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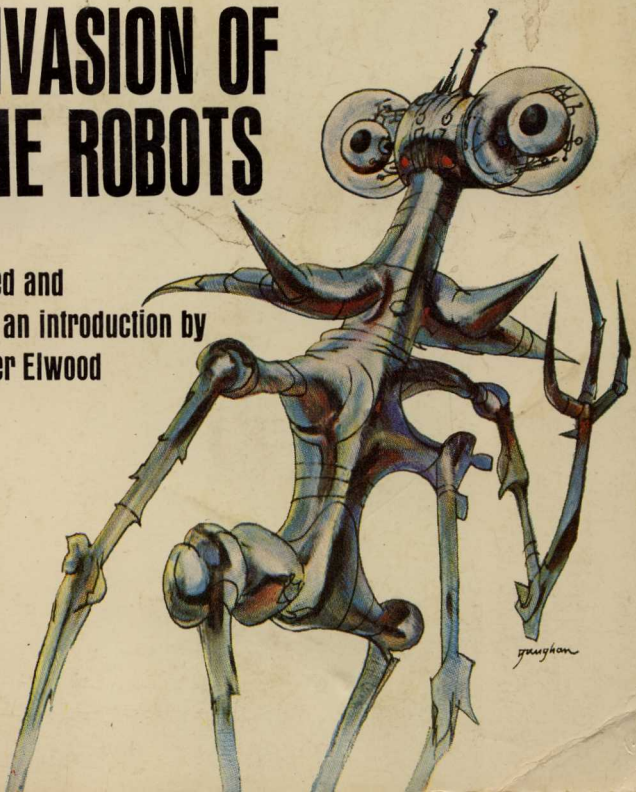
INVASION OF THE ROBOTS

edited and
with an introduction by
Roger Elwood



They're coming!

They're coming!

They're coming!

INVASION OF THE ROBOTS

Will they be friends? Or fiends? Will they lift civilization to incredible heights? Or will they set out to destroy the Earth?

Find out in the excitement-packed pages of this extraordinary collection of science-fiction at its imaginative best. Treat yourself to the cleverest stories of the greatest names in science-fiction today!

INVASION OF THE ROBOTS

edited and with an introduction by

Roger Elwood

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To Otto Binder because he is a warm, sincere human being in an age of unfeeling automatons, to Alvin M. Riley Jr. because he has had the supreme patience to remain one of my few close friends—and especially to my parents for reasons they understand in their hearts.

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INTRODUCTION

by Roger Elwood

The square-headed, bulky-bodied "creature" stands motionless, inscrutible in an anonymous lab. Hovering expectantly around it are several U.S. Government officials who are waiting for the success or failure of a project upon which millions of taxpayers' dollars have been spent.

A switch is thrown. Tubes leap into electrical life and circuits hum.

Suddenly . . .

A robot is born.

But it is primitive, a mechanical man comparable in efficiency to the early gropings of science that produced the *first* submarine or atom bomb.

In actuality, such a robot *was* recently created but it is a scientific plateau that had been reached long before, in fiction not fact. For 50 years, robots have "peopled" the pages of science fiction. The robot was, and always has been, eternal, indestructible, never subject to heart attacks, headaches and other ailments afflicting its human counterparts. It is devoid of emotion and can shed no tears nor grimace in pain. It is a soulless creation of metal and wires, with electrical impulses and a computer acting as its "intelligence."

Among themes in science fiction, the robot plot has proven to be one of the most popular indeed. Several of this literary genre's best known craftsmen have lent their talents to fascinating and provocative tales about metal-men . . . and I have picked some of the finest such stories ever anthologized.

Eight authors are represented herein. One story in particular, "With Folded Hands," by Jack Williamson, is considered by many to be one of the best novelettes in its field.

To further entertain and thrill you, I have chosen superb stories by the cream of the science fiction crop, including Eric Frank Russell, Philip K. Dick, Henry Kuttner, Richard Matheson, Lester del Rey and, of course, Isaac Asimov.

