he could not find Veronica anywhere in the city. But he kept thinking her eyes were on

him, that if he could turn quickly enough he would catch her staring.

"That's what makes voodoo magic work," he told himself savagely. "A man can scare himself to death, once he knows he's been threatened--"

Death, of course, had nothing to do with it. Clearly it was no part of her plan that her enemy should die--and escape her. She knew what Fowler would hate most--ridicule.

Perhaps the things that kept happening were accidents. The time he tripped over nothing and did a foolishly clownish fall for the amusement of a long line of people waiting before a ticket window. His ears burned whenever he remembered that. Or the time he had three embarrassing slips of the tongue in a row when he was trying to make a good impression on a congressman and his pompous wife in connection with a patent. Or the time in the Biltmore dining room when he dropped every dish or glass he touched, until the whole room was staring at him and the head-waiter was clearly of two minds about throwing him out.

It was like a perpetual time bomb. He never knew what would happen next, or when or where. And it was certainly sheer imagination that made him think he could hear Veronica's clear, high, ironic laughter whenever his own body betrayed him into one of these ridiculous series of slips.

He tried shaking the truth out of Norman.

"What did you do?" he demanded of the blank, speechless face. "What did she make you do? Is there something wrong with my synapses how? Did you rig up something that would throw me out of control whenever she wants me to? What did you do, Norman?"

But Norman could not tell him.

On the third day she televised the house. Fowler went limp with relief when he saw her features taking shape in the screen. But before he could speak she said sharply: "All right, John. I only have a minute to waste on you. I just wanted you to know I'm really going to start to work on you beginning next week. That's all, John. Good-by."

The screen would not make her face form again no matter how sharply he rapped on it, no matter how furiously he jabbed the buttons to call her back. After awhile he relaxed limply in his chair and sat staring blankly at the wall. And now he began to be afraid--

It had been a long time since Fowler faced a crisis in which he could not turn to Norman for help. And Norman was no use to him now. He could not or would not produce a device that Fowler could use as protection against the nameless threat. He could give him no inkling of what weapon he had put in Veronica's hand.

It might be a bluff. Fowler could not risk it. He had changed a great deal in three years, far more than he had realized until this crisis arose. There had been a time when his mind was flexible enough to assess dangers coolly and resourceful enough to produce alternative measures to meet them. But not any more. He had depended too long on Norman to solve all his problems for him. Now he was helpless. Unless--

He glanced again at that stunning alternative and then glanced mentally away, impatient, knowing it for an impossibility. He had thought of it often in the past week, but of course it couldn't be done. Of course--

He got up and went into the windowless room where Norman sat quietly, staring at nothing. He leaned against the door frame and

looked at Norman. There in that shuttered skull lay a secret more precious than any miracle Norman had yet produced. The brain, the mind, the source. The mysterious quirk that brought forth golden eggs.

"There's a part of your brain in use that normal brains don't have," Fowler said thoughtfully aloud. Norman did not stir. "Maybe you're a freak. Maybe you're a mutation. But there's something like a thermostat in your head. When it's activated, your mind's activated, too. You don't use the same brain-centers I do. You're an idling motor. When the supercharger cuts in something begins to work along lines of logic I don't understand. I see the result, but I don't know what the method is. If I could know that--"

He paused and stared piercingly at the bent head. "If I could only get that secret out of you, Norman! It's no good to you. But there isn't any limit to what I could do with it if I had your secret and my own brain."

If Norman heard he made no motion to show it. But some impulse suddenly goaded Fowler to action. "I'll do it!" he declared. "I'll try it! What have I got to lose, anyhow? I'm a prisoner here as long as this goes on, and Norman's no good to me the way things stand. It's worth a try."

He shook the silent man by the shoulder. "Norman, wake up. Wake up, wake up, wake up. Norman, do you hear me? Wake up, Norman, we have work to do."

Slowly, out of infinite distances, the prisoner returned to his cell, crept forward in the bone cage of the skull and looked dully at Fowler out of deep sockets.

And Fowler was seized with a sudden, immense astonishment that until now he had never really considered this most obvious of

courses. Norman could do it. He was quite confident of that, suddenly. Norman could and must do it. This was the point toward which they had both been moving ever since Norman first rang the doorbell years ago. It had taken Veronica and a crisis to make the thing real. But now was the time--time and past time for the final miracle.

Fowler was going to become sufficient unto himself.

"You're going to get a nice long rest, Norman," he said kindly. "You're going to help me learn to... to think the way you think. Do you understand, Norman? Do you know what it is that makes your brain work the way it does? I want you to help my brain think that way, too. Afterward, you can rest, Norman. A nice, long rest. I won't be needing you any more after that, Norman."

Norman worked for twenty-four hours without a break. Watching him, forcing down the rising excitement in his mind, Fowler thought the blank man too seemed overwrought at this last and perhaps greatest of all his tasks. He mumbled a good deal over the intricate wiring of the thing he was twisting together. It looked rather like a tesseract, an open, interlocking framework which Norman handled with great care. From time to time he looked up and seemed to want to talk, to protest. Fowler ordered him sternly back to his task.

When it was finished it looked a little like the sort of turban a sultan might wear. It even had a jewel set in the front, like a headlight, except that this jewel really was light. All the wires came together there, and out of nowhere the bluish radiance sprang, shimmering softly in its little nest of wiring just above the forehead. It made Fowler think of an eye gently opening and closing. A thoughtful eye that looked up at him from between Norman's hands.

At the last moment Norman hesitated. His face was gray with

exhaustion as he bent above Fowler, holding out the turban. Like Charlemagne, Fowler reached impatiently for the thing and set it on his own head. Norman bent reluctantly to adjust it.

There was a singing moment of anticipation--

The turban was feather-light on his head, but wherever it touched it made his scalp ache a bit, as if every hair had been pulled the wrong way. The aching grew. It wasn't only the hair that was going the wrong way, he realized suddenly--

It wasn't only his hair, but his mind--

It wasn't only--

Out of the wrenching blur that swallowed up the room he saw Norman's anxious face take shape, leaning close. He felt the crown of wire lifted from his head. Through a violent, blinding ache he watched Norman grimace with bewilderment.

"No," Norman said. "No... wrong... you... wrong--"

"I'm wrong?" Fowler shook his head a little and the pain subsided, but not the feeling of singing anticipation, nor the impatient disappointment at this delay. Any moment now might bring some interruption, might even bring some new, unguessable threat from Veronica that could ruin everything.

"What's wrong?" he asked, schooling himself to patience. "Me? How am I wrong, Norman? Didn't anything happen?"

"No. Wrong... you--"

"Wait, now." Fowler had had to help work out problems like this before. "o.k., I'm wrong. How?" He glanced around the room. "Wrong

room?" he suggested at random. "Wrong chair? Wrong wiring? Do I have to co-operate somehow?" The last question seemed to strike a response. "Co-operate how? Do you need help with the wiring? Do I have to do something after the helmet's on?"

"Think!" Norman said violently.

"I have to think?"

"No. Wrong, wrong. Think wrong."

"I'm thinking wrong?"

Norman made a gesture of despair and turned away toward his room, carrying the wire turban with him.

Fowler, rubbing his forehead where the wires had pressed, wondered dizzily what had happened. Think wrong. It didn't make sense. He looked at himself in the television screen, which was a mirror when not in use, fingered the red line of the turban's pressure, and murmured, "Thinking, something to do with thinking. What?" Apparently the turban was designed to alter his patterns of thought, to open up some dazzling door through which he could perceive the new causalities that guided Norman's mind.

He thought that in some way it was probably connected with that moment when the helmet had seemed to wrench first his hair and then his skull and then his innermost thoughts in the wrong direction. But he couldn't work it out. He was too tired. All the emotional strain of the past days, the menace still hanging over him, the tremulous excitement of what lay in the immediate future--no, he couldn't be expected to reason things through very clearly just now. It was Norman's job. Norman would have to solve that problem for them both.

Norman did. He came out of his room in a few minutes, carrying the turban, twisted now into a higher, rounder shape, the gem of light glowing bluer than before. He approached Fowler with a firm step.

"You... thinking wrong," he said with great distinctness. "Too... too old. Can't change. Think wrong!"

He stared anxiously at Fowler and Fowler stared back, searching the deep-set eyes for some clue to the meaning hidden in the locked chambers of the skull behind them.

"Thinking wrong." Fowler echoed. "Too... old? I don't understand. Or-do I? You mean my mind isn't flexible enough any more?" He remembered the wrenching moment when every mental process had tried vainly to turn sidewise in his head. "But then it won't work at all!"

"Oh, yes," Norman said confidently. "But if I'm too old--" It wasn't age, really. Fowler was not old in years. But the grooves of his thinking had worn themselves deep in the past years since Norman came. He had fixed inflexibly in the paths of his own self-indulgence and now his mind could not accept the answer the wire turban offered. "I can't change," he told Norman despairingly. "If I'd only made you do this when you first came, before my mind set in its pattern--"

Norman held out the turban, reversed so that the blue light bathed his face in blinking radiance. "This--will work," he said confidently.

Belated caution made Fowler dodge back a little. "Now wait. I want to know more before we... how can it work? You can't make me any younger, and I don't want any random tampering with my brain. I--"

Norman was not listening. With a swift, sure gesture he pressed the wired wreath down on Fowler's head.

There was the wrenching of hair and scalp, skull and brain. This first--and then very swiftly the shadows moved upon the floor, the sun gleamed for one moment through the eastern windows and the world darkened outside. The darkness winked and was purple, was dull red, was daylight--

Fowler could not stir. He tried furiously to snatch the turban from his head, but no impulse from his brain made any connection with the motionless limbs. He still stood facing the mirror, the blue light still winked thoughtfully back at him, but everything moved so fast he had no time to comprehend light or dark for what they were, or the blurred motions reflected in the glass, or what was happening to him.

This was yesterday, and the week before, and the year before, but he did not clearly know it. You can't make me any younger. Very dimly he remembered having said that to Norman at some remote interval of time. His thoughts moved sluggishly somewhere at the very core of his brain, whose outer layers were being peeled off one by one, hour by hour, day by day. But Norman could make him younger. Norman was making him younger. Norman was whisking him back and back toward the moment when his brain would regain flexibility enough for the magical turban to open that door to genius.

Those blurs in the mirror were people moving at normal time-speed--himself, Norman, Veronica going forward in time as he slipped backward through it, neither perceiving the other. But twice he saw Norman moving through the room at a speed that matched his own, walking slowly and looking for something. He saw him search behind a chair-cushion and pull out a creased folder, legal size--the folder he had last sent Norman to find, on that day when he vanished from his closed room!

Norman, then, had traveled in time before. Norman's powers must be more far-reaching, more dazzling, than he had ever guessed. As his

own powers would be, when his mind cleared again and this blinding flicker stopped.

Night and day went by like the flapping of a black wing. That was the way Wells had put it. That was the way it looked. A hypnotic flapping. It left him dazed and dull--

Norman, holding the folder, lifted his head and for one instant looked Fowler in the face in the glass. Then he turned and went away through time to another meeting in another interval that would lead backward again to this meeting, and on and on around a closing spiral which no mind could fully comprehend.

It didn't matter. Only one thing really mattered. Fowler stood there shocked for an instant into almost total wakefulness, staring at his own face in the mirror, remembering Norman's face.

For one timeless moment, while night and day flapped around him, he stood helpless, motionless, staring appalled at his reflection in the gray that was the blending of time--and he knew who Norman was.

Then mercifully the hypnosis took over again and he knew nothing at all.

There are centers in the brain never meant for man's use today. Not until the race has evolved the strength to handle them. A man of today might learn the secret that would unlock those centers, and if he were a fool he might even turn the key that would let the door swing open.

But after that he would do nothing at all of his own volition.

For modern man is still too weak to handle the terrible energy that must pour forth to activate those centers. The grossly overloaded physical and mental connections could hold for only a fraction of a

second. Then the energy flooding into the newly unlocked brain-center never meant for use until perhaps a thousand more years have remodeled mankind, would collapse the channels, fuse the connections, make every synapse falter in the moment when the gates of the mind swing wide.

On Fowler's head the turban of wires glowed incandescent and vanished. The thing that had once happened to Norman happened now to him. The dazzling revelation--the draining, the atrophy--

He had recognized Norman's face reflected in the mirror beside his own, both white with exhaustion, both stunned and empty. He knew who Norman was, what motives moved him, what corroding irony had made his punishing of Norman just. But by the time he knew, it was already far too late to alter the future or the past.

Time flapped its wings more slowly. That moment of times gone swung round again as the circle came to its close. Memories flickered more and more dimly in Fowler's mind, like day and night, like the vague, shapeless world which was all he could perceive now. He felt cold and weak, strangely, intolerably, inhumanly weak with a weakness of the blood and bone, of the mind and soul. He saw his surroundings dimly, but he saw--other things--with a swimming clarity that had no meaning to him. He saw causes and effects as tangible before him as he had once seen trees and grass. But remote, indifferent, part of another world.

Help was what he needed. There was something he must remember. Something of terrible import. He must find help, to focus his mind upon the things that would work his cure. Cure was possible; he knew it--he knew it. But he needed help.

Somehow there was a door before him. He reached vaguely, moving his hand almost by reflex toward his pocket. But he had no pocket.

This was a suit of the new fashion, sleek in fabric, cut without pockets. He would have to knock, to ring. He remembered--

The face he had seen in the mirror. His own face? But even then it had been changing, as a cloud before the sun drains life and color and soul from a landscape. The expunging amnesia wiped across its mind had had its parallel physically, too; the traumatic shock of moving through time--the dark wing flapping--had sponged the recognizable characteristics from his face, leaving the matrix, the characterless basic. This was not his face. He had no face; he had no memory. He knew only that this familiar door before him was the door to the help he must have to save himself from a circling eternity.

It was almost wholly a reflex gesture that moved his finger toward the doorbell. The last dregs of memory and initiative drained from him with the motion.

Again the chimes played three soft notes. Again the circle Closed.

Again the blank man waited for John Fowler to open the door.

The Lion and the Unicorn

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It was snowing.

Now there was nothing at all but snow. The world was entirely shut out by the whirling white flakes. Until now, even though I couldn't communicate with my people, I'd had the solid earth around me, and I'd been able to see the barrier peaks overhead. Now I was completely shut off and alone.

There was nothing I could do. I huddled in my blankets and waited. The air was a little warmer, but it wasn't cold that would kill me--it was loneliness.

I began to feel that all my previous life had been a dream, and that nothing really existed except myself.

My thoughts began to whirl. I couldn't stop them. I knew I was nearly at the breaking point. The snow whirled meaninglessly around me, and my thoughts whirled too, and there was nothing to stop them. There were no anchors.

Except in the past.

I went back again, trying to find something solid. The time after Barton, while Barton was still alive. The time of McNey and Lincoln Cody. The one unverified story in the Key Lives, because there was an hour in McNey's life which no other telepath had seen, and which had to be filled in by inference alone. But the telepaths who had known McNey for so long and so intimately were well qualified to fill in the missing details.

It was complete, the story of the Lion and the Unicorn. I reached back into the time and the mind of McNey, forgetting, for a while, the snow and the loneliness, finding what I needed there in the past, when McNey waited for the paranoid Sergei Callahan to enter his house....

The best way of keeping a secret is to avoid even the appearance of secrecy. McNey whistled a few bars of Grieg, and the vibrations set delicate machinery in operation. The dull amber of the walls and ceiling changed to a cool transparency. Polaroid crystal did tricks with the red glare of the sunset above the Catskills. The deep, cloudless blue sky hung empty overhead. But Barton's helicopter had already arrived, and soon Callahan would be here, too.

That Callahan would dare to come, and alone, gave a horrible clarity to the danger. Twenty years ago a dagger would have ended the matter. But not permanently. Barton had used steel, and, while he had not completely failed, he had not succeeded either. The menace had grown.

McNey, standing by his desk, brushed a hand across his forehead and looked at his wet palm curiously. Hypertension. The result of this desperate, straining attempt to get in contact with Callahan, and the surprise of finding it far too easy. And now Barton as the catalyst--mongoose and snake.

There must be no clash--not yet. Somehow Barton must be kept from killing Callahan. The hydra had more than a hundred heads, and the Power as well. There lay the chief peril, the tremendous secret weapon of the mad telepaths.

But they weren't mad. They were paranoid types, coldly logical, insane in one regard only, their blind warped hatred for nontelepaths. In twenty years, thirty, forty perhaps, they had--not grown--but organized, until today the cancerous cells were spotted throughout

the towns of America, from Modoc and American Gun to Roxy and Florida End.

I'm old, McNey thought. Forty-two, but I feel old. The bright dream I grew up with--it's fading, blotted out by a nightmare.

He glanced in a mirror. He was big-boned, large-framed, but soft. His eyes were too gentle, not suited for battle. His hair--the wig all telepathic Baldies wore--was still dark, but he'd buy a graying one soon.

He was tired.

He was on leave of absence from Niagara, one of the science towns; but there were no furloughs from his secret job. That was a job many Baldies held, and one no nontelepaths suspected--a combination of policing and extermination. For paranoid Baldies could not be allowed to survive. That was axiomatic.

Over the ridge lay the town. McNey let his gaze travel downward, across pine and sumac groves, to the pool in the brook, where trout hid under shadowed overhangs. He opened part of the wall and let the cool air enter. Absently he whistled the phrase that would start the supersonics and keep mosquitoes at a respectful distance. On the flagged walk below he saw a slim figure, trim in light slacks and blouse, and recognized Alexa, his adopted daughter. The strong family instinct of Baldies had made adoption a commonplace.

The fading sunlight burnished her glossy wig. He sent a thought down.

Thought you were in the village. Marian's at the show.

She caught the hint of disappointment in his mind. Intrusion, Darryl?

For an hour or two--

o.k. There's an apple-blossom sequence in the pic, and I can't stand the smell of the stuff. Marian asked me-- I'll catch a dance or two at the Garden.

He felt wretched as he watched her go off. In the perfect telepathic world there would be no need for secrecy or evasion. That, indeed, was one of the drawbacks of the paranoid system--the mysterious, untappable wave length on which they could communicate. The thing called the Power. It was, McNey thought, a secondary characteristic of the mutation itself, like baldness, and yet more strictly limited. It seemed that only the paranoid Baldies could develop the Power. Which implied two separate and distinct mutations. Considering the delicate balance of the mental machine, that was not improbable.

But true rapport was vital for a complete life. Telepaths were more sensitive than nontelepaths; marriage was more complete; friendship warmer; the race a single living unit. For no thought could be hidden from probing. The average Baldy refrained, from courtesy, when a rapport mind went blurred; yet, ultimately, such blurring should become unnecessary. There need be no secrets.

Both Marian and Alexa knew of McNey's connection with the organization, but it was a tacit understanding. They knew without words when McNey did not want to answer questions. And because of the deep trust that comes from telepathic understanding, they refrained from asking any, even in their thoughts.

Alexa was twenty now. Already she had felt the reaction of being an outsider in a world complete in itself. For Baldies were still intruders, no matter how much rationalization was used. The great majority of humanity was non-telepathic--and fear, distrust, and hatred lay latent in that giant tribunal that daily passed judgment upon the Baldy

mutation.

Capital punishment, McNey knew very well, was the sentence contingent upon a thumbs-down verdict. And if the thumbs ever turned down--

If the nontelepaths ever learned what the paranoids were doing--

Barton was coming up the path. He walked with the lithe springiness of youth, though he was over sixty. His wig was iron-gray, and McNey could sense the wary alertness of the hunter's thoughts. Technically Barton was a naturalist, a big-game hunter. His quarry was sometimes human, however.

Upstairs, Dave, McNey thought.

Right. Is it here yet?

Callahan's coming soon.

The thoughts did not mesh. The semantic absolute symbol for Callahan was simpler in McNey's mind; in Barton's it was colored by associations from a half-lifetime of conflict with a group he hated, by now, almost pathologically. McNey never knew what lay behind the violence of Barton's hatred. Once or twice he had caught fleeting mental images of a girl, dead now, who had once helped Barton, but such thoughts were always as inchoate as reflections in rippling water.

Barton came up in the dropper. He had a seamed, swarthy face, and a trick of smiling lopsidedly so that the grimace was almost a sneer. He sat down in a relaxer, sliding his dagger forward into a more handy position, and thought for a drink. McNey supplied Scotch and soda. The sun had dropped beyond the mountain, and the wind grew colder. Automatic induction began to warm the room.

Lucky you caught me. On my way north. Trouble.

About us?

Always.

This time what?

Barton's thoughts broadened.

f Wigless Baldy with Hedgehound group Peril to Baldies < Villages being raided

_ Wigless one untrained telepathic ally

Wigless? Paranoid?

Know little. Can't establish communication.

But-- Hedgehounds?

Barton's sneer was reflected by his thought.

Savages. I'll investigate. Can't let the humans connect Us with raiding Hedgehounds.

McNey was silent, pondering. It had been a long time since the Blowup, when hard radiations had first created the mutations, and brought about the decentralization of a culture. But those days had seen the beginnings of the Hedgehounds, the malcontents who had refused to join the village unions, who had fled to the woods and the backlands and lived the savage life of nomads--but always in small groups, for fear of the omnipresent atomic bombs. Hedgehounds weren't seen often. From helicopters you might catch glimpses of

furtive figures trailing in single file through the Limberlost country, or in the Florida Everglades, or wherever the old forests stood. But by necessity they lived hidden in the backwoods. Occasionally there were quick raiding parties on isolated villages--so few, however, that no one considered the Hedgehounds a menace. They were nuisances at best, and for the most part they stayed away from towns.

To find a Baldy among them was less singular than amazing. Telepaths formed a racial unit, branching out into family groups. As infants grew, they were assimilated. Might be some sort of paranoid plot. Dunno what sort.

McNey tipped his drink. No use killing Callahan, you know, he pointed out.

Tropism, Barton's thought said grimly. Taxis. When I catch 'em, I kill 'em. Not-Certain methods work on Them. I've used adrenalin. They can't foresee a berserker's actions in a fight, because he can't foresee his own. You can't fight Them as you'd play a chess game, Darryl. You've got to force them to limit their powers. I've killed some by making them fight with machines, which don't react as instantly as the mind. In fact--shadow of bitterness--we dare make no plans ahead. The paranoids can read our minds. Why not kill It?

Because we may have to compromise. The blasting wave of hot, violent fury made McNey wince. Barton's negative was stunningly emphatic.

McNey turned his glass, watching the moisture condense. But the paranoids are expanding.

Find a way of tapping their power, then! We're trying. There's no way. Find a secret wave length for us.

McNey's mind blurred. Barton looked away mentally. But he had caught a scrap of something. He tried not to ask the question burning within him.

McNey said aloud, "Not yet, Dave. I mustn't even think it; you know that."

Barton nodded. He, too, realized the danger of working out a plan in advance. There was no effective barrier that could be erected against the paranoids probing.

Don't kill Callahan, McNey pleaded. Let me lead.

Unwillingly Barton assented. It's coming. Now.

His more disciplined mind, trained to sense the presence of the radiations that meant intelligence, had caught stray fragments from the distance. McNey sighed, put down his glass, and rubbed his forehead.

Barton thought. That Baldy with the Hedgehounds. May I bring him here if necessary?

Of course.

Then a new thought came in, confident, strong, calm. Barton moved uneasily. McNey sent out an answer.

After a minute Sergei Callahan stepped out of the dropper and stood waiting, warily eyeing the naturalist. He was a slim, blond, soft-featured man, with hair so long and thick that it was like a mane. Only affectation made paranoids wear wigs of such extreme style--that and their natural maladjustment.

He didn't look dangerous, but McNey felt as though a feral beast had

come into the room. What had the medievalists symbolized by the lion? Carnal sin? He couldn't remember. But in Barton's mind he caught the echo of a similar thought: a carnivore, to be butchered!

"How d'you do," Callahan said, and because he spoke aloud, McNey knew that the paranoid had classed his hosts as a lower species, and gave them patronizing contempt. It was characteristic of the paranoids.

McNey rose; Barton didn't. "Will you sit down?"

"Sure." Callahan dropped on a relaxer. "You're McNey. I've heard of Barton."

"I'm sure you have," the hunter said softly. McNey hastily poured drinks. Barton left his untasted.

Despite the silence, there was something in the room that had the quality of fourth-dimensional sound. There was no attempt at direct telepathic communication, but a Baldy is never in complete mental silence, except in the stratosphere. Like half-heard, distant music of toccata and fugue the introspective thoughts beat dimly out. Instinctively one man's mental rhythm sought to move in the same pattern as another's, as soldiers automatically keep step. But Callahan was out of step, and the atmosphere seemed to vibrate faintly with discord.

The man had great self-confidence. Paranoids seldom felt the occasional touches of doubt that beset the straight-line Baldies, the nagging, inevitable question telepaths sometimes asked themselves: Freak or true mutation? Though several generations had passed since the Blowup, it was still too early to tell. Biologists had experimented, sadly handicapped by the lack of possible controls, for animals could not develop the telepathic function. Only the

specialized colloid of the human brain had that latent power, a faculty that was still a mystery.

By now the situation was beginning to clarify a trifle. In the beginning there had been three distinct types, not recognized until after the post-Blowup chaos had subsided into decentralization. There were the true, sane Baldies, typified by McNey and Barton. There were the lunatic offshoots from a cosmic womb raging with fecundity, the teratological creatures that had sprung from radiation-battered germ plasm--two-headed fused twins, cyclops, Siamese freaks. It was a hopeful commentary that such monstrous births had almost ceased.

Between the sane Baldies and the insane telepaths lay the mutation-variant of the paranoids, with their crazy fixation of egotism. In the beginning the paranoids refused to wear wigs, and, if the menace had been recognized then, extermination would have been easy. But not now. They were more cunning. There was, for the most part, nothing to distinguish a paranoid from a true Baldy. They were well camouflaged and safe, except for the occasional slips that gave Barton and his hunters a chance to use the daggers that swung at every man's belt.

A war--completely secret, absolutely underground by necessity--in a world unconscious of the deadly strife blazing in the dark. No nontelepath even suspected what was happening. But the Baldies knew.

McNey knew, and felt a sick shrinking from the responsibility involved. One price the Baldies paid for survival was the deification of the race, the identification of self, family, and friends with the whole mutation of telepaths. That did not include the paranoids, who were predators, menacing the safety of all Baldies on earth.

McNey, watching Callahan, wondered if the man ever felt self-doubt.

Probably not. The feeling of inferiority in paranoids made them worship the group because of pure egotism; the watchword was We are supermen! All other species are inferior.

They were not supermen. But it was a serious mistake to underestimate them. They were ruthless, intelligent, and strong.

Not as strong as they thought, though. A lion can easily kill a wild hog, but a herd of hogs can destroy a lion.

"Not if they can't find him," Callahan said, smiling.

McNey grimaced. "Even a lion leaves spoor. You can't keep on with your plan indefinitely without the humans suspecting, you know."

Contempt showed in Callahan's thought. "They're not telepaths. Even if they were, we have the Power. And you can't tap that."

"We can read your minds, though," Barton put in. His eyes were glowing. "We've spoiled some of your plans that way."

"Incidents," Callahan said. He waved his hand. "They haven't any effect on the long-term program. Besides, you can read only what's above the conscious threshold of awareness. We think of other things besides the Conquest. And—once we arrange another step—we carry it out as quickly as possible, to minimize the danger of having the details read by one of the traitors."

"So we're traitors now," Barton said.

Callahan looked at him. "You are traitors to the destiny of our race. After the Conquest, we'll deal with you."

McNey said, "Meanwhile, what will the humans be doing?"

"Dying," Callahan said.

McNey rubbed his forehead. "You're blind. If a Baldy kills one human, and that's known, it'll be unfortunate. It might blow over. If two or three such deaths occur, there'll be questions asked and surmises made. It's been a long while since we had Baldy lynchings, but if one smart human ever guesses what's going on, there'll be a worldwide program that will destroy every Baldy on earth. Don't forget, we can be recognized." He touched his wig.

"It won't happen."

"You underestimate humans. You always have."

"No," Callahan said, "that's not true. But you've always underestimated Us. You don't even know your own capabilities."

"The telepathic function doesn't make supermen."

"We think it does."

"All right," McNey said, "we can't agree on that. Maybe we can agree on other things."

Barton made an angry sound. Callahan glanced at him. "You say you understand our plan. If you do, you know it can't be stopped. The humans you're so afraid of have only two strong points: numbers and technology. If the technology's smashed, We can centralize, and that's all We need. We can't do it now, because of the atomic bombs, of course. The moment we banded together and revealed ourselves--blam! So--"

"The Blowup was the last war," McNey said. "It's got to be the last. This planet couldn't survive another."

"The planet could. And we could. But humanity couldn't."

Barton said, "Galileo doesn't have a secret weapon."

Callahan grinned at him. "So you traced that propaganda, did you? But a lot of people are beginning to believe Galileo's getting to be a menace. One of these days, Modoc or Sierra's going to lay an egg on Galileo. It won't be our affair. Humans will do the bombing, not Baldies."

"Who started the rumor?" Barton asked.

"There'll be more, a lot more. We'll spread distrust among the towns--a long-term program of planned propaganda. It'll culminate in another Blowup. The fact that humans would fall for such stuff shows their intrinsic unfitness to rule. It couldn't happen in a Baldy world."

McNey said, "Another war would mean the development of anticommunication systems. That'd play into your hands. It's the old rule of divide and fall. As long as radio, television, helicopter and fast-plane traffic weld humans together, they're racially centralized."

"You've got it," Callahan said. "When humanity's lowered to a more vulnerable status, we can centralize and step in. There aren't many truly creative technological brains, you know. We're destroying those--carefully. And we can do it, because we can centralize mentally, through the Power, without being vulnerable physically."

"Except to Us," Barton said gently.

Callahan shook his head slowly. "You can't kill us all. If you knifed me now, it wouldn't matter. I happen to be a co-ordinator, but I'm not the only one. You can find some of Us, sure, but you can't find Us all, and you can't break Our code. That's where you're failing, and why you'll always fail."

Barton ground out his cigarette with an angry gesture. "Yeah. We may fail, at that. But you won't win. You can't. I've seen a pogrom coming for a long while. If it comes, it'll be justified, and I won't be sorry, provided it wipes out all of you. We'll go down too, and you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you've destroyed the entire species through your crazy egotism."

"I'm not offended," Callahan said. "I've always contended that your group was a failure of the mutation. We are the true supermen--unafraid to take our place in the universe, whereas you're content to live on the crumbs the humans drop from their table."

"Callahan," McNey said suddenly, "this is suicidal. We can't--"

Barton sprang out of his chair and stood straddle-legged, glowering furiously. "Darryl! Don't beg the swine! There's a limit to what I'll stand!"

"Please," McNey said, feeling very helpless and impotent. "We've got to remember that we're not supermen, either."

"No compromise," Barton snapped. "There can't be any appeasement with those wolves. Wolves--hyenas!"

"There'll be no compromise," Callahan said. He rose, his leonine head a dark silhouette against the purple sky. "I came to see you, McNey, for just one reason. You know as well as I that the humans musn't suspect our plan. Leave us alone, and they won't suspect. But if you keep trying to hinder us, you'll just increase the danger of discovery. An underground war can't stay underground forever."

"So you see the danger, after all," McNey said.

"You fool." Callahan said, almost tolerantly. "Don't you see we're

fighting for you, too? Leave us alone. When the humans are wiped out, this will be a Baldy world. You can find your place in it. Don't tell me you've never thought about a Baldy civilization, complete and perfect."

"I've thought about it," McNey assented. "But it won't come about through your methods. Gradual assimilation is the answer."

"So we'll be assimilated back into the human strain? So our children will be degraded into hairy men? No, McNey. You don't recognize your strength, but you don't seem to recognize your weakness, either. Leave us alone. If you don't, you'll be responsible for any pogrom that may come."

McNey looked at Barton. His shoulders slumped. He sank lower in his relaxer.

"You're right, after all, Dave," he whispered. "There can't be any compromise. They're paranoids."

Barton's sneer deepened. "Get out," he said. "I won't kill you now. But I know who you are. Keep thinking about that. You won't live long-my word on it."

"You may die first," Callahan said softly.

"Get out."

The paranoid turned and stepped into the dropper. Presently his figure could be seen below, striding along the path. Barton poured a stiff shot and drank it straight.

"I feel dirty," he said. "Maybe this'll take the taste out of my mouth."

In his relaxer McNey didn't move. Barton looked at the shadowy form

sharply.

He thought: What's eating you?

I wish... I wish we had a Baldy world now. It wouldn't have to be on earth. Venus or even Mars. Callisto--anywhere. A place where we could have peace. Telepaths aren't made for war, Dave.

Maybe it's good for them, though.

You think 'I'm soft. Well, I am. I'm no hero. No crusader. It's the microcosm that's important, after all. How much loyalty can we have for the race if the family unit, the individual, has to sacrifice all that means home to him?

The vermin must be destroyed. Our children will live in a better world.

Our fathers said that. Where are we?

Not yet lynched, at any rate. Barton laid his hand on McNey's shoulder. Keep working. Find the answer. The paranoid code must be cracked. Then I can wipe them out--all of them!

McNey's thought darkened. I feel there will be a pogrom. I don't know when. But our race hasn't faced its greatest crisis yet. It will come. It will come.

An answer will come too, Barton thought. I'm going now. I've got to locate that Baldy with the Hedgehounds.

Good-bye, Dave.

He watched Barton disappear. The path lay empty thereafter. He waited, now, for Marian and Alexa to return from the town, and for the first time in his life he was not certain that they would return.

They were among enemies now, potential enemies who at a word might turn to noose and fire. The security the Baldies had fought for peacefully for generations was slipping away from underfoot. Before long Baldies might find themselves as homeless and friendless as Hedgehounds--

A too-elastic civilization leads to anarchy, while a too-rigid one will fall before the hurricane winds of change. The human norm is arbitrary; so there are arbitrary lines of demarcation. In the decentralized culture, the social animal was better able to find his rightful place than he had been in thousands of years. The monetary system was founded on barter, which in turn was founded on skill, genius, and man-hours. One individual enjoyed the casual life of a fisherman on the California coast; his catch could bring him a television set designed by a Galileo man who enjoyed electronics--and who also liked fish.

It was an elastic culture, but it had its rigidities. There were misfits. After the Blowup, those antisocials had fled the growing pattern of towns spreading over America and taken to the woods, where individualism could be indulged. Many types gathered. There were bindle stiffs and hobos, Cajuns and crackers, paisanos and Bowery bums--malcontents, anti-socials, and those who simply could not be assimilated by any sort of urban life, not even the semirural conditions of the towns. Some had ridden the rods, some had walked the highways of a world that still depended on surface travel, and some were trappers and hunters--for even at the time of the Blowup there had been vast forest tracts on the North American continent.

They took to the woods. Those who had originally been woodsmen knew well enough how to survive, how to set birdsnares and lay traps for deer and rabbit. They knew what berries to pick and what roots to

dig. The others--

In the end they learned, or they died. But at first they sought what they thought to be an easier way. They became brigands, swooping down in raids on the unifying towns and carrying off booty--food, liquor and women. They mistook the rebirth of civilization for its collapse. They grouped together in bands, and the atomic bombs found targets, and they died.

After a while there were no large groups of Hedgehounds. Unity became unsafe. A few score at most might integrate, following the seasons in the north temperate zones, staying in the backland country in more tropical areas.

Their life became a combination of the American pioneer's and the American Indian's. They migrated constantly. They re-learned the use of bow and javelin, for they kept no contact with the towns, and could not easily secure firearms. They drifted in the shallows of the stream of progress, hardy, brown woodmen and their squaws, proud of their independence and their ability to wrest a living from the wild.

They wrote little. But they talked much, and by night, around campfires, they sang old songs--"Barbara Allen," "The Twa Corbies," "Oh Susanna," and the folk ballads that last longer than Senates and Parliaments. Had they ridden horse-back, they would have known the songs based on the rhythm-patterns of equine gait; as it was, they walked, and knew marching songs.