Always popular and with its own fair share of the reading audience, the robot as a story character received an important national plug when a leading electronics firm recently announced it had developed a machine capable of moving, talking and, to a degree, "thinking," in short, a "computer-on-wheels."

All this focusing of attention is bound to make the robot the "man of the hour." He could become more sought after as a leading film star than Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and the Beatles all rolled into one.

Read the following, richly-rewarding stories and witness for yourself what has already commenced today . . . at this very moment . . . even *now* as you hold this book in your hands.

. . . the invasion of the robots.

There's no stopping them.

Satisfaction Guaranteed

By Issac Asimov

Tony was tall and darkly handsome, with an incredibly patrician air drawn into every line of his unchangeable expression, and Claire Belmont regarded him through the crack in the door with a mixture of horror and dismay.

"I can't, Larry. I just can't have him in the house." Feverishly, she was searching her paralyzed mind for a stronger way of putting it; some way that would make sense and settle things, but she could only end with a simple repetition.

"Well, I can't!"

Larry Belmont regarded his wife stiffly, and there was that spark of impatience in his eyes that Claire hated to see, since she felt her own incompetence mirrored in it. "We're committed, Claire," he said, "and I can't have you backing out now. The company is sending me to Washington on this basis, and it probably means a promotion. It's perfectly safe and you know it. What's your objection?"

She frowned helplessly, "It just gives me the chills. I couldn't bear him."

"He's as human as you or I, almost. So, no nonsense. Come, get out there."

His hand was on the small of her back, shoving; and she found herself in her own living room, shivering. *It* was there, looking at her with a precise politeness, as though appraising his hostess-to-be of the next three weeks. Dr. Susan Calvin was there, too, sitting stiffly in thin-lipped abstraction. She had the cold, faraway look of someone who has worked with machines so long that a little of the steel had entered the blood.

"Hello," crackled Claire in general, and ineffectual, greeting.

But Larry was busily saving this situation with a spurious gayety. "Here, Claire, I want you to meet Tony, a swell guy. This is my wife, Claire, Tony, old boy." Larry's hand draped itself amiably over Tony's shoulder, but Tony remained unresponsive and expressionless under the pressure.

He said, "How do you do, Mrs. Belmont."

And Claire jumped at Tony's voice. It was deep and mellow, smooth as the hair on his head or the skin on his face.

Before she could stop herself, she said, "Oh, my,—you talk."

"Why not? Did you expect that I didn't?"

But Claire could only smile weakly. She didn't really know what she had expected. She looked away, then let him slide gently into the corner of her eye. His hair was smooth and black, like polished plastic,—or was it really composed of separate hairs? And was the even, olive skin of his hands and face continued on past the obscurement of his formally-cut clothing.

She was lost in the shuddering wonder of it and had to force her thoughts back into place to meet Dr. Calvin's flat, unemotional voice.

"Mrs. Belmont, I hope you appreciate the importance of this experiment. Your husband tells me he has given you some of the background. I would like to give you more, as the senior psychologist of the U. S. Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation.

"Tony is a robot. His actual designation on the company files is TN-3, but he will answer to Tony. He is not a mechanical monster, nor simply a calculating machine of the types that were developed during World War II, fifty years ago. He has an artificial brain nearly as complicated as our own. It is an immense telephone switchboard on an atomic scale, so that billions of possible 'telephone connections' can be compressed into an instrument that will fit inside a skull.

"Such brains are manufactured for each model of robot specifically. Each contains a precalculated set of connections so that each robot knows the English language to start with, and enough of anything else that may be necessary to perform his job.

"Until now, U. S. Robots had confined its manufacturing activity to industrial models for use in places where human labor is impractical—in deep mines, for instance, or in underwater work. But we want to invade the city and the home. To do so, we must get the ordinary man and woman to accept these robots without fear. You understand that there is nothing to fear."

"There isn't, Claire," interposed Larry, earnestly. "Take my word for it. It's impossible for him to do any harm. You know I wouldn't leave him with you otherwise."