Jesse James Hartwell, leader of his little band of Hedgehounds, was superintending the cooking of bear steaks over the campfire, and his bass voice rolled out now, muffled and softened by the pines that screened camp from brook. His squaw, Mary, was singing too, and presently others joined in, hunters and their wives--for squaw no longer carried the derogatory shade of meaning it once had. The

attitude the Hedgehounds had toward their wives was a more realistic version of the attitudes of medieval chivalry.

"Bring the good old bugle, boys, we'll sing another song--"

It was dark by the stream. They had been late in finding a camping place tonight; the hunt for the bear had delayed them, and after that it had been difficult to find fresh water. As always when the tribe was irritable, there had been half-serious raillery at Lincoln Cody's expense. It was, perhaps, natural for any group to sense the mental difference--or superiority--of a Baldy, and compensate by jeering at his obvious physical difference.

Yet they had never connected Line with the town Baldies. For generations now telepaths had worn wigs. And not even Line himself knew that he was a telepath. He knew that he was different, that was all. He had no memory of the helicopter wreck from which his infant body had been taken by Jesse James Hartwell's mother; adopted into the tribe, he had grown up as a Hedgehound, and had been accepted as one. But though they considered him one of theirs, they were too ready to call him "skinhead"--not quite in jest. "Sing it as we used to sing it, fifty thousand strong While we were marching through Georgia..."

There were twenty-three in Hartwell's band. A good many generations ago, one of his ancestors had fought with the Grand Army of the Republic, and had been with Sherman on his march. And a contemporary of that soldier, whose blood also ran in Hartwell's veins, had worn Confederate gray and died on the Potomac. Now twenty-three outcast Hedgehounds, discards of civilization, huddled about the fire and cooked the bear they had killed with spear and arrow. The chorus burst out vigorously. "Hurrah! Hurrah! We bring the jubilee, Hurrah! Hurrah! The flag that makes men free, So we sang the chorus from Atlanta to the sea While we were marching through

Georgia."

There was a gray scar of desolation where Atlanta had been. The bright, clean new towns dotted Georgia, and helicopters hummed to the sea and back again now. The great War between the States was a memory, shadowed by the greater conflicts that had followed. Yet in that still northern forest, vigorous voices woke the past again.

Line rubbed his shoulders against the rough, bark of the tree and yawned. He was chewing the bit of a battered pipe and grateful for the momentary solitude. But he could sense--feel--understand stray fragments of thoughts that came to him from around the campfire. He did not know they were thoughts, since, for all he knew, Hartwell and the others might feel exactly the same reactions. Yet, as always, the rapport made him faintly unhappy, and he was grateful for the--something--that told him Cassie was coming.

She walked softly out of the shadow and dropped beside him, a slim, pretty girl a year younger than his seventeen years. They had been married less than a year; Line was still amazed that Cassie could have loved him in spite of his bald, gleaming cranium. He ran his fingers through Cassie's glossy, black hair, delighting in the sensuous feel of it, and the way it ran rippling across his palm.

"Tired, hon?"

"Nope. You feeling bad, Line?"

"It's nothing," he said.

"You been acting funny ever since we raided that town," Cassie murmured, taking his brown hand and tracing a pattern with her forefinger across the calloused palm. "You figure that wasn't on the beam for us to do, maybe."

"I dunno, Cassie," he sighed, his arm circling her waist. "It's the third raid this year--"

"You ain't questioning Jesse James Hartwell?"

"S'pose I am?"

"Well, then," Cassie said demurely, "you better start considering a quick drift for the two of us. Jesse don't like no arguments."

"No more do I," Line said. "Maybe there won't be no more raids now we're southering."

"We got full bellies, anyhow, and that's more than we had across the Canada line. I never saw a winter like this, Line."

"It's been cold," he acknowledged. "We can make out. Only thing is--"

"What?"

"I kinda wish you'd been along on the raids. I can't talk to nobody else about it. I felt funny. There was voices inside my head, like."

"That's crazy. Or else conjure."

"I'm no hex man. You know that, Cassie."

"And you ain't been smoking crazy weed." She meant the marijuana that grew wild in the backlands. Her gaze sought his. "Tell me what it's like, Line. Bad?"

"It ain't bad and it ain't good. It's mixed up, that's all. It's sort of like a dream, only I'm awake. I see pictures."

"What pictures, Line?"

"I don't know," he said, looking into the darkness where the brook chuckled and splashed. "Because half the time it ain't me when that happens. I get hot and cold inside. Sometimes it's like a music in my head. But when we raided that town it was plain bad, Cassie hon." He seized a bit of wood and tossed it away. "I was like that chip tossed around in the water. Everything was pulling at me every which way."

Cassie kissed him gently. "Don't pay no mind to it. Everybody gets mixed up once in a while. Once we get more south, and the hunting's good, you'll forget your vapors."

"I can forget 'em now. You make me feel better, just being with you. I love the smell of your hair, sweet." Line pressed his face against the cool, cloudy darkness of the girl's braids.

"Well, I won't cut it, then."

"You better not. You got to have enough hair for both of us."

"You think that matters to me, Line? Boone Curzon's bald, and he's plenty handsome."

"Boone's old, near forty. That's why. He had hair when he was young."

Cassie pulled up some moss and patted it into shape on Line's head. She smiled at him half-mockingly. "How's that? Ain't nobody anywhere that's got green hair. Feel better now?"

He wiped his scalp clean, pulled Cassie closer and kissed her. "Wish I never had to leave you. I ain't troubled when you're around. Only these raids stir me up."

"Won't be no more of 'em, I guess."

Line looked into the dimness. His young face, seamed and bronzed by his rugged life, was suddenly gloomy. Abruptly he stood up.

"I got a hunch Jesse James Hartwell's planning another."

"Hunch?" She watched him, troubled. "Maybe it ain't so."

"Maybe," Line said doubtfully. "Only my hunches work pretty good most times." He glanced toward the fire. His shoulders squared.

"Line?"

"He's figgering on it, Cassie. Sitting there thinking about the chow we got at that last town. It's his belly working on him. I ain't going to string along with him."

"You better not start nothing."

"I'm gonna... talk to him," Line said almost inaudibly, and moved into the gloom of the trees. From the circle of firelight a man sent out a questioning challenge; the eerie hoot of an owl, mournful and sobbing. Line understood the inflection and answered with the caw of a raincrow. Hedgehounds had a language of their own that they used in dangerous territory, for there was no unity among the tribes, and some Hedgehounds were scalpers. There were a few cannibal groups, too, but these degenerates were hated and killed by the rest whenever opportunity offered.

Line walked into camp. He was a big, sturdy, muscular figure, his strong chest arched under the fringed buckskin shirt he wore, his baldness concealed now by a squirrelhide cap. Temporary shelters had been rigged up, lean-tos, thatched with leaves, gave a minimum

of privacy, and several squaws were busily sewing. At the cookpot Bethsheba Hartwell was passing out bear steaks. Jesse James Hartwell, an oxlike giant with a hook nose and a scarred cheek that had whitened half of his beard, ate meat and biscuits with relish, washing them down with green turtle soup--part of the raid's loot. On an immaculate white cloth before him was spread caviar, sardines, snails, chow chow, antipasto, and other dainties that he sampled with a tiny silver fork that was lost in his big, hairy hand.

"C'mon and eat, skinhead," Hartwell rumbled. "Where's your squaw? She'll get mighty hungry."

"She's coming," Line said. He didn't know that Cassie was crouching in the underbrush, a bared throwing-knife in her hand. His thoughts were focused on the chief, and he could still sense what he had called his hunch, and which was actually undeveloped telepathy. Yes, Hartwell was thinking about another raid.

Line took a steak from Bethsheba. It didn't burn his calloused hands. He squatted near Hartwell and bit into the juicy, succulent meat. His eyes never left the bearded man's face.

"We're out of Canada now," he said at last. "It's warming up some. We still heading south?"

Hartwell nodded. "You bet. I don't figure on losing another toe with frostbite. It's too cold even here."

"There'll be hunting, then. And the wild corn's due soon. We'll have a plenty to eat."

"Pass the biscuits, Bethsheba. Urp. More we eat, Line, the fatter we'll get for next winter."

Line pointed to the white cloth. "Them don't fatten you up none."

"They're good anyhow. Try some of these here fish eggs."

"Yeah--pfui. Where's the water?"

Hartwell laughed. Line said, "We going north come summer?"

"We ain't voted on it yet. I'd say no. Me, I'd rather head south."

"More towns. It ain't safe to go on raiding, Jesse."

"Nobody can't find us once we get back in the woods."

"They got gun."

"You scared?"

"I ain't scared of nothing," Line said. "Only I sort of know you're thinking about another raid. And I'm telling you to count me out."

Hartwell's heavy shoulders hunched. He reached for a sardine, ate it slowly, and then turned his head toward the boy. His lids were half-lowered.

"Yaller?" But he made it a question, so a fight wasn't obligatory.

"You seen me fight a grizzly with a knife."

"I know," Hartwell said, rubbing the white streak in his beard. "A guy can turn yaller, though. I ain't saying that's it, understand. Just the same, nobody else is trying to back out."

"On that first raid we was starving. The second--well, that might pass too. But I don't see no percentage in raiding just so you can eat fish eggs and worms."

"That ain't all of it, Line. We got blankets, too. Things like that we needed. Once we lay our hands on a few guns--"

"Getting too lazy to pull a bow?"

"If you're spoiling for a fight," Hartwell said slowly, "I can oblige you. Otherwise shut up."

Line said, "o.k. But I'm serving notice to count me out on any more raids."

In the shadows Cassie's hand tightened on the dagger's hilt. But Hartwell suddenly laughed and threw his steakbone at Line's head. The boy ducked and glowered.

"Come the day your belt starts pinching, you'll change your mind," Hartwell said. "Forget about it now. Git that squaw of yours and make her eat; she's too skinny." He swung toward the woods. "Cassie! C'mon and have some of this fish soup."

Line had turned away, readjusting his cap. His face was less somber now, though it was still thoughtful. Cassie bolstered her knife and came out into the firelight. Hartwell beckoned to her.

"Come and get it," he said.

The air was peaceful again. No more friction developed, though Line, Cassie knew, was in a quarrelsome mood. But Hartwell's good humor was proof against any but direct insults. He passed around the whiskey bottle he had looted--a rare treat, since the tribe could distill smoke only when they settled for a while, which wasn't often. Line didn't drink much. Long after the fire had been smothered and snores came from the lean-tos around him, he lay awake, troubled and tense.

Something--someone--was calling him.

It was like one of his hunches. It was like what he had felt during the raids. It was like Cassie's nearness, and yet there was a queer, exciting difference. There was a friendliness to that strange call that he had never felt before.

Dim and indefinable, a dweller hidden deep in his mind woke and responded to that call of a kindred being.

After a while he rose on one elbow and looked down at Cassie. Her face was partly veiled by the deeper blackness of her hair. He touched its soft, living warmth gently. Then he slipped noiselessly out of the shelter and stood up, staring around.

There was a rustling of leaves, and the chuckling of the brooklet. Nothing else. Moonlight dappled the ground here and there. A woodrat rustled softly through the wild grasses. The air was very cold and crisp, with a freshness that stung Line's cheeks and eyes.

And suddenly he was frightened. Old folktales troubled him. He remembered his foster mother's stories of men who could turn to wolves, of the Wendigo that swept like a vast wind above the lonely forests, of a Black Man who bought souls--the formless, dark fears of childhood rose up in nightmare reality. He had killed a grizzly with his knife, but he had never stood alone at night in the woods, while a Call murmured in his mind--silently--and made his blood leap up in fiery response.

He was afraid, but the bait was too strong. He turned south, and walked out of the camp. Instinctive training made his progress noiseless. He crossed the brook, his sandals inaudible on the stones, and mounted a slope. And there, sitting on a stump waiting for him, was a man.

His back was toward Line, and nothing could be seen but the hunched torso and the bald, gleaming head. Line had a momentary horrible fear that when the man turned, he might see his own face. He touched his knife. The confused stirring in his brain grew chaotic.

"Hello, Line," a low voice said.

Line had made no sound, and he knew it. But, somehow, that dark figure had sensed his approach. The Black Man--?

"Do I look black?" the voice asked. The man stood up, turning. He was sneering--no, smiling--and his face was dark and seamed. He wore town clothes.

But he wasn't the Black Man. He didn't have a cloven hoof. And the warm, sincere friendliness subtly radiating from his presence was reassuring to Line in spite of his suspicions.

"You called me," Line said. "I'm trying to figure it out." His eyes dwelt on the bald cranium.

"My name's Barton," the man said. "Dave Barton." He lifted something gray--a scalp?--and fitted it carefully on his head. The sneer indicated amusement.

"I feel naked without my wig. But I had to show you I was a... a--" He sought for the word that would fit the telepathic symbol. "That you were one of us," he finished.

"I ain't--"

"You're a Baldy," Barton said, "but you don't know it. I can read that from your mind."

"Read my mind?" Line took a backward step.

"You know what Baldies are? Telepaths?"

"Sure," Line said doubtfully. "I heard stories. We don't know much about town life. Listen," he said with fresh suspicion, "how'd you come to be out here? How'd--"

"I came looking for you."

"Me? Why?"

Barton said patiently, "Because you're one of Us. I can see I've got to explain a lot. From the beginning, maybe. So--"

He talked. It might have been more difficult had they not been Baldies. Though Line was telepathically untrained, he could nevertheless receive enough mental confirmation to clarify the questions in his mind. And Barton spoke of the Blowup, of the hard radiations--so much Greek to Line, until Barton used telepathic symbolism--and, mostly, of the incredible fact that Line wasn't merely a hairless freak in his tribe. There were other Baldies, a lot of them.

That was important. For Line caught the implications. He sensed something of the warm, deep understanding between telepaths, the close unity of the race, the feeling of belonging that he had never had. Just now, alone in the woods with Barton, he was conscious of more genuine intimacy than he had ever felt before.

He was quick to understand. He asked questions. And, after a while, so did Barton.

"Jesse James Hartwell's behind the raids. Yeah, I was in on 'em. You mean you all wear them wigs?"

"Naturally. It's a big civilization, and we belong to it. We're part of the whole set-up."

"And... and nobody laughs at you for being bald?"

"Do I look bald?" Barton asked. "There are drawbacks, sure. But there are plenty of advantages."

"I'll say!" Line breathed deeply. "People... the same sort... your own sort--" He was inarticulate.

"The non-Baldies didn't always give us an even break. They were afraid of us, a little. We're trained from childhood never to take advantage of our telepathic powers with humans."

"Yeah, I can see that. It makes sense."

"Then you know why I came, don't you?"

"I can sort of understand it," Line said slowly. "These raids... people might start thinking a Baldy's involved-- I'm a Baldy!"

Barton nodded. "Hedgehounds don't matter. A few raids--we can take care of them. But to have one of Us involved is bad medicine."

"I told Jesse James Hartwell tonight I was having no part in any more raiding." Line said. "He won't push me."

"Yes-- That helps. Listen, Line. Why don't you come home with me?"

Years of training made Line pause. "Me? Go into a town? We don't do that."

"You?"

"The... Hedgehound. I ain't a Hedgehound, am I? Gosh, this is--" He rubbed his jaw. "I'm all mixed up, Barton."

"Tell you what. Come with me now, and see how you like our sort of life. You never were trained to use your telepathic function, so you're like a half-blind man. Take a look at the set-up, and then decide what you want to do."

On the verge of mentioning Cassie, Line paused. He was half afraid that if he spoke of her, Barton might withdraw his offer. And, after all, it wasn't as if he intended to leave Cassie permanently. It'd be just for a week or two, and then he could come back to the tribe.

Unless he took Cassie with him now--

No. Somehow he'd feel shamed in admitting that he, a Baldy, had married a Hedgehound. Though he was proud of Cassie herself, all right. He'd never give her up. It was only--

He was lonely. He was horribly, sickeningly lonely, and what he had glimpsed in Barton's mind and Barton's words drew him with overpowering force. A world where he belonged, where no one called him skinhead, where he'd never feel inferior to the bearded men of the tribe. A wig of his own.

Just for a few weeks. He couldn't miss this chance. He couldn't! Cassie would be waiting for him when he came back.

"I'll go with you," he said. "I'm ready right now. o.k.?"

But Barton, who had read Line's mind, hesitated before he answered.

"o.k.," he said at last. "Let's go."

Three weeks later Barton sat in McNey's solarium and shaded his eyes wearily with one hand. "Line's married, you know," he said, "to a Hedgehound girl. He doesn't know we know it."

"Does it matter?" McNey asked. He was looking very tired and troubled.

"I suppose not. But I thought I'd better mention it, because of Alexa."

"She knows her own mind. And she must know about Line being married, too, by this time. She's been giving him telepathic coaching for weeks."

"I noticed that when I came in."

"Yeah," McNey said, rubbing his forehead. "That's why we're being oral. Telepathic conversations distract Line when there's more than one; he's still learning selectivity."

"How do you like the boy?"

"I like him. He's not... quite what I'd expected, though."

"He grew up with the Hedgehounds."

"He's one of Us," McNey said with finality.

"No symptoms of paranoid tendencies?"

"Definitely not. Alexa agrees."

"Good," Barton said. "That relieves me. It was the one thing I was afraid of. As for the Hedgehound girl, she's not one of Us, and we can't afford to weaken the race by intermarriage with humans. That's been an axiom almost since the Blowup. My own feeling is that if

Line marries Alexa or any other one of Us, it's all to the good, and we can forget about previous entanglements."

"It's up to her," McNey said. "Any more Hedgehound raids?"

"No. But they're the least of my troubles. Sergei Callahan's gone underground. I can't locate him, and I want to."

"Just to kill him?"

"No. He must know other key paranoids. I want to drag that information out of him. He can't blur his mind permanently--and once I get him where I want, he'll have few secrets left."

"We're fighting a losing battle."

"Are we?"

"I can't talk yet," McNey said, with subdued violence. "I can't even let myself think about the problem. I... it works out this way. There's crux, a single equation, that must be solved. But not yet. Because the moment I solve it, my mind can be read. I've got to work out all the minor details first. Then--"

"Yes?"

McNey's smile was bitter. "I don't know. I'll find an answer. I haven't been idle."

"If we could crack the Power," Barton said. "If we could only tap the paranoid's code--"

"Or," McNey said, "if we had a code of our own--"

"Unbreakable."

"Which is impossible, by any mechanical means. No scrambler could work, because we'd have to know the key, and our minds could be read by paranoids. I don't want to think about it any more for a while, Dave. The details, yes. But not the problem itself. I... might solve it before I'm ready."

"The paranoids are plenty busy," Barton said. "Their propaganda's spreading. That talk about Galileo's secret weapon is still going around."

"Haven't the Galileans made any denials?"

"It isn't that tangible. You can't buck a whispering campaign. That, Darryl, is what's apt to cause a bust-up. You can fight a person or a thing, but you can't fight a wind. A wind that whispers."

"But the atomic bombs! After all--"

"I know. Just the same, some hothead is going to get scared enough to take action one of these days. He'll say, 'Galileo's got a secret weapon. We're not safe. They're going to attack us.' So he'll jump the gun. After that, there'll be other incidents."

"With Us in the middle. We can't stay neutral. I think there'll be a pogrom, Dave, sooner or later."

"We'll survive it."

"You think so? With every non-Baldy's hand ready to strike down telepaths--man, woman or child? There'll be no quarter given. We need another world, a new world--"

"That'll have to wait till we get interstellar ships."

"And meanwhile we live on borrowed time. It might be best if we let the human race reassimilate us."

"Retgression?"

"Suppose it is? We're in the position of a unicorn in a herd of horses. We daren't use our horn to defend ourselves. We've got to pretend to be horses."

"The lion and the unicorn," Barton said, "were fighting for the crown. Well, Callahan and his paranoids are the lion, all right. But the crown?"

"Inevitably," McNey said, "it must be rule. Two dominant species can't exist on the same planet or even in the same system. Humans and telepaths can't evenly divide rule. We're knuckling under now. Eventually, we'll arrive, by a different path, at Callahan's goal. But not by degrading or enslaving humans! Natural selection is our weapon. Biology's on our side. If we can only live in peace with humans, until--"

"--and drummed them out of town," Barton said.

"So the humans mustn't suspect the lion and the unicorn are fighting. Or what they're fighting for. Because if they do, we won't survive the pogrom. There will be no refuge. Our race is soft, through environment and adaptation."

"I'm worried about Callahan," Barton said suddenly. "I don't know what he's planning. By the time I find out, it may be too late. If he sets something in operation that can't be stopped--"

"I'll keep working," McNey promised. "I may be able to give you something soon."

"I hope so. Well, I'm flying to St. Nick tonight. Ostensibly to check the zoo there. Actually, I've other motives. Maybe I can pick up Callahan's trail."

"I'll walk you down to the village." McNey went with Barton into the dropper. They stepped outside into the warm, spring air, glancing through the transparent wall at the televisor where Alexa sat with Line. Barton said, "They don't seem worried, anyhow."

McNey laughed. "She's sending in her column to the Recorder. Alexa's a specialist on heart problems. I hope she never has any of her own to solve!"

"--if you love him," Alexa said into the mike, "marry him. And if he loves you, he'll have no objection to running psychrating tests and comparing id balance sheets. You're considering a lifetime partnership, and both of you should read the contracts before signing them." She managed to look like a cat with cream on its whiskers. "But always remember that love is the most important thing in the world. If you find that, it will always be springtime in your hearts. Good luck, Wondering!"

She pressed a switch. "Thirty, Line. My job's done for the day. That's one sort of job a Baldy can find--heart problem editor on a telepaper. Think you'd like it?"

"No," Line said. "It ain't... it's not up my alley."

He was wearing a silken blue shirt and darker blue shorts, and a cropped brown wig covered his skull. He wasn't used to it yet, and kept touching it uneasily.

"Ain't as good as isn't," Alexa said. "I know what you mean, and that's more important than grammatical construction. More lessons?"

"Not for a while yet. I get tired easy. Talking's still more natural, somehow."

"Eventually you'll be finding it cumbersome. Personal endings--you speak, he speaks, parlons, parlez, parlent--telepathically you don't use those vestiges."

"Vestiges?"

"Sure," Alexa said. "From the Latin. The Romans didn't use pronouns. Just amo, amas, amant," she clarified mentally, "and the endings gave you the right pronoun. Nous, vous, and Us are used now instead, we, you plural, and they. So the endings are unnecessary. If you're communicating with a Swiss telepath, though, you might find yourself wondering why he kept thinking of a girl as it. But you'd know what it meant to him, and you couldn't if you were being oral only."

"It's plenty hard," Line said. "I'm getting the angles, though. That round-robin business we had last night was--" He groped for a word, but Alexa caught the meaning from his mind.

"I know. There's an intimacy that's pretty wonderful. You know, I've never felt badly about being adopted. I knew just where I fitted into Marian's life and Darryl's, and how they felt about me. I knew I belonged."

"It must be a nice feeling," Line said. "I'm sort of getting it, though."

"Of course.... You're one of Us. After you've mastered the telepathic function, you won't have any doubts at all."

Line watched the play of sunlight on Alexa's bronze curls. "I guess I do belong with your kind of folks."

"Glad you came with Dave?"

He looked at his hands. "I can't tell you, Alexa. I can't tell you how wonderful it is. I'd been shut out in the dark all my life, thinking I was a freak, never feeling right sure about myself. Then all this--" He indicated the televisor. "Magical miracles, that's what. And all the rest."

Alexa understood what was in his mind. Through him she felt the heady excitement of an exile returning to his own kind. Even the televisor, familiar symbol of her job, assumed a new glamour, though it was the standard double-screen model, the upper for news flashes, the lower for the twenty-four-hour newspaper that was received, recorded on wire-film, and thereafter available for reference. Push-buttons selected the publication, and the dials made it possible to focus down on the pages, on either the action pictures or the printed matter. Format, of course, was quite as important as news value. The big concealed wall-screen at one end of the room was used for plays, concerts, movies, and Disneys. But for the added sensual attractions of smell, taste, and touch, one had to go to the theaters; such special equipment was still too expensive for the average home.

"Yes." Alexa said, "you're one of Us. And you've got to remember that the future of the race is important. If you stay, you must never do anything to hurt it."

"I remember what you've been telling me about the p-para-noids," Line nodded. "Guess they're sort of like the cannibal tribes 'mong the Hedgehounds. They're fair quarry for anybody." He felt his wig, stepped to a mirror-unit, and adjusted the headpiece.

Alexa said, "There's Marian outside. I want to see her. Wait for me, Line; I'll be back."

She went out, Lincoln, awkwardly testing his newly-realized powers, felt her thought fingering subtly toward the plump, pretty woman who was moving among the flowers, armed with gloves and spray.

He wandered to the clavilux, and, one-fingered, picked out a tune. He hummed: "All in the merry month of May, When the green buds they were swellin', Young Jemmy Grove on his death-bed lay For love of Barb'ry Allen."

Memories of Cassie rose up. He forced them back into the shadows, along with the Hedgehounds and the nomad life he had known. That wasn't his life any more. Cassie--she'd get along all right. He'd go after her, one of these days, and bring her to live with him among the Baldies. Only--only she wasn't a Baldy. She wasn't like Alexa, for instance. She was quite as pretty, sure; yet there was all this talk about the future of the race. If, now, he married a Baldy and had Baldy sons and daughters--

But, he was already married. What was the good of thinking so? A Hedgehound marriage might not amount to a hill of beans among the townfolk, of course, and, anyway, all this mental round-robin stuff was sort of polygamy.

Well, he'd climb that hill when he came to it. First he had to get the trick of this telepathy business. It was coming, but slowly, for he'd not been conditioned since infancy, as other Baldies were. The latent power had to be wakened and directed--not as a child could be taught, but allowing for Line's maturity, and his ability to grasp and understand the goal.

Marian came in with Alexa. The older woman stripped off her cloth gloves and brushed beads of perspiration from her ruddy cheeks. "Lo, Line," she said. "How's it going?"

"Fairish, Marian. You should of asked me to help out there."

"I need the exercise. I gained three pounds this morning arguing with that turnip-bleeder Gatson, down at the store. Know what he wants for fresh breadfruit?"

"What's that?"

"Catch this." Marian formed mental concepts involving sight, touch and taste. Alexa chimed in with the smell of breadfruit. Line had his own arbitrary standards for comparisons, and within a second had assimilated the absolute meaning; he would recognize a breadfruit from now on. Marian threw a quick mental question. Line answered.

To town (Darryl McNey) by window (ten minutes past)

"A bit confused," Marian said, "but I get the idea. He ought to be back soon. I'm in the mood for a swim. Suppose I fix some sandwiches?"

"Swell," Alexa said. "I'll help. Line knows more about catching trout than anybody I've ever seen, except he doesn't know what a dry fly is."

"I just aim to catch fish," Line said. "Enough to eat. Many a time I had to fish through holes in the ice to keep from being hungry."

Later, stretching his brown, hard body on the sandy bank of the pool upstream, he luxuriated in the warm sunlight and watched Alexa. Slim and attractive in white shorts and bathing cap, she inexpertly practiced casting, while McNey, pipe in his mouth, worked a likely-looking spot under an overhang of branches that brushed the water. Marian placidly ate sandwiches and watched the activities of a community of ants with considerable interest. The deep, unspoken comradeship of the family and the race was intangibly in the air. A

bond that reached out, touched Line, and drew him into its friendly center. This is it, he thought. I belong here. And Alexa's mind answered him with quiet confidence: You are one of Us.

The months passed very quickly for Line, broken by occasional visits from Dave Barton, whose manner grew increasingly more troubled, and by the green that covered tree and brush, ground and vine, as spring gave place to summer, and summer drew toward a not-distant autumn. He seldom thought of the Hedgehounds now. There was a sort of tacit acceptance of the situation among the little group; he felt, without actually bringing the realization consciously to mind, that Alexa knew a great deal about his past, and that she would not bring up the matter of Cassie unless he did. That she was beginning to love him he did not doubt. Nor did he doubt much that he loved her. After all, Alexa was his kind, as Cassie never had been.

But he dreamed of Cassie, nevertheless. Sometimes he felt loneliness, even among his own people. At such times he was anxious to finish his telepathic training and join Barton's fight against the paranoids. Barton was eager to enlist Line, but he warned against the danger of moving too soon. "The paranoids aren't fools, Line," he said. "We mustn't underestimate them. I've lived this long simply because I'm a trained big-game hunter. My reactions are just a bit faster than theirs, and I always try to maneuver them in a position where telepathy can't help them. If a paranoid's at the bottom of a well, he may read your intention of dropping a load of bricks on his head—but he can't do a lot about it."

"Any news about Callahan?" McNey asked.

"No word for months. There's some plan—maybe a big push in the propaganda field, maybe assassinations of key technologists. I don't know what. I've read no minds that knew the right answers. But I think something's going to break soon; I've found out that much. We've got

to be ready for it. We've got to break their code--or get one of our own. The same tune, Darryl."

"I know," McNey said. He stared out at the empty blue sky. "There isn't much I can say now, or even think. The same tune, all right."

"But you haven't failed? In a few weeks you're due back at Niagara."

Line said, "Look, about this code. I was thinking, the Hedgehounds have got a sort of code. Like this." He imitated a few bird and animal calls. "We know what they mean but nobody else knows."

"Hedgehounds aren't telepaths. If they were, your code wouldn't stay a secret long."

"Guess you're right. I'd like to take a crack at the paranoids, though."

"You'll have your chance," Barton said. "But, meanwhile, it's Darryl's job to find us a new weapon."

McNey said wearily, "I know all about that. No more pep talks, Dave, please."

Barton stood up, scowling. "I've a job to do down south. I'll see you when I get back, Darryl. Meanwhile, take care of yourself. If this business--whatever it is--should break soon, don't run any risks. You're vital to Us, much more so than I am."

With a nod to Line he went out. McNey stared at nothing. Line hesitated, sent out a querying thought, and met abstracted rebuff. He went downstairs.

He couldn't find Alexa. Finally he went out into the gardens, working his way toward the brook. A flash of color caught his eye, and he headed for it.

Alexa was sitting on a rock, her flimsy playsuit unzipped to let the slight breeze cool her. The heat was so intense that she had removed her wig, and her bald head was shiny and incongruous, incompatible with her artificial lashes and eyebrows. It was the first time Line had ever seen her wigless.

Instantly, at his thought, she swung about and began to replace the wig. But her arm stopped in arrested motion. She looked at him, half questionably, and then with pain and growing understanding in her eyes.

"Put it on, Alexa," Line said.

She watched him steadily. "What for--now?"

"I... it doesn't--"

Alexa shrugged and slipped the headpiece into place. "That was... strange," she said, deliberately speaking aloud as if she did not want to let her mind slip back into the channels of telepathic intimacy where hurt can strike so unerringly. "I'm so used myself to Baldies being--bald. I never thought before the sight could be--" She did not finish aloud. After a moment she said, "You must have been very unhappy among the Hedgehounds, Line. Even more unhappy than you realize. If you've been conditioned against the sight of baldness to... to that extent--"

"It wasn't," Line denied futilely. "I didn't... you shouldn't think--"

"It's all right. You can't help reactions as deeply rooted as that. Some day standards of beauty will change. Hairlessness will be lovely. Today it isn't, certainly not to a man with your psychological background. You must have been made to feel very keenly that you were inferior because of your baldness--"

Line stood there awkwardly, unable to deny the thought that had sprung so vividly into his mind, burning with shame and dismay at the knowledge that she had seen as clearly as himself the ugly picture of her baldness in his thought. As if he had held up a distorting mirror to her face and said aloud, "This is the way you look to me." As if he had slapped her gratuitously across the cheek with the taunt of her-- abnormality.

"Never mind," Alexa said, a little shakily, smiling. "You can't help it if baldness disg... distresses you. Forget it. It isn't as if we were m-married or... anything."

They looked at each other in silence. Their minds touched and sprang apart and then touched again, tentatively, with light thoughts that leaped from point to point as gingerly as if the ideas were ice-floes that might sink beneath the full weight of conscious focus.

I thought I loved you... perhaps I did... yes, I too... but now there can't be... (sudden, rebellious denial)... no, it's true, there can't ever be Tightness between us... not as if we were ordinary people... we'd always remember that picture, how I looked (abrupt sheering off from the memory)... (agonized repudiation of it)... no, couldn't help that... always between us... rooted too deeply... and anyhow, Cas-- (sudden closing off of both minds at once, before even the thought-image had time to form.)

Alexa stood up. "I'm going into town," she said. "Marian's at the hairdresser's. I... I'll get a wave or something."

He looked at her helplessly, half reluctant to let her go, though he knew as well as she how much had been discussed and weighed and discarded in the past moment of voiceless speech.

"Good-by, Alexa," he said.

"Good-by, Line."

Line stood for a long time watching the path, even after she had gone. He would have to leave. He didn't belong here. Even if nearness to Alexa were possible after this, he knew he could not stay. They were--abnormal. He would be seeing the baldness, the contemptible, laughable baldness he had hated in himself, more clearly now than the wigs they wore. Somehow until this moment he had never fully realized--

Well, he couldn't go without telling Darryl. Slowly, dragging his feet a little, he turned back toward the house. When he came to the side lawn he sent out an inexpert, querying thought.

Something answered him from the cellar-laboratory, a queer, strange, disturbing vibration that clung briefly to his mind and then pulled away. It wasn't McNey. It was--an intruder. Line went down the cellar steps. At the bottom he paused, trying to sort the tangled confusion in his mind as he thrust out exploratory mental fingers. The door was open. McNey was lying on the floor, his mind blanked, blood seeping from a red stain on his side. The intruder? Who--

Sergei Callahan.

Where--

Hidden. And armed.

So am I, Line thought, his dagger springing into his hand.

Telepathically you are untrained. In a fight you can't win.

That was probably true. Telepathy took the place of prescience with

the Baldies. Any Baldy could outguess and conquer a non-Baldy, and Line was not yet thoroughly trained in the use of the telepathic function.

He probed awkwardly. And, suddenly, he knew where Callahan was.

Behind the door. Where he could strike Line in the back when the boy entered the laboratory. He had not expected the untrained Baldy to discover the ambush until too late, and even as Line realized the situation, Callahan made a move to spring out.

All Line's weight smashed against the panel, slamming the door back against the wall. Callahan was caught. Pressed helplessly between the two metal planes--door and wall--he tried to brace himself, to wriggle free. His hand, gripping a dagger, snaked out. Line dropped his own weapon, put his back against the door, and planted his feet more firmly. The door frame gave him good purchase. Veins stood out on his forehead as he ground, crushed, drove the door back with all his strength.

What had Dave Barton said once? "Kill them with machines--" This was a machine--one of the oldest. The lever.

Suddenly Callahan began to scream. His agonized thought begged for mercy. In a moment his strength would fail, he pleaded. "Don't--don't crush me!"

His strength failed.

Line's heavy shoulders surged. There was one frightful mental scream from Callahan, more agonizing than the audible sound he made, and Line let the door swing slowly away from the wall. A body collapsed with its movement. Line picked up his dagger, used it efficiently, and then turned to McNey.

There was a puddle of blood on the floor, but McNey still lived. Callahan had not had time to finish his task.

Line became busy administering first aid.

This was it.

It was past midnight. In the cellar laboratory, McNey leaned back in his chair, wincing as he felt the pressure of the bandages about his ribs. He blinked at the fluorescents, sighed, and rubbed his forehead.

His hand hovered over the notepad. An equation was lacking. He wasn't quite ready to think of it just yet.

But the job was almost finished. It would give the Baldies a weapon, at last, against the paranoids. They couldn't tap the paranoid's secret wave length, but they could--

Not yet. Don't think of it yet.

Even Line had helped, unknowingly, by one suggestion he had made. Mimicry. Yes, that was one answer. The paranoids would not even suspect--

Not yet.