Claire cast a quick, secret glance at Tony and lowered her voice, "What if I make him angry?"

"You needn't whisper," said Dr. Calvin, calmly. "He *can't* get angry at you, my dear. I told you that the switchboard connections of his brain were predetermined. Well, the most im-

portant connection of all is what we call 'The First Law of Robotics', and it is merely this: 'No robot can harm a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.' All robots are built so. No robot can be forced in any way to do harm to any human. So, you see, we need you and Tony as a preliminary experiment for our own guidance, while your husband is in Washington to arrange for government-supervised legal tests."

"You mean all this isn't legal?"

Larry cleared his throat, "Not just yet, but it's all right. He won't leave the house, and you mustn't let anyone see him. That's all. —And Claire, I'd stay with you, but I know too much about the robots. We must have a completely inexperienced tester so that we can have severe conditions. It's necessary."

"Oh, well," muttered Claire. Then, as a thought struck her, "But what does he do?"

"Housework," said Dr. Calvin, shortly.

She got up to leave, and it was Larry who saw her to the front door. Claire stayed behind drearily. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the mantelpiece, and looked away hastily. She was very tired of her small, mousy face and her dim, unimaginative hair. Then she caught Tony's eyes upon her and almost smiled before she remembered—

He was only a machine.

Larry Belmont was on his way to the airport when he caught a glimpse of Gladys Claffern. She was the type of woman who seemed made to be seen in glimpses. —Perfectly and precisely manufactured; dressed with thoughtful hand and eye; too gleaming to be stared at.

The little smile that preceded her and the faint scent that trailed her were a pair of beckoning fingers. Larry felt his stride break; he touched his hat, then hurried on.

As always, he felt that vague anger. If Claire could only push her way into the Claffern clique, it would help so much. But what was the use?

Claire! The few times she had come face to face with Gladys, the little fool had been tongue-tied. He had no illusions. The testing of Tony was his big chance, and it was in Claire's hands. How much safer it would be in the hands of someone like Gladys Claffern.

Claire woke the second morning to the sound of a subdued knock on the bedroom door. Her mind clamored, then went icy. She had avoided Tony the first day, smiling thinly when she met him and brushing past with a wordless sound of apology.

"Is that you,—Tony?"

"Yes, Mrs. Belmont. May I enter?"

She must have said, yes, because he was in the room, quite suddenly and noiselessly. Her eyes and nose were simultaneously aware of the tray he was carrying.

"Breakfast?" she said.

"If you please."

She wouldn't have dared to refuse, so she pushed herself slowly into a sitting position and received it: poached eggs, buttered toast, coffee.

"I have brought the sugar and cream separately," said Tony. "I expect to learn your preference with time, in this and in other things."

She waited.

Tony, standing there straight and pliant as a metal rule, asked, after a moment, "Would you prefer to eat in privacy?"

"Yes. —I mean, if you don't mind."

"Will you need help later in dressing?"

"Oh my, no!" She clutched frantically at the sheet, so that the coffee hovered at the edge of catastrophe. She remained so, in rigor, then sank helplessly back against the pillow when the door closed him out of her sight again.

She got through breakfast somehow. —He was only a machine, and if it were only more visible that he were, it wouldn't be so frightening. Or if his expression would change. It just stayed there, *nailed* on. You couldn't tell what went on behind those dark eyes and that smooth, olive skin-stuff. The coffee-cup beat a faint castanet for a moment as she set it back, empty, on the tray.

Then she realized that she had forgotten to add the sugar and cream after all, and she did so hate black coffee.

She burnt a straight path from bedroom to kitchen after dressing. It was her house, after all, and there wasn't anything frippy about her, but she liked her kitchen clean. He should have waited for supervision—

But when she entered, she found a kitchen that might have been minted fire-new from the factory the moment before.

She stopped, stared, turned on her heel and nearly ran into Tony. She yelped.

"May I help?" he asked.

"Tony," and she scraped the anger off the edges of her mind's panic, "you must make some noise when you walk. I can't have you stalking me, you know. —Didn't you use this kitchen?"