Well, Line had gone back to his Hedgehound tribe and his Hedgehound squaw. In the end, the psychological fixation implanted in the boy's mind had proved stronger than the strong bonds of race. Too bad, because Line had had something that few Baldies possessed--an innate hardness, a resourceful strength that might prove useful in the dark days that were coming.

The dark days that might yet be postponed, for a while, if--

Marian was asleep. McNey forced his thought from her. After years of marriage, they were so closely attuned that even that casual thought might waken her. And not until she had fallen asleep had he dared to bring his mind to bear on this ultimate problem. There could be no secrets between Baldies.

But this would be a secret--the one that would give Dave Barton a weapon against the paranoids. It was the unbreakable code that McNey had searched for for two years now.

It was a secret method of communication for Baldies.

Now. Work fast. Work fast!

McNey's stylus moved rapidly. He made a few adjustments in the machine before him, sealed its fastenings thoroughly, and watched power-flow develop. After a while, something came out of a small opening at one end of the device, a fine mesh of wire, with a few flatly curved attachments. McNey took off his wig, fitted the wire cap to his head, and donned the wig again. After a glance at a mirror, he nodded, satisfied.

The machine was permanently set now to construct these communicator caps when raw materials were fed into it. The matrix, the blueprint, had been built into the device, and the end result was a communicator gadget, easily hidden under a wig, which every non-paranoid Baldy probably would eventually wear. As for the nature of the gadget--

The problem had been to find a secret means of communication, akin to the paranoids'untappable wave band. And telepathy itself is simply a three-phase oscillation of electromagneto-gravitic energy, emanating from the specialized colloid of the human brain. But

telepathy, per se, can be received by any sensitive mind en rapport with the sender.

And so the trick had been--find a method of artificial transmission. The brain, when properly stimulated by electric energy, will give out electromagneto-gravitic energy, undetectable except to telepaths because there are no instruments sensitive to this output. But when the paranoids would receive such radiations, without the unscrambling assistance of one of McNey's little caps, they wouldn't suspect a code.

Because they'd be hearing--sensing--only static.

It was a matter of camouflage. The waves masqueraded. They masqueraded on a wave band that nobody used, for that particular band was too close to that of the radio communicators used in thousands of private helicopters. For these radios, five thousand megacycles was normal; fifteen thousand manifested itself as a harmless harmonic static, and McNey's device simply added more squirts of static to that harmonic interference.

True, direction finders could receive the signals and locate them--but helicopters, like Baldies, were scattered all over the country, and the race traveled a good deal, both by necessity and by choice. The paranoids could locate the source of the fifteen thousand megacycles emanating from the wire caps--but why should they think to?

It was an adaptation of the Hedgehounds'code of imitating bird and animal calls. A tenderfoot in the woods wouldn't look for a language in the cry of an owl--and the paranoids wouldn't be seeking secret messages in what was apparently only static.

So, in these light, easily disguised mesh helmets, the problem was

solved, finally. The power source would be an automatic tapping of free energy, an imperceptible drain on any nearby electrical generator, and the master machine itself, which made the communicators, was permanently sealed. No one, except McNey himself, knew even the principles of the new communication system. And, since the machine would be guarded well, the paranoids would never know, any more than Barton himself would know, what made the gadget tick. Barton would realize its effectiveness, and that was all. The list of raw materials needed was engraved on the feeder-hopper of the machine; nothing else was necessary. So Barton would possess no secrets to betray inadvertently to the paranoids, for the secrets were all sealed in the machine, and in one other place.

McNey took off the wire cap and laid it on the table. He turned off the machine. Then, working quickly, he destroyed the formulas and any traces of notes or raw materials. He wrote a brief note to Barton, explaining what was necessary.

There was no more time left after that. McNey sank back in his chair, his tired, ordinary face without expression. He didn't look like a hero. And, just then, he wasn't thinking about the future of the Baldy race, or the fact that the other place where the secret was sealed was in his brain.

As his hands loosened the bandage about his ribs, he was thinking of Marian. And as his life began to flow out with the blood from his reopened wound, he thought: I wish I could say good-bye to you, Marian. But I mustn't touch you, not even with my mind. We're too close. You'd wake up, and--

I hope you won't be. too lonely, my dear--

He was going back. The Hedgehounds weren't his people, but

Cassie was his wife. And so he had betrayed his own race, betrayed the future itself, perhaps, and followed the wandering tribe across three states until now, with the autumn winds blowing coldly through bare leaves, he had come to the end of his search. She was there, waiting. She was there, just beyond that ridge. He could feel it, sense it, and his heart stirred to the homecoming.

Betrayal, then. One man could not matter in the life of a race. There would be a few Baldy children less than if he had married Alexa. The Baldies would have to work out their own salvation--

But he wasn't thinking about that as he leaped the last hurdle and ran to where Cassie was sitting near the fire. He was thinking about Cassie, and the glossy darkness of her hair, and the soft curve of her cheek. He called her name, again and again.

She didn't believe it at first. He saw doubt in her eyes and in her mind. But that doubt faded when he dropped beside her, a strange figure in his exotic town clothing, and took her in his arms.

"Line," she said, "you've come back."

He managed to say, "I've come back," and stopped talking and thinking for a while. It was a long time before Cassie thought to show him something in which he might be expected to evince interest.

He did. His eyes widened until Cassie laughed and said that it wasn't the first baby in the world.

"I... us... you mean--"

"Sure. Us. This is Line Junior. How'd you like him? He takes after his dad, too."

"What?"

"Hold him." As Cassie put the baby into his arms, Line saw what she meant. The small head was entirely hairless, and there was no sign of lashes or eyebrows.

"But... you ain't bald, Cassie. How--"

"You sure are, though, Line. That's why."

Line put his free arm around her and drew her close. He couldn't see the future; he couldn't realize the implications of this first attempt at mixing races. He only knew a profound and inarticulate relief that his child was like himself. It went deeper than the normal human desire to perpetuate one's own kind. This was reprieve. He had not, after all, wholly failed his race. Alexa would never bear his children, but his children need not be of alien stock in spite of it.

That deep warping which the Hedgehounds had wrought upon himself must not happen to the child. I'll train him, he thought. He'll know from the start--he'll learn to be proud he's a Baldy. And then if they ever need him... no, if We ever need him... he'll be ready where I failed.

The race would go on. It was good and satisfying and right that the union of Baldy and human could result in Baldy children. The line need not come to dead end because a man married outside his own kind. A man must follow his instinct, as Line had done. It was good to belong to a race that allowed even that much treason to its tradition, and exacted no lasting penalty. The line was too strong to break. The dominant strain would go on.

Perhaps McNey's invention could postpone the day of the pogrom. Perhaps it could not. But if the day came, still the Baldies would go on. Underground, hidden, persecuted, still they must go on. And

perhaps it would be among the Hedgehounds that the safest refuge could be found. For they had an emissary there, now--

Maybe this was right, Line thought, his arm around Cassie and the child. Once I belonged here. Now I don't. I'll never be happy for good in the old life. I know too much-- But here I'm a link between the public life and the secret life of the refugees. Maybe some day they'll need that link. "Line," he mused, and grinned.

Off in the distance a growl of song began to lift. The tribesmen, coming back from the day's hunting. He was surprised, a little, to realize he felt no more of the old, deep, bewildered distrust of them. He understood now. He knew them as they could never know themselves, and he had learned enough in the past months to evaluate that knowledge. Hedgehounds were no longer the malcontents and misfits of civilization. Generations of weeding-out had distilled them. Americans had always been a distillation in themselves of the pioneer, the adventurous drawn from the old world. The buried strain came out again in their descendants. The Hedgehounds were nomads now, yes; they were woodsmen, yes; they were fighters, always. So were the first Americans. The same hardy stock that might, some day, give refuge again to the oppressed and the hunted.

The song grew louder through the trees, Jesse James Hartwell's roaring bass leading all the others. "Hurrah, hurrah, we bring the jubilee! Hurrah, hurrah, the flag that makes men free--"

Greater Than Gods

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The desk was glass-clear steel, the mirror above it a window that opened upon distance and sight and sound whenever the televisor buzzer rang. The two crystal cubes on the desk were three-dimensional photographs of a sort undreamed of before the Twenty-third Century dawned. But between them on the desk lay a letter whose message was older than the history of writing itself.

"My darling--" it began in a man's strongly slanting handwriting. But there Bill Cory had laid down his pen and run despairing fingers through his hair, looking from one crystal-cubed photograph to the other and swearing a little under his breath. It was fine stuff, he told himself savagely, when a man couldn't even make up his mind which of two girls he wanted to marry. Biology House of Science City, that trusted so faithfully the keenness and clarity of Dr. William Cory's decisions, would have shuddered to see him now.

For the hundredth time that afternoon he looked from one girl's face to the other, smiling at him from the crystal cubes, and chewed his lip unhappily. On his left, in the translucent block that had captured an immortal moment when dark Marta Mayhew smiled, the three-dimensional picture looked out at him with a flash of violet eyes. Dr. Marta Mayhew of Chemistry House, ivory whiteness and satin blackness. Not at all the sort of picture the mind conjures up of a leading chemist in Science City which houses the greatest scientists in the world.

Bill Cory wrinkled his forehead and looked at the other girl. Sallie Carlisle dimpled at him out of the crystal, as real as life itself to the last flying tendril of fair curls that seemed to float on a breeze frozen

eternally into glass. Bill reached to turn the cube a little, bringing the delicate line of her profile into view, and it was as if time stood still in the crystalline deeps and pretty Sallie in the breathing flesh paused for an eternal moment with her profile turned away.

After a long moment Bill Cory sighed and picked up his pen. After the "darling" of the letter he wrote firmly, "Sallie."

"Dr. Cory," hesitated a voice at the door. Bill looked up, frowning. Miss Brown blinked at him nervously behind her glasses. "Dr. Ashley's--"

"Don't announce me, Brownie," interrupted a languid voice behind her. "I want to catch him loafing. Ah, Bill, writing love letters? May I come in?"

"Could I stop you?" Bill's grin erased the frown from his forehead. The tall and tousled young man in the doorway was Charles Ashley, head of Telepathy House, and though their acquaintance had long been on terms of good-natured insult, behind it lay Bill's deep recognition of a quality of genius in Ashley that few men ever attain. No one could have risen to the leadership of Telepathy House whose mind did not encompass many more levels of infinite understanding than the ordinary mind even recognizes.

"I've worked myself into a stupor," announced the head of Telepathy House, yawning. "Come on up to the Gardens for a swim, huh?"

"Can't." Bill laid down his pen. "I've got to see the pups--"

"Damn the pups! You think Science City quivers every time those little mutts yap! Let Miss Brown look after 'em. She knows more than you do about genetics, anyhow. Some day the Council's going to find it out and you'll go back to working for a living."

"Shut up," requested Bill with a grin. "How are the pups, Miss Brown?"

"Perfectly normal, doctor. I just gave them their three o'clock feeding and they're asleep now."

"Do they seem happy?" inquired Ashley solicitously.

"That's right, scoff," sighed Bill. "Those pups and I will go ringing down the corridors of time, you mark my words."

Ashley nodded, half seriously. He knew it might well be true. The pups were the living proof of Bill's success in prenatal sex determination--six litters of squirming maleness with no female among them. They represented the fruit of long, painstaking experiments in the x-ray bombardment of chromosomes to separate and identify the genes carrying the factors of sex determination, of countless failures and immeasurable patience. If the pups grew into normal dogs--well, it would be one long, sure stride nearer the day when, through Bill's own handiwork, the world would be perfectly balanced between male and female in exact proportion to the changing need.

Miss Brown vanished with a shy, self-effacing smile. As the door closed behind her, Ashley, who had been regarding the two photograph cubes on Bill's desk with a lifted eyebrow, arranged his long length on the couch against the wall and was heard to murmur:

"Eenie-meenie-minie-mo. Which is it going to be, Wil-yum?"

They were on terms too intimate for Bill to misunderstand, or pretend to.

"I don't know," he admitted miserably, glancing down in some

hesitation at the letter beginning, "My darling Sallie--"

Ashley yawned again and fumbled for a cigarette. "You know," he murmured comfortably, "it's interesting to speculate on your possible futures. With Marta or Sallie, I mean. Maybe some day somebody will find a way to look ahead down the branching paths of the future and deliberately select the turning points that will carry him toward the goal he chooses. Now if you could know beforehand where life with Sallie would lead, or life with Marta, you might alter the whole course of human history. That is, if you're half as important as you think you are."

"Huh-uh," grunted Bill. "If you predicate a fixed future, then it's fixed already, isn't it? And you'd have no real choice."

Ashley scratched a match deliberately and set his cigarette aglow before he said: "I think of the future as an infinite reservoir of an infinite number of futures, each of them fixed, yet malleable as clay. Do you see what I mean? At every point along our way we confront crossroads at which we make choices among the many possible things we may do the next moment. Each crossroad leads to a different future, all of them possible, all of them fixed, waiting for our choice to give them reality. Perhaps there's a--call it a Plane of Probability--where all these possible results of our possible choices exist simultaneously. Blueprints of things to come. When the physical time of matter catches up with, and fills in, any one particular plan, it becomes fixed in the present.

"But before time has caught up with it, while our choice at the crossroads is still unmade, an infinite number of possible futures must exist as it were in suspension, waiting for us in some unimaginable, dimensionless infinity. Can you imagine what it would be like to open a window upon that Probability Plane, look out into the infinities of the future, trace the consequences of future actions

before we make them? We could mold the destiny of mankind! We could do what the gods must do, Bill! We'd be greater than gods! We could look into the Cosmic Mind--the very brain that planned us--and of our own will choose among those plans!"

"Wake up, Ash," said Bill softly.

"You think I'm dreaming? It's not a new idea, really. The old philosopher, Berkeley, had a glimpse of it when he taught his theories of subjective idealism, that we're aware of the cosmos only through a greater awareness all around us, an infinite mind--

"Listen, Bill. If you vision these... these blueprints of possible futures, you've got to picture countless generations, finite as ourselves, existing simultaneously and completely in all the circumstances of their entire lives--yet all of them still unborn, still even uncertain of birth if the course of the present is diverted from their particular path. To themselves, they must seem as real as we to each other.

"Somewhere on the Plane of Probability, Bill, there may be two diverging lines of your descendants, unborn generations whose very existence hinges on your choice here at the crossroads. Projections of yourself, really, their lives and deaths trembling in the balance. Think well before you choose!"

Bill grinned. "Suppose you go back to the Slum and dope out a way for me to look into the Cosmic Plan," he suggested.

Ashley shook his head.

"Wish I could. Boy, would you eat that word 'Slum'then! Telepathy House wouldn't be the orphan child around the City any longer if I could really open a window onto the Probability Plane. But I wouldn't bother with you and your pint-sized problems. I'd look ahead into the

future of the City. It's the heart of the world, now. Some day it may rule the world. And we're biased, you know. We can't help being. With all the sciences housed here under one citywide roof, wielding powers that kings never dreamed of-- No, it may go to our heads. We may overbalance into... into... well, I'd like to look ahead and prevent it. And if this be treason--" He shrugged and got up. "Sure you won't join me?"

"Go on--get out. I'm a busy man."

"So I see." Ashley twitched an eyebrow at the two crystal cubes. "Maybe it's good you can't look ahead. The responsibility of choosing might be heavier than you could bear. After all, we aren't gods and it must be dangerous to usurp a god's prerogative. Well, see you later."

Bill leaned in the doorway watching the lounging figure down the hall toward the landing platform where crystal cars waited to go flashing along the great tubes which artery Science City. Beyond, at the platform's edge, the great central plaza of the City dropped away in a breath-taking void a hundred stories deep. He stood looking out blind-eyed, wondering if Sallie or Marta would walk this hall in years to come.

Life would be more truly companionship with Marta, perhaps. But did a family need two scientists? A man wanted relaxation at home, and who could make life gayer than pretty Sallie with her genius for entertainment, her bubbling laughter? Yes, let it be Sallie. If there were indeed a Probability Plane where other possible futures hung suspended, halfway between waking and oblivion, let them wink out into nothingness.

He shut the door with a little slam to wake himself out of the dream, greeting the crystal-shrined girl on his desk with a smile. She was so

real--the breeze blowing those curls was a breeze in motion. The lashes should flutter against the soft fullness of her lids-- Bill squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head to clear it. There was something wrong--the crystal was clouding-- A ringing in his ears grew louder in company with that curious blurring of vision. From infinitely far away, yet strangely in his own ears, a tiny voice came crying. A child's voice calling, "Daddy... daddy!"

A girl's voice, coming nearer, "Father--" A woman's voice saying over and over in a smooth, sweet monotone, "Dr. Cory... Dr. William Cory--"

Upon the darkness behind his closed lids a streaked and shifting light moved blurrily. He thought he saw towers in the sun, forests, robed people walking leisurely--and it all seemed to rush away from his closed eyes so bewilderingly--he lifted his lids to stare at-- To stare at the cube where Sallie smiled. Only this was not Sallie.

He gaped with the blankness of a man confronting impossibilities. It was not wholly Sallie now, but there was a look of Sallie upon the lovely, sun-touched features in the cube. All of her sweetness and softness, but with it--something more. Something familiar. What upon this living, lovely face, with its level brown eyes and courageous mouth, reminded Bill of--himself?

His hands began to shake a little. He thrust them into his pockets and sat down without once taking his eyes from the living stare in the cube. There was amazement in that other stare, too, and a half-incredulous delight that brightened as he gazed.

Then the sweet curved lips moved--lips with the softness of Sallie's closing on the firm, strong line of Bill's. They said distinctly, in a sound that might have come from the cube itself or from somewhere deep within his own brain: "Dr. Cory... Dr. Cory, do you hear me?"

"I hear you," he heard himself saying hoarsely, like a man talking in a dream. "But--"

The face that was Sallie's and his blended blazed into joyful recognition, dimples denting the smooth cheeks with delicious mirth. "Oh, thank Heaven it is you! I've reached through at last. I've tried so hard, so long--"

"But who... what--" Bill choked a little on his own amazement and fell silent, marveling at the strange warm tenderness that was flooding up in him as he watched this familiar face he had never seen before. A tenderness more melting and protective and passionately selfless than he had ever imagined a man could feel. Dizzy with complete bewilderment, too confused to wonder if he dreamed, he tried again. "Who are you? What are you doing here? How did--"

"But I'm not there--not really." The sweet face smiled again, and Bill's heart swelled until his throat almost closed with a warmth of pride and tenderness he was too dizzy to analyze now. "I'm here--here at home in Eden, talking to you across the millennium! Look--"

Somehow, until then he had not seen beyond her. Sallie's face had smiled out of a mist of tulle, beyond which the cube had been crystal-clear. But behind the face which was no longer wholly Sally's, a green hillside filled the cube. And, very strangely, it had no look of smallness. Though the cube's dimensions confined it, here was no miniature scene he gazed upon. He looked through the cube as through a window, out into a forest glade where upon a bank of green myrtle at the foot of a white garden wall a little group of tanned men and women reclined in a circle with closed eyes, lying almost like corpses on the dark, glossy leaves. But there was no relaxation in them. Tensity more of the spirit than the body knit the group into a whole, focused somehow upon the woman in the circle's center--this

fair-haired woman who leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, chin in hand, staring brown-eyed and tensely into space--into Bill Cory's eyes. Dimly he realized that his perception had expanded as he stared. Awareness now of a whole countryside beyond her, just over the garden wall, made this cube that had housed Sallie's careless smile a window indeed, opening upon distance in space and time far outside his imagining.

He knew he was dreaming. He was sure of it, though the memory of what Ashley had been saying hovered uneasily in the back of his mind, too elusive now to be brought consciously into view. But in this impossible dream he clenched his hands hard in his pockets, taking a firm hold upon reality.

"Just who are you, and what do you want? And how did you--"

She chose to answer the last question first, breaking into it as if she could read his thoughts as she knelt staring on the myrtle leaves.

"I speak to you along an unbroken cord between us--father. Thousands of times removed, but--father. A cord that runs back through the lives that have parted us, yet which unite us. With the help of these people around me, their full mental strength supplementing mine, we've established contact at last, after so many failures, so much groping in mysteries which even I understand only partly, though my family for generations has been trained in the secrets of heredity and telepathy."

"But why--"

"Isn't the fact of achievement an end in itself? Success in establishing a two-way contact with the past, in talking to one's own ancestors--do I need more reason for attempting that than the pure joy of achieving it? You wonder why you were chosen. Is that it?"

Because you are the last man in a direct line of males to be born into my family before the blessed accident that saved the world from itself.

"Don't look so bewildered!" Laughter bubbled from the cube--or was it a sound in his own brain? "You aren't dreaming! Is it so incredible that along the unbroken cord of memories which links your mind to mine the current might run backward against the time flow?"

"But who are you? Your face--it's like--"

"My face is the face of the daughter that Sallie Cory bore you, thousands of years ago. That resemblance is a miracle and a mystery beyond all understanding--the mystery of heredity which is a stranger thing than the fact of our communication. We have wondered among ourselves if immortality itself--but no, I'll have mercy on you!"

This bewilderingly beloved face that had darkened with mystical brooding, flashed suddenly alive again with swift laughter, and hearing it, catching a lift of the brows that was his and a quirk of the soft lips that was Sallie's own, Bill made no effort to stem the tide of warm affection rising higher and higher in him. It was himself looking out of this cube through Sallie's brown eyes--himself exultant in achievement for the simple sake of achieving. She had called him father. Was this a father's love, selfless, unfathomable, for a lovely and beloved daughter?

"Don't wonder any more," laughed the voice in his ears. "Look--here's the past that lies between us. I want you to understand what parts your world from mine."

Softly the myrtle glade and the lovely smiling face that blended Sallie and Bill melted into the depths of a cloud forming inside the three

dimensions of the cube. For a moment--nothing. Then motion was lifting behind the mist, shouldering the veils aside. Three-dimensional space seemed to open up all around him-- He saw a wedding procession coming down a church aisle toward him, Sallie smiling mistily through a cloud of silver tulle. And he knew at the sight of her that though it was only chance which had chosen her instead of dark Marta Mayhew, he could come to love Sallie Carlisle Cory with an intensity almost frightening.

He saw time go by with a swiftness like thought itself, events telescoping together with no sense of confusion, moving like memories through his mind, clear, yet condensed into split seconds. He was watching his own future, seeing a life that revolved around Sallie as the center of existence. He saw her flashing in and out of his laboratory as he worked, and whenever she entered, the whole room seemed to light up; whenever she left, he could scarcely work for the longing to follow.

He saw their first quarrel. Sallie, spinning in a shimmer of bright glass-silk as soft as gossamer, dimpled at the self which in this waking dream was more vividly Bill Cory than the Bill who watched. "See, darling, aren't I heavenly?" And he heard himself answering, "Edible, darling! But isn't that stuff expensive?"

Sallie's laughter was light. "Only fifteen hundred credits. That's dirt-cheap for a Skiparelle model."

He gasped. "Why Sallie, that's more than we're allowed for living expenses! I can't--"

"Oh, daddy'll pay for it if you're going to be stingy. I only wanted--"

"I'll buy my wife's clothes." Bill was grim. "But I can't afford Paris fashions, darling."

Sallie's pretty underlip pouted alarmingly. Tears sparkled in the soft brown eyes she lifted to his, and his heart melted almost painfully in one hopeless rush.

"Don't cry, sweetheart! You can keep it, just this once. But we'll have to make it up next month. Never again, Sallie, understand?"

Her nod was bright and oblivious as a child's.

But they didn't make it up. Sallie loved partying, and Bill loved Sallie, and nowadays there was much more hilarity than work going on behind the door in Biology House marked "Dr. William Vincent Cory." The television's panels were tuned to orchestras playing strong rhythm now, not to lectures and laboratory demonstrations as of old.

No man can do two jobs well. The work on sex determination began to strike snags in the path that had seemed almost clear to success, and Bill had so little time any more to smooth them out. Always Sallie was in the back of his mind, sweet, smiling, adorable.

Sallie wanted the baby to be born in her father's home. It was a lovely place, white-walled on low green hills above the Pacific. Sallie loved it. Even when little Sue was big enough to travel she hated to think of leaving. And the climate was so wonderful for the baby there-- Anyhow, by then the Council had begun to frown over Bill Cory's work. After all, perhaps he wasn't really cut out to be a scientist-- Sallie's happiness was more important than any man's job, and Sallie could never be really happy in Science City.

The second baby was a girl, too. There were a lot of girls being born nowadays. The telenews broadcasters joked about it. A good sign, they said. When a preponderance of boys was born, it had always meant war. Girls should bring peace and plenty for the new

generation.

Peace and plenty--that was what mattered most to Bill and Sallie Cory now. That and their two exquisite daughters and their home on the green Pacific hills. Young Susan was growing up into a girlhood so enchanting that Bill suffused with pride and tenderness every time he thought of her. She had Sallie's beauty and blondeness, but there was a resolution in her that had been Bill's once, long ago. He liked to think of her, in daydreams, carrying on the work that he would never finish now.

Time ran on, years telescoping pleasantly into uneventful years. Presently the Cory girls were growing up... were married... were mothers. The grandchildren were girls, too. When Grandfather Cory joined his wife in the little graveyard on the sea-turned hill beyond the house, the Cory name died with him, though there was in his daughter's level eyes and in her daughter's look of serene resolution something more intrinsically Bill Cory than his name. The name might die, but something of the man who had borne it lived on in his descendants.

Girls continued to outnumber boys in the birth records as the generations passed. It was happening all over the world, for no reason that anyone could understand. It didn't matter much, really. Women in public offices were proving very efficient; certainly they governed more peacefully than men. The first woman president won her office on a platform that promised no war so long as a woman dwelt in the White House.

Of course, some things suffered under the matriarchy. Women as a sex are not scientists, not inventors, not mechanics or engineers or architects. There were men enough to keep these essentially masculine arts alive--that is, as much of them as the new world needed. There were many changes. Science City, for instance.

Important, of course, but not to the extent of draining the country dry to maintain it. Life went on very nicely without too much machinery.

The tendency was away from centralized living in these new days. Cities spread out instead of up. Skyscrapers were hopelessly old-fashioned. Now parklands and gardens stretched between low-roofed houses where the children played all day. And war was a barbarous memory from those nightmare years when men still ruled the world.

Old Dr. Phillips, head of the dwindling and outmoded Science City, provoked President Wiliston into a really inspiring fury when he criticized the modern tendency toward a non-mechanized rural civilization. It happened on the telenews, so that half the world heard it.

"But Madam President," he said, "don't you realize where we're heading? The world's going backward! It's no longer worthwhile for our best minds to attempt bettering living conditions. We're throwing genius away! Do you realize that your cabinet yesterday flatly rejected the brilliant work of one of our most promising young men?"

"I do!" Alice Wiliston's voice rang with sudden violence over half the world. "That 'brilliant work,' as you call it, was a device that might have led to war! Do you think we want that? Remember the promise that the first woman president made the world, Dr. Phillips! So long as we sit in the White House there will be no need for war!"

And Elizabeth of England nodded in London; Julianna vii smiled into her Amsterdam telenews screen. While women ruled, war was outlawed. Peace and ease, and plenty would dominate civilization, leisure for cultivation of the arts, humankind coming into its own at last, after so many ages of pain and blood and heartbreak.

Years telescoped into centuries of peace and plenty in a garden world. Science had turned its genius to the stabilization of the climate so that nowhere was shelter necessary from cold or storms; food was freely abundant for all. The Garden that Adam and Eve forfeited in the world's beginning had returned again to their remotest descendants, and the whole earth was Eden.

And in this world that no longer demanded the slightest physical effort, mankind was turning to the cultivation of the mind. In these white, low-roofed houses set among garden parks, men and women increasingly adventured into the realms beyond the flesh, exploring the mysteries of the mind.

Bill Cory, leaning forward in his chair, had lost all identity with himself. He was simply a consciousness watching time unfold before him. The gravestone that bore his name on the California hillside had long since sunk into the sod, but if there is immortality at all, Bill Cory watched himself move forward through the centuries, down the long, expanding line of his descendants. Now and again, startlingly, his own face looked briefly at him from some faraway child of his remote grandchildren. His face, and Sallie's.

He saw pretty Sue come and go like reflections in a mirror. Not always Sue unmistakably and completely—sometimes only her brown eyes lighted the face of a many-times-great-granddaughter; sometimes the lift of her smile or the tilt of her pretty nose alone was familiar to him in a strange face. But sometimes Sue herself, perfect to the last detail, moved through the remote future. And every time he saw those familiar features, his heart contracted with an ache of tenderness for the daughter he yet might never have.

It was for these beloved Susans that he was becoming uneasy as he watched time go by in this lazy paradise world. People were slowing mentally and physically. What need any more for haste or trouble?

Why worry because certain unimportant knowledge was being lost as time went on? The weather machines, the food machines were eternal; what else really mattered? Let the birth rate decline, let the dwindling race of the inventive and the ambitious fade like the anachronism it was. The body had taken mankind as far as it could; the mind was the vehicle for the future. In the vast reaches of infinity were fields aplenty for the adventurous spirit. Or one could simply drowse the days away-- Clouds thickened softly across the dreamy vistas of Eden. Bill Cory leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes with both hands. The hands were shaking, and he stared at them a little stupidly, still half lost in the wonder of what he had seen, in the strange welter of emotions that still warred in him--the memory of Sallie and his strong love for her, the memory of Sue's sweetness, the memory of pride in them both. And in the queer feeling that it had been himself in those many daughters of his through the ages, striving so hard for world peace to the ultimate end that mankind might achieve--ruin.

For it was wrong--it was bad. The whole world. The race of man was too splendid, too capable of working miracles, to end on a myrtle bank dreaming about abstractions. He had just seen a decadent, indolent, civilization going down the last incline into oblivion as a result--yes, as a direct result--of his own action. He'd seen himself sinking into a fat, idle old age, without honor or achievement.

Suddenly and desperately he hoped that Ashley had been right--that this was not the inevitable and changeless future. If he tore up the letter lying on his desk now, if he never married Sallie, would not his work be finished successfully some day, and the catastrophe of unbalanced births avoided? Or could a man change his ordained future?

Almost fearfully he reached for the letter lying beside that clouded cube in which the years had mirrored themselves. Would he be able

to take the letter up and rip it across--like this? The sound of tearing paper reassured him. So far, at least, he was still a free agent.

And knowing that, suddenly he was sorry. Not to marry Sallie, with her bubbling laugh. Never to see young Sue growing into beauty and courage and sweetness. Old age without achievement, had he said to himself a moment ago? Sue herself was achievement enough for any man. Sue and those other Susans down the long line of his descendants, incarnating again and again all that was finest in him, eternal as life itself through millenniums.

He did not want to meet again the brown eyes of this latest Susan who had come to him in the depths of the cube. While he looked, his reason was lost in his love for her, and not even against reason could he believe the world which had produced her to be anything but perfect, simply because this beloved daughter moved and breathed in it.

But the letter was torn. He would never marry Sallie if he could help himself. The cost was too high, even for such a reward as Sue. And an almost tremulous awe broke over him in a sudden tide as he realized what he was doing. This was what Ashley had dreamed of--opening a window into the Plane of Probability and learning enough to force the Cosmic Mind out of its course. Changing the shape of his own future and that of all mankind. Greater than gods--but he was no god. And Ashley had warned him that it might be dangerous to usurp a god's prerogative. Suddenly he was afraid.

He looked away from that cube which held his future, and across from it on his desk the violet eyes of Marta Mayhew caught his, fixed in their changeless smile. She was a girl, he thought, he remembered from half a lifetime ago, so much had happened since he glanced last into her face. Dark and lovely she was, her eyes meeting his almost as if there were vision behind their deep, long

stare. Almost as if--

Light flared out in one white, blinding sheet that blotted out the cube and the violet-eyed face and the room around him. Involuntarily Bill clapped his hands to his eyes, seeing behind the darkness of his lids a dazzle of blurring colors. It had happened too quickly for wonder-- he was not even thinking as he opened his eyes and looked into the cube where Marta's gaze had met him a moment before.

And then a great tide of awe and wonder came washing up into his consciousness, and he knew that Ashley had been right. There was an alternative future. There comes a point beyond which bewilderment and shock no longer affect the human brain, and Bill was outside wondering now, or groping for logical explanations. He only knew that he stood here staring into the cube from which Marta's eyes had smiled at him so short an instant ago-- They were still Marta's eyes, deep-colored in a boy face almost Bill's own, feature for feature, under a cap of blue steel. Somehow that other future had come to him, too. He was aware of a sudden urgent wonder why they had come so nearly together, though neither could be conscious of the other-- But things were moving in the depths of the cube.

Behind the boy's face, three-dimensional perspective had started vividly back from the crystal surfaces, as if the cube were a wide window flung suddenly open upon a new world. In that world, a place of glass and shining chromium, faces crowded as if indeed at an open window, peering into his room. Steel-helmed faces with staring eyes. And foremost among them, leaning almost through the opened window into his own past, the steel-capped boy whose features were Bill's looked eagerly out, the sound of quickened breath through his lips a soft, clear sound in the room. They were Bill's lips, Bill's features--but Marta's gentle courage had somehow grown masculine in the lines of the boy's face, and her eyes met Bill's in his.

In the instant before those parted lips spoke, Bill knew him, and his throat closed on an unuttered cry of recognition--recognition of this face he had never seen before, yet could not mistake. The deep welling of love and pride in his heart would have told him the boy's identity, he thought, had he not known at sight who he was--would be--might one day be-- He heard his own voice saying doubtfully, "Son--?"

But if the boy heard he must not have understood. He was handicapped by no such emotion as stirred Bill. His clipped, metallic voice spoke as clearly as if indeed through an opened window:

"Greetings from the United World, William Vincent Cory! Greetings from the Fifteenth Leader in the Fifth New Century, a. c."

Behind the disciplined, stern-featured young face others crowded, men with steel-hard features under steel caps. As the boy's voice paused, a dozen right arms slanted high, a dozen open palms turned forward in a salute that was old when Caesar took it in ancient Rome. A dozen voices rolled out in clipped accents, "Greetings, William Vincent Cory!"

Bill's bewildered stammer was incoherent, and the boy's face relaxed a little into a smile. He said: "We must explain, of course. For generations our scientists have been groping in the past, Dr. Cory. This is our first successful two-way contact, and for its demonstration to our Council, connection with you was selected as the most appropriate and fitting contact possible. Because your name is holy among Us; we know all there is to know of your life and work, but we have wished to look upon your face and speak to you of our gratitude for molding mankind into the patterns of the United World.

"As a matter of record, I have been instructed to ask first at what point we have intersected the past. What date is it in your calendar?"

"Why, it's July 7, 2240," Bill heard his own voice stammer a little as he answered, and he was conscious of a broad and rather foolish grin overspreading his face. He couldn't help it. This was his boy--the child who wouldn't be born for years yet, who might, really, never be born. Yet he knew him, and he couldn't help smiling with pride, and warm, delighted amusement. So stern-faced, so conscious of his own responsibility! Marta's son and his--only of course it couldn't be, exactly. This scene he looked into must be far ahead in time--"Twenty-two forty!" exclaimed the boy who was not his son.

"Why, the Great Work isn't even finished yet then! We're earlier than we knew!"

"Who are you, son?" Bill couldn't keep the question back any longer.

"I'm John Williams Cory iv, sir," said the boy proudly. "Your direct descendant through the Williams line, and--First in the Candidates Class." He said it proudly, a look of almost worshiping awe lighting his resolute young face. "That means, of course, that I shall be the Sixteenth Leader when the great Dunn retires, and the sixth Cory--the sixth, sir!--to be called to that highest of all human stations, the Leadership!" The violet eyes so incongruous in that disciplined young face blazed with almost fanatic exaltation.

Behind him, a heavy-faced man moved forward, lifting the Roman salute, smiling wintrily beneath his steel helmet.