"I did, Mrs. Belmont."

"It doesn't look it."

"I cleaned up afterwards. Isn't that customary?"

Claire opened her eyes wide. After all, what could one say to that? She opened the oven compartment that held the pots,

took a quick, unseeing look at the metallic glitter inside, then said with a tremor, "Very good. Quite satisfactory."

If, at the moment, he had beamed; if he had smiled; if he had quirked the corner of his mouth the slightest bit, she felt that she could have warmed to him. But he remained an English lord in repose, as he said, "Thank you, Mrs. Belmont. Would you come into the living room?"

She did, and it struck her at once. "Have you been polishing the furniture?"

"Is it satisfactory, Mrs. Belmont?"

"But when? You didn't do it yesterday."

"Last night, of course."

"You burnt the lights all night?"

"Oh, no. That wouldn't have been necessary. I've a built-in ultra-violet source. I can see in ultra-violet. And, of course, I don't require sleep."

He did require admiration, though. She realized that, then. He had to know that he was pleasing her. But she couldn't bring herself to supply that pleasure for him.

She could only say, sourly, "Your kind will put ordinary house-workers out of business."

"There is work of much greater importance they can be put to in the world, once they are freed of drudgery. After all, Mrs. Belmont, things like myself can be manufactured. But nothing yet can imitate the creativity and versatility of a human brain, like yours."

And though his face gave no hint, his voice was warmly surcharged with awe and admiration, so that Claire flushed and muttered, "*My* brain! You can have it."

Tony approached a little and said, "You must be unhappy to say such a thing. Is there anything I can do?"

For a moment, Claire felt like laughing. It *was* a ridiculous situation. Here was an animated carpet-sweeper, dish-washer, furniture-polisher, general factotum, rising from the factory table—and offering his services as consoler and confidant.

Yet she said suddenly, in a burst of woe and voice, "Mr. Belmont doesn't think I have a brain, if you must know. —And I suppose I haven't." She couldn't cry in front of him. She felt, for some reason, that she had the honor of the human race to support against this mere creation.

"It's lately," she added. "It was all right when he was a student; when he was just starting. But I can't be a big man's wife; and he's getting to be a big man. He wants me to be a hostess and an entry into social life for him— Like G—guh—guh—Gladys Claffern."

Her nose was red, and she looked away.

But Tony wasn't watching her. His eyes wandered about the room, "I can help you run the house."

"But it's no good," she said, fiercely. "It needs a touch I can't give it. I can only make it comfortable; I can't ever make it the kind they take pictures of for the Home Beautiful magazines."

"Do you want that kind?"

"Does it do any good—wanting?"

Tony's eyes were on her, full. "I could help."

"Do you know anything about interior decoration?"

"Is it something a good housekeeper should know?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then I have the potentialities of learning it. Can you get me books on the subject?"

Something started then.

Claire, clutching her hat against the brawling liberties of the wind, had manipulated two fat volumes on the home arts back from the public library. She watched Tony as he opened one of them and flipped the pages. It was the first time she had watched his fingers flicker at anything like fine work.

I don't see how they do it, she thought, and on a sudden impulse reached for his hand and pulled it toward herself. Tony did not resist, but let it lie limp for inspection.

She said, "It's remarkable. Even your finger nails look natural."

"That's deliberate, of course," said Tony. Then, chattily, "The skin is a flexible plastic, and the skeletal framework is a light metal alloy. Does that amuse you?"

"Oh, no," she lifted her reddened face. "I just feel a little embarrassed at sort-of poking into your insides. It's none of my business. You don't ask me about mine."

"My brain-paths don't include that type of curiosity. I can only act within my limitations, you know."

And Claire felt something tighten inside her in the silence that followed. Why did she keep forgetting he was a machine? Now the thing itself had to remind her. Was she so starved for sympathy that she would even accept a robot as equal,—because he sympathized?

She noticed Tony was still flipping the pages,—almost helplessly,—and there was a quick, shooting sense of relieved