"I am Dunn, sir," he said in a voice as heavy as his features. "We've let Candidate Cory contact you because of the relationship, but it's my turn now to extend greetings from the System you made possible. I want to show it to you, but first let me thank you for founding the greatest family the United World has ever known. No other name has appeared more than twice on the great roll of Leaders, but we have had five Corys--and the finest of them all is yet to come!"

Bill saw a wave of clear red mount his boy's proud, exalted face, and his own heart quickened with love and pride. For this was his son, by whatever name he went here. The memory of his lovely daughter had been drowned out momentarily in the deep uprushing of pride in this tall, blue-eyed boy with his disciplined face and his look of leashed eagerness. There was drive and strength and power of will in that young face now.

He scarcely heard Dunn's heavy voice from the room beyond the cube, so eagerly was he scanning the face of this son he yet might never have, learning almost hungrily the already familiar features, at once hard and eager and exultant. That mouth was his, tight and straight, and the cheeks that creased with deep hollows when he smiled, but the violet eyes were his mother's eyes, and the gentle inflexibility of Marta's courage at once strengthened and softened the features that were Bill's own. The best of them both was here, shining now with something more than either had ever known--an almost fanatic devotion to some stern purpose as exalting as worship, as inflexible as duty-- "Your own future, sir," Dunn was saying. "But our past, of course. Would you like to see it, Dr. Cory, so that you may understand just how directly we owe to you all that our world is today?"

"Yes--v-very much." Bill grinned at his own stammer, suddenly light-hearted and incredulous. All this was a dream. He knew that, of course. Why, the very coincidences in it proved that. Or--were they coincidences? Desperately he tried to clarify the thought taking form in his own mind, a terrifyingly vast thought, terrifyingly without explanation. And yet it must be a dream-- If it were real, then there was more than chance here. It could be no accident that these two children of his, groping blindly in the dark for contact with him, had succeeded at so nearly the same moment. There would be reason behind it, reason too vast for comprehension. He parted his lips to

speaking, but Dunn was already speaking.

"Look then, William Vincent Cory! Watch your own greatness unfolding in the years that lie ahead."

Hazily the scene in the cube blurred. The beloved, blue-eyed face of the boy he might never have, faded as a dream fades--a dream fading in a dream, he thought dimly--

This time it was Marta coming down the church aisle toward him, looking like a violet-eyed madonna coifed and veiled in white lace. He knew that he did not love her, now. His heart was still sore with the memory of Sallie. But love would come; with a woman like this it could not but come. There was tenderness and humor and passion on that raptly lifted face, and a strength that would call out the strength in him, not a weakness such as dimpled in Sallie's face to evoke an underlying weakness in himself. For weakness was in him. He knew it. It would depend upon the woman who shared his life which quality overcame the other.

Life would be good with Marta. He saw it unfolding before him in a long succession of days, work and play and companionship that brought out the best in both. And the memory of the strange vision in which he thought he loved Sallie faded. This was the woman he loved. Her courage and humor, her violet eyes bright with pride of him-- Life went by--clear, condensed, swift. He saw his own work moving steadily toward success, Marta's eager encouragement tiding him over the low ebbs when difficulties threatened. She was so full of pride in her brilliant young husband that her enthusiasm almost ran away with her. It was she who insisted upon making the discovery public.

"I want to flaunt you before the world!" she urged. "Let's report to the Council now, darling. Aw, please, Bill!"

"We're not ready yet," he protested feebly. "Let's wait--"

"What for? Look." She shook a record sheet under his nose. "A hundred per cent success in the last dozen experiments! What more do you want? It's time to make an official report--announce what you're doing to the world! You've been all the way from fruit flies to monkeys. You'll have to make a report to the Council anyhow before you can take the next step. And remember, darling, when you come to that, I'm first in line as a candidate."

He seized her shoulders in a heavy grip, frowning down into the eagerness of her lifted face. "There'll be no guinea pigs in this family! When Junior Cory comes into the world he--or she--will do it without benefit of x-rays. Understand?"

"But darling, I thought the whole idea was to give parents their choice of boys or girls in the family."

"The thing's not perfected yet to the point where I'd want to risk my own wife. And anyhow... anyhow, I've got a funny notion I'd rather just take what comes. Don't know why, exactly, but--"

"Bill, I do believe you're superstitious! Well, we'll fight that out later. But right now, you're going to make a full report of your success to the Council, and I'm going to be the proudest wife in the City. And that's final!"

So the report was made public. It created a tremendous furor; the world clamored for the magical stuff that would put the molding of the future into their hands. Bill Cory blushed and grinned for a delighted public in the telenews screens, promising the great gift soon, and Marta glowed with vicarious pride.

By the time he had made his first experiment with a human subject,

the puppies which were the result of his first successful mammalian experiment were beginning to worry him a little. Miss Brown was the first to notice it. She came in from the kennels one day with a frown behind her steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Dr. Cory, has someone been training those dogs?"

"Training them?" Bill looked up, puzzled. "Of course not. Why?"

"Well, they've got the makings of the finest trained dogs on Earth. Either the whole lot of them is exceptionally intelligent or... or something. They just fall over each other obeying every command you can make clear to them."

Bill straightened from his microscope. "Um-m-m... funny. Usually one or two dogs in a litter are more intelligent and obedient than the rest. But to have every one in six litters a canine genius is something pretty queer. What do you make of it?"

"I wouldn't call it genius, exactly. As I say, I'm not sure if it's unusual intelligence or... well, maybe a strong strain of obedience, or lack of initiative, or... it's too soon to say. But they're not normal dogs, Dr. Cory."

It was too soon to say. Tests simply showed the pups to be extraordinarily amenable to training, but what quality in them made this so was difficult to determine. Bill was not sure just what it implied, but an uneasiness in him woke and would not be quieted.

The first "x-ray" babies began to be born. Without exception they were fine, strong, healthy infants, and without exception of the predetermined sex. The Council was delighted; the parents were delighted; everyone was delighted except Bill. The memory of those oddly obedient pups haunted him-- Within three years the Cory

System was available to the public

The experimental babies had made such an excellent showing that, in the end, Bill gave in to the insistent world, though something in the recesses of his mind urged delay. Yet he couldn't explain it. The babies were all healthy, normal, intelligent children. Unusually amenable to authority, yes, but that was an asset, not a liability.

Presently all over the world the first crops of Cory System babies began to appear, and gradually Bill's misgivings faded. By then Bill Junior had arrived to take his mind off other people's children but even now he was obscurely glad that little Bill was a boy on his own initiative, not because his parents had forced masculinity upon him. There was no rhyme or reason to Bill's queer obsession that his own child should not be a product of the x-ray system, but he had been firm about it.

And in later years he had reason to be glad. Bill Jr. grew up fast. He had Marta's violet eyes and his father's darkly blond hair, and a laughing resolution all his own. He was going to be an architect, and neither his mother's shocked protest at this treason to the family profession, nor Bill's not wholly concealed disappointment could swerve him. But he was a good lad. Between school terms he and his father had entirely marvelous vacations together, and for Bill the world revolved about this beloved, talented, headstrong youngster whose presence upon Earth seemed reason enough for Bill's whole existence.

He was glad, even, that the boy was stubborn. For there could be no question now about a weakness in the children of the Cory System births. In all ways but one they were quite normal, it was true, but initiative seemed to have been left out of them. It was as if the act of predetermining their sex had robbed them of all ability to make any decisions of their own. Excellent followers they were—but no leaders

sprang up among them.

And it was dangerous to fill with unquestioning followers of the strongest man a world in which General George Hamilton controlled the United States. He was in his fourth term as president as the first great group of Cory System children came to maturity. Fiercely and sincerely he believed in the subjugation of the many to the State, and this new generation found in him an almost divinely inspired leader.

General George dreamed of a United World in which all races lived in blind obedience and willing sacrifice for the common good. And he was a man to make his dreams come true. Of course, he admitted, there would be opposition at first. There might be bloody wars, but in his magnificent dreams he believed sincerely that no price could be too high, that the end justified any means necessary to achieve it. And it seemed like the cooperation of Heaven itself to find almost an entire generation coming into adulthood ready to accept his leadership implicitly.

He understood why. It was no secret now what effect the Cory System had upon the children it produced. They would follow the strongest leader with blind faith. But upon this one generation of followers General George knew he could build a future that would live after him in the magnificent fulfillment of his most magnificent dreams. For a war lord needs a nation of soldiers, a great crop of boy babies to grow into armies, and surprisingly few saw the real motive behind General George's constant cry for boys, boys, boys--huge families of them. Fathers of many sons were feted and rewarded. Everybody knew there was the certainty of war behind this constant appeal for families of sons, but comparatively few realized that since the best way to be sure of boys was the use of the Cory System, the whole new generation would be blind followers of the strongest leader, just as their fathers were. Perhaps the Cory System might have died of its own great weakness, its one flaw, had not

General George so purposefully demanded sons of his followers.

General George died before the first great war was over. His last words, gasped in the bursting tumult of a bomb raid over Washington were, "Carry on--unite the world!" And his vice-president and second in command, Phillip Spaulding, was ready to snatch up the falling torch and light the world to union.

Half the United States lay in smoking ruins before the Great War ended. But General George had builded well upon that most enduring of all foundations--the faith of men. "Be fruitful and multiply," was a command his followers had obeyed implicitly, and Spaulding had mighty resources of human brawn and human obedience to draw upon.

The great general had died gladly for his dream, and he had not died in vain. Half the world was united under his starry banners within a decade after his death; the United World of his vision came into being less than fifty years later.

With peace and blind faith and prosperity, Science City indeed came into its own. And because a taste of power had made the Leaders hungry, the eyes of the City turned upward toward starry space. During the command of the Fourth Leader after the immortal General George, the first successful space voyage was achieved. The first living man stood knee-deep in the dead pumice dust of the moon and a mighty forward stride for mankind was recorded.

It was only a step. Mars came next, three generations later. After a brief and bloody war, its decadent inhabitants surrendered and the Seventh Leader began to have giddily intoxicating dreams of a United Solar System-- Time telescoped by. Generation melted into generation in changing tides over a world population that seemed unaltering in its by now age-old uniforms of George Blue. And in a

sense they were unaltering. Mankind was fixed in a mold--a good enough mold for the military life of the u. w.--the United World. The Cory System had long ago become compulsory, and men and women were produced exactly in the ratio that the Leaders decreed. But it was significant that the Leader class came into the world in the old haphazard fashion of the days before the legendary Dr. Cory's discovery.

The name of Cory was a proud one. It had long been a tradition in that famous family that the founder's great System should not be used among themselves. They were high among the Leader class. Several of the Leaders had borne the surname of Cory, though the office of course was not hereditary, but passed after rigid training and strict examination to the most eligible of the Candidates Class when an old Leader passed his prime.

And among the mighty Corys, family resemblance was strong. Generations saw the inevitable dilution of the original strain, but stubbornly through the years the Cory features came and went. Sometimes only the darkly blond hair of the first great Bill, sometimes the violet eyes which his pretty Marta had bequeathed her son, sometimes the very face of young Bill Jr. himself, that had roused an ache of pride and love in his father's heart whenever he saw those beloved features.

The Cory eyes looked now upon two worlds, triumphantly regimented to the last tiny detail. Mankind was proving his supremacy over himself--over his weaknesses and his sentimental, selfish desires for personal happiness as opposed to the great common good. Few succumbed to such shameful yearnings, but when they did, every man was a spy against his neighbor, as stern as the Leader himself in crushing these threats to the u. w.'s strength. It should be the individual's holiest and most mystically passionate dream to sacrifice his happiness for the Leader and the u. w., and the Leader

and the United World lived for the sole purpose of seeing that he did.

Marvelous was the progress of mankind. The elements had long since been conquered; the atom had yielded up its incalculable power in the harness of the machines, space itself was a highway for the vehicles of the u. w.

Under the blue-black skies of Mars, mankind's checkerboard cities patterned the hot red soil; under the soft gray clouds of Venus, those roofed and checkered cities spread from a common center through jungles steaming in more than tropic heat. Many-mooned Jupiter was drawing the covetous eyes of the Leaders in their sky-high cities of glass and steel.

And moving through these patterned cities upon three worlds, the followers of the Leader went about their ways, resolute, unfaltering, their faces set in one pattern of determination.

It was not a happy pattern. There was little laughter here; the only emotion upon the serious faces, aside from the shadow of that same exaltation that blazed in the Leader's eyes, was a subtle furtiveness, a sidelong quality that by intuition seemed to distrust its neighbors. Bill recognized it. Every man's duty was to sacrifice for the Cause not only his personal desires and happiness, but his personal honor as well; he must keep relentlessly alert for traitorous weakness in his friends, his associates, his own family.

Mistily the panorama of the centuries began to melt into itself, to fade, while behind it a blue-eyed face, helmed in blue steel, took form to smile straight into Bill's eyes. A tense, expectant smile, supremely confident.

Bill sat back and breathed deeply, avoiding for a moment the proudly smiling face of his son. "I'm--there!" he was thinking. "That was me

being born again and again, working with all my heart to crush out human happiness-- But there was Sue, too, generations of her--yes, and of me--working just as sincerely toward an opposite goal, a world without war. Either way they've got me. If I don't finish my work, the world unbalances toward matriarchy; if I do, mankind turns into a machine. It's bad. Either way it's bad--"

"The doctor is almost overwhelmed at the realization of his own greatness," Dunn's voice murmured from the window into the future. Bill recognized it for a sort of apology, and sat up with an effort to meet the pride-bright eyes of the boy who one day might be his son. There was nothing but happy expectancy of praise on the boy's face, but Dunn must have read a little doubt in Bill's, for he said heavily, as if to overwhelm that doubt:

"We build toward one common end, all of us--we have no thought for any smaller purpose than the conquest of the Solar System for the mighty race of man! And this great purpose is yours no less than ours, Dr. Cory."

"Manpower is what counts, you know, sir." Young Billy's voice took up the tale as Dunn's died. "We've got tremendous reserves, and we're piling up still more. Lots of room yet on Mars to fill up, and Venus is almost untouched yet. And after that, we'll breed men and women adapted to Jupiter's gravity, perhaps... oh, there'll be no end to our power, sir! We'll go on and on-- Who knows? There may come a day when we're a United Universe!"

For an instant, hearing the young voice shake with eagerness, Bill doubted his own doubtfulness. The mighty race of man! And he was part of it, living in this far-off future no less than he lived now in the flesh, in the burning ardor of this iron-faced boy. For a moment he forgot to be amazed and incredulous that he stood in the Twenty-third Century and looked as if through a window into the Thirtieth,

talking with the unborn descendant of his yet unconceived son. For this moment it was all accomplished reality, a very magnificent and blood-stirring present achieved directly through his own efforts.

"Father... father!" The voice was sweet and high in the core of his brain. And memory came back in an overwhelming rush that for an instant drowned out everything but a father's awareness of special love for a favorite daughter.

"Yes, Susan... yes, dear." He murmured it aloud, swinging around toward the cube that housed his other future. Sue leaned forward upon her knees among the myrtle leaves, her brown eyes wide and a little frightened upon his. There was a crease between her winged brows that dented Bill's own forehead as he faced her. For a moment it was almost as if each of them looked into a mirror which reflected the features of the other, identical in nearly every detail. Then Sallie's smile dimpled the cheeks of her far-descended daughter, and Sue laughed a small, uneasy laugh.

"What is it, father? Is something wrong?"

He opened his lips to speak--but what could he say? What could he possibly say to her, who did not even dream that her own time was anything but inevitable? How could he explain to a living, warmly breathing woman that she did not exist, might never exist?

He stared at her unhappily, groping for words he could not find. But before he spoke-- "Dr. Cory, sir-- Is anything wrong?" He turned back to Billy with a harried crease between his brows and then stared wildly from one face to the other. How could they help hearing one another? But obviously Billy, from his window into the present, saw simply the cube that held Sallie's immortal smile, while Sue, from hers, looked upon Marta's changeless face. It seemed to Bill that the boy and the girl had spoken in voices almost identical, using words

nearly the same, though neither was aware of the other. How could they be? They could not even exist simultaneously in the same world. He might have one of these beloved children or the other; not both. Equally beloved children, between whom he must choose--and how could he choose?

"Father--" said Sue on a rising inflection of alarm. "There is something wrong. I... feel it in your mind-- Oh, what is it, father?"

Bill sat speechless, staring from one face to the other of these mutually exclusive children. Here they stood, with their worlds behind them, looking anxiously at him with the same little crease between the brows of each. And he could not even speak to either without convincing the other he was a madman talking to empty air. He wanted insanely to laugh. It was a deadlock beyond all solution. Yet he must answer them--he must make his choice-- As he sat there groping in vain for words, a curious awareness began to take shape in his mind. How strange it was that these two should have been the ones to reach him, out of all the generations behind each that had been searching the past. And why had they established contact at so nearly the same time, when they had all his life span to grope through, hunting him for such different reasons, in such different ways? There was more than accident here, if all this were not a dream-- Billy and Sue--so similar despite the wide divergence of their words, a wider divergence than the mind can well grasp, for how can one measure the distance between mutually incompatible things? Billy who was all of Bill Cory that was strong and resolute and proud; Sue, who incarnated his gentler qualities, the tenderness, the deep desire for peace. They were such poles apart--why, they were the poles! The positive and negative qualities that, together, made up all that was best in Bill Cory. Even their worlds were like two halves of a whole; one all that was strong and ruthless, the other the epitome of gentle, abstract idealism. And both were bad, as all extremes must be.

And if he could understand the purpose behind the fact that these two poles of human destiny had reached back in their own pasts to find him at the same moment--if he could understand why the two halves of his soul, split into positive and negative entities, stood here clothed almost in his own flesh to torture him with indecision, perhaps-- He could not choose between them, for there was no choice, but there was a deeper question here than the simple question of conduct. He groped for it blindly, wondering if the answer to everything might not lie in the answer to that question. For there was purpose here vaster than anything man has words for-- something loomed behind it to shadowy heights that made his mind reel a little as he tried to understand.

He said inadequately to both his staring children: "But why... how did you... at this very moment out of all time--"

To Billy it was mere gibberish, but Sue must have understood the question in his mind, for after a moment, in a puzzled murmur, she said:

"I--don't know, exactly. There is something here beyond the simple fact of success. I... I feel it-- I can sense something behind my own actions that... that frightens me. Something guiding and controlling my own mind-- Oh, father, father, I'm afraid!"

Every protective instinct in him leaped ahead of reason in Bill's instant, "Don't be frightened, honey! I won't let anything happen to you!"

"Dr. Cory!" Young Billy's voice cracked a little in horror at what must have sounded to him like raving madness. Behind him, staring faces went tense with bewilderment. Above their rising murmurs Sue wailed, "Father!" in a frightened echo to Billy's, "Dr. Cory, are you ill,

sir?"

"Oh, wait a minute, both of you!" said Bill wildly. And then in a stammer, to stop Billy's almost hysterical questions, "Your... your sister-- Oh, Sue, honey, I hear you! I'll take care of you! Wait a minute!"

In the depths of the cube the boy's face seemed to freeze, the eyes that were Marta's going blank beneath the steel cap, Bill's very mouth moving stiffly with the stiffness of his lips.

"But you never had a daughter--"

"No, but I might have, if--I mean, if I'd married Sallie of course you'd never even-- Oh, God!" Bill gave it up and pressed both hands over his eyes to shut out the sight of the boy's amazed incredulity, knowing he'd said too much, yet too numbed and confused now for diplomacy. The only clear idea in his head was that he must somehow be fair to both of them, the boy and the girl. Each must understand why he-- "Is the doctor ill, Candidate Cory?" Dunn's voice was heavy from the cube.

Bill heard the boy's voice stammering: "No--that is, I don't--" And then, faltering, more softly: "Leader, was the great doctor ever--mad?"

"Good God, boy!"

"But--speak to him, Leader!"

Bill looked up haggardly as Dunn's voice rolled out with the sternness of a general addressing armies. "Pull yourself together, sir! You never had a daughter! Don't you remember?"

Bill laughed wildly. "Remember? I've never had a son yet! I'm not

married--not even engaged! How can I remember what hasn't happened?"

"But you will marry Marta Mayhew! You did marry her! You founded the great line of Corys and gave the world your--"

"Father... father! What's wrong?" Sue's sweet wail was in his ears. He glanced toward her window momentarily, seeing the terror in the soft brown eyes that stared at him, but he could only murmur:

"Hush, darling--wait, please!" before he faced the Leader and said with a strong effort at calmness, "None of all that has happened--yet."

"But it will--it must--it did!"

"Even if I never married Marta, never had a son?"

Dunn's dark face convulsed with a grimace of exasperated anger.

"But good Lord, man, look here!" He seized Billy's blue-uniformed shoulders with both hands, thrusting him forward. "You did have a son! This is his descendant, the living likeness of young Cory Junior! This world... I myself... all of us... we're the result of that marriage of yours! And you never had a daughter! Are you trying to tell us we don't exist? Is this a... a dream I'm showing you?" And he shook the boy's broad young shoulders between his hands. "You're looking at us, hearing us, talking to us! Can't you see that you must have married Marta Mayhew?"

"Father, I want you! Come back!" Sue's wail was insistent.

Bill groaned. "Wait a minute, Dunn." And then, turning, "Yes, honey, what is it?"

On her knees among the myrtle leaves Sue leaned forward among

the sun-flecked shadows of her cool green glade, crying: "Father, you won't... you can't believe them? I heard... through your ears I heard them, and I can understand a little through your mind linked with mine. I can understand what you're thinking... but it can't be true! You're telling yourself that we're still on the Probability Plane... but that's just a theory! That's nothing but a speculation about the future! How could I be anything but real? Why, it's silly! Look at me! Listen to me! Here I am! Oh, don't let me go on thinking that maybe... maybe you're right, after all. But it was Sallie Carlisle you married, wasn't it, father? Please say it was!"

Bill gulped. "Wait, honey. Let me explain to them first." He knew he shouldn't have started the whole incredible argument. You can't convince a living human that he doesn't exist. They'd only think him mad. Well-- Sue might understand. Her training in metaphysics and telepathy might make it possible. But Billy-- He turned with a deep breath and a mental squaring of shoulders, determined to try, anyhow. For he must be fair. He began: "Dunn, did you ever hear of the Plane of Probability?"

At the man's incredulous stare he knew a dizzy moment of wonder whether he, too, lived in an illusion as vivid as theirs, and in that instant the foundations of time itself rocked beneath his feet. But he had no time now for speculation. Young Billy must understand, no matter how mad Dunn believed him, and Sue must know why he did what he must do--though he didn't understand himself, yet, what that would be. His head was ringing with bewilderment.

"The... the Plane of Probability?" In Dunn's eyes upon his he saw a momentary conviction flare that, reality or not, and history be damned, this man was mad. And then, doubtfully, the Leader went on, "Hm-m-m... yes, somewhere I have heard-- Oh, I remember. Some clap-trap jargon the old Telepathy House fakers used to use before we cleared them out of Science City. But what's that

nonsense got to--"

"It's not nonsense." Bill closed his eyes in a sudden, almost intolerable longing for peace, for time to think what he must do. But no, the thing must be settled now, without time for thinking. And perhaps that was the best way, after all. A man's brain would crack if he paused to think out this madness. Only he must say something to young Billy-- And what could he say? How could he face either of these beloved children and, to their uncomprehending, pleading faces, refuse them life? If he could only break the connection that riveted them all into a sort of triple time balance-- But he couldn't. He must make it clear to Billy-- "It's not nonsense," he heard his own voice repeating wildly. "The future--you and your world--is a probability only. I'm a free agent. If I never marry Marta, never perfect the sex-determination idea, the probable future shifts to... to another pattern. And that as bad as yours, or worse!" he finished to himself.

"Is he mad?" Billy's voice was a whisper in the screen.

The Leader said as if to himself, in an awed and stumbling voice, "I don't... I can't... the thing's preposterous! And yet he is unmarried, the Great Work's still unfinished. Suppose he never-- But we're real! We're flesh and blood, aren't we? He stamped a booted foot on the floor as if to test the foundations of his world. "We're descended in an unbroken line from this... this madman. Lord in heaven, are we all mad?"

"Father! Come back!" Sue's voice shrieked in Bill's ears. He turned desperately, glad of an excuse to escape the haunted stares from that other window even though he must face hers. She had risen to her feet among the myrtle leaves. The glade was cool and still about her in this lazy, sunlit world of her own future. She was crying desperately, "Don't listen, father! I can feel the confusion in your mind. I know what they're saying! But they aren't real, father--they

can't be! You never had a son, don't you remember? All this you're saying is just... just talk, isn't it? That silly stuff about the Probability Plane--it's nothing but speculation! Oh, say it is, father! We've got such a lovely world, we love living so... I want to live, father! I am real! We've fought so hard, for so many centuries, for peace and happiness and our beautiful garden world. Don't let it snuff out into nothingness! But"--she laughed uncertainly--"how could you, when it's all around us, and has been for thousands of years? I... oh, father!" Her voice broke on a little quivering gulp that made Bill's heart quiver with it, and he ached intolerably with the rising of her tears. She was his to protect and cherish, forever. How could he-- "Dr. Cory--do you hear me? Oh, please listen!" Young Billy's familiar voice reached out to him from that other future. He glanced toward him once, and then put his hands to his ears and whirled from them both, the two voices mingling in an insane chaos of pleading.

Sue on her myrtle bank in a future immeasurably far ahead, child of a decadent world slipping easily down the slope of oblivion.

Billy's world might be as glorious as he believed, but the price was too high to pay for it. Bill remembered the set, unsmiling faces he had seen in the streets of that world. These were men his own work had robbed of the initiative that was their birthright. Happiness was their birthright, too, and the power to make the decisions that determined their own futures.

No, not even for such achievements as theirs must mankind be robbed of the inalienable right to choose for himself. If it lay in Bill Cory's power to outlaw a system which destroyed men's freedom and honor and joy, even for such an end as mankind's immortal progress, he had no choice to make. The price was too high. Confusedly he remembered something out of the dim past: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul...."

But--the alternative. Bill groaned. Happiness, peace, freedom, honor--yes, Sue's world had all that Billy's lacked. And to what end? Indolence and decadence and extinction for the great race that Billy's civilization would spread gloriously among the stars.

"But I'm thinking of choice," groaned Bill to himself. "And, I haven't got any choice! If I marry Sallie and don't finish my work-- one future follows. If I marry Marta and do finish it, the other comes. And both are bad--but what can I do? Man or mankind; which has the stronger claim? Happiness and extinction--or unhappiness and splendid immortality; which is better?"

"Cory--Dr. Cory!" It was Dunn's voice, heavy enough to break through the daze of bewilderment that shrouded Bill's brain, he turned. The Leader's iron-hard face under the steel helmet was settling into lines of fixed resolution. Bill saw that he had reached some decision, and knew a sudden, dazed admiration for the man. After all, he had not been chosen Leader for nothing.

"You're a fool to tell us all this, Cory. Mad, or a fool, or both. Don't you know what it means? Don't think we established this connection unprepared for trouble! The same force that carries the sight and sound of us from our age to yours can carry destruction, too! Nowhere in our past is there a record that William Cory was killed by a blast of atom-gun fire as he sat at his desk--but, by God, sir, if you can change that past, so can we!"

"It would mean wiping yourself out, you know," Bill reminded him as steadily as he could, searching the angry eyes of this man who must never have faced resolute opposition before, and wondering if the man had yet accepted a truth that must seem insanely impossible to him. He wanted overwhelmingly to laugh, and yet somewhere inside him a chilly conviction was growing that it might be possible for the

children of his unborn son, in a future that would never exist, to blast him out of being. He said: "You and your whole world would vanish if I died."

"But not unavenged!" The Leader said it savagely, and then hesitated. "But what am I saying? You've driven me almost as mad as you! Look, man, try to be sensible! Can you imagine yourself dissolving into nothingness that never existed? Neither can I!"

"But if you could kill me, then how could your world ever have been born?"

"To hell with all that!" exploded Dunn. "I'm no metaphysician! I'm a fighting man! I'll take the chance!"

"Please, Dr. Cory--" Billy pressed forward against the very surface of the cube, as if he could thrust himself back into his own past and lay urgent hands upon this man so like him, staring white-faced and stubborn into the future. Perhaps it was more than the desire for peace that spoke in his shaken voice. If Bill Cory, looking into that young face so like his own, had felt affection and recognition for it, then must not the boy know a feeling akin to it as he saw himself in Cory's features? Perhaps it was that subtle, strange identification between the two that made the boy's voice tremble a little as if with the first weakening of belief. When he spoke he seemed to be acknowledging the possibility of doubt, almost without realizing it. He said in that shaken, ardent voice:

"Please, try to understand! It's not death we're afraid of. All of us would die now, willingly, if our deaths could further the common good. What we can't endure to face is the death of our civilization, this marvelous thing that makes mankind immortal. Think of that, Sir! This is the only right thing possible for you to do! Would we feel so strongly if we weren't sure? Can you condemn your own race to

eternity on one small planet, when you could give them the universe to expand in and every good thing science can offer?"

"Father... father!" It was Sue again, frantic and far away.

But before Bill could turn to her, Dunn's voice broke in heavily over both the others. "Wait--I've made up my mind!" Billy fell back a little, turning to his Leader with a blaze of sudden hope. Bill stared. "As I see it," went on Dunn, "the whole preposterous question hinges on the marriage you make. Naturally I can't concede even to myself that you could possibly marry anyone but the woman you did marry--but if you honestly feel that there's any question in your own mind about it, I'll settle it for you."

He turned to nod toward a corner of the room in which he stood that was outside Bill's range, and in a moment the blue-uniformed, staring crowd about him parted and a low, rakish barrel of blue-gleaming steel glided noiselessly forward toward that surface of the cube which was a window into the past-future that parted Bill and themselves. Bill had never seen anything like it before, but he recognized its lethal quality. It crouched streamlined down upon its base as if for a lunge, and its mouth facing him was a dark doorway for death itself. Dunn bent behind it and laid his hand upon a half-visible lever in its base.

"Now," he said heavily. "William Cory, there seems to be a question in your mind as to whether we could reach you with our weapons. Let me assure you that the force-beam which connects us can carry more than sight and sound into your world! I hope I shan't have to demonstrate that. I hope you'll be sensible enough to turn to that television screen in the wall behind you and call Marta Mayhew."

"M-Marta?" Bill heard the quiver in his voice. "Why--"

"You will call her, and in our sight and hearing you are going to ask her to marry you. That much choice is yours, marriage or death. Do you hear me?"

Bill wanted insanely to laugh. Shotgun wedding from a mythical future-- "You can't threaten me with that popgun forever," he said with a quaver of mirth he could not control. "How do you know I'll marry her once you're away?"

"You'll keep your word," said Dunn serenely. "Don't forget, Cory, we know you much better than you know yourself. We know your future far more completely than you saw it. We know how your character will develop with age. Yes, you're an honorable man. Once you've asked her to marry you, and heard her say yes--and she will--you won't try to back out. No, the promise given and received between you constitutes a marriage as surely as if we'd seen the ceremony performed. You see, we trust your honor, William Cory."

"But--" Bill got no further than that, for explosively in his brain a sweet, high voice was sobbing:

"Father, father, what are you doing? What's happened? Why don't you speak to me?"

In the tension Bill had nearly forgotten Sue, but the sound of that familiar voice tore at him with sudden, almost intolerable poignancy. Sue--the promise to protect her had risen to his lips involuntarily at the very mention of danger. It was answer to an urgency rooted race-deep, the instinct to protect the helpless and the loved. For a moment he forgot the gun trained on him from the other window; he forgot Billy and the world behind him. He was conscious only of his daughter crying in terror for help--for help from him and for protection against him at once, in a dizzy confusion that made his head swim.

"Sue--" he began uncertainly.

"Cory, we're waiting!" Dunn's voice had an ominous undertone.

But there was a solution. He never knew just when he first became aware of it. A long while ago, perhaps, subconsciously, the promise of it had begun to take shape in his mind. He did not know when he first realized that--but he thought he knew whence it came. There was a sureness and a vastness about it that did not originate in himself. It was the Cosmic Mind indeed in which his own small soul was floundering, and out of that unthinkably limitless Plan, along with the problem came at last the solution. (There must be balance... the force that swings the worlds in their orbits can permit of no question without an answer--)

There was no confusion here; there had never been. This was not chance. Purpose was behind it, and sudden confidence came flooding into him from outside. He turned with resolution so calm upon his face that Billy sighed and smiled, and Dunn's tense face relaxed.

"Thank God, sir," breathed Billy, "I knew you'd come to your senses. Believe me, sir, you won't be sorry."

"Wait," said Bill to them both, and laid his hand on the button beneath his desk that rang a bell in his laboratory. "Wait and see."

In three worlds and times, three people very nearly identical in more than the flesh alone--perhaps three facets of the same personality, who can say?--stood silent and tense and waiting. It seemed like a very long time before the door opened and Miss Brown came into the room, hesitating on the threshold with her calm, pleasant face questioning.

"You want me, Dr. Cory?"

Bill did not answer for a moment. He was pouring his whole soul into this last long stare that said good-bye to the young son he would never know. For understanding from some vast and nameless source was flooding his mind now, and he knew what was coming and why it would be so. He looked across the desk and gazed his last upon Sue's familiar face so like his own, the fruit of a love he would never share with pretty Sallie. And then, drawing a deep breath, he gulped and said distinctly:

"Miss Brown, will you marry me?"

Dunn had given him the key--a promise given and received between this woman and himself would be irrevocable, would swing the path of the future into a channel that led to no world that either Billy or Sue could know.

Bill got his first glimmer of hope for that future from the way the quiet woman in the doorway accepted his question. She did not stare or giggle or stammer. After one long, deep look into his eyes--he saw for the first time that hers were gray and cool behind the lenses--she answered calmly.

"Thank you, Dr. Cory. I shall be very happy to marry you."

And then--it came. In the very core of his brain, heartbreak and despair exploded in a long, wailing scream of faith betrayed as pretty Sue, his beloved, his darling, winked out into the oblivion from which she would never now emerge. The lazy green Eden was gone forever; the sweet fair girl on her knees among the myrtle leaves had never been--would never be.

Upon that other window surface, in one last flash of unbearable

clearness, young Billy's incredulous features stared at him. Behind that beloved, betrayed face he saw the face of the Leader twisting with fury. In the last flashing instant while the vanishing, never-to-exist future still lingered in the cube, Bill saw an explosion of white-hot violence glare blindingly from the gun mouth, a heat and violence that seared the very brain. Would it have reached him--could it have harmed him? He never knew, for it lasted scarcely a heartbeat before eternity closed over the vanishing world in a soundless, fathomless, all-swallowing tide.

Where that world had stretched so vividly a moment ago, now Marta's violet gaze looked out into the room through crystal. Across the desk Sallie's lovely, careless smile glowed changelessly. They had been gateways to the future--but the gates were closed. There would never be such futures now; there never had been. In the Cosmic Mind, the great Plan of Things, two half-formed ideas went out like blown candle flames.

And Bill turned to the gray-eyed woman in the doorway with a long, deep, shaken sigh. In his own mind as he faced her, thoughts too vast for formulation moved cloudily.

"I know now something no man was ever sure of before--our oneness with the Plan. There are many, many futures. I couldn't face the knowledge of another, but I think--yes, I believe, ours will be the best. She won't let me neglect the work we're doing, but neither will she force me to give it to the world unperfected. Maybe, between us, we can work out that kink that robs the embryo of determination, and then--who knows?

"Who knows why all this had to happen? There was Purpose behind it--all of it--but I'll never understand just why. I only know that the futures are infinite--and that I haven't lost Billy or Sue. I couldn't have done what I did without being sure of that. I couldn't lose them,

because they're me--the best of me, going on forever. Perhaps I'll never die, really--not the real me--until these incarnations of the best that's in me, whatever form and face and name they wear, work out mankind's ultimate destiny in some future I'll never see. There was reason behind all this. Maybe, after all, I'll understand--some day."

He said nothing aloud, but he held out his hand to the woman in the door and smiled down confidently into her cool, gray eyes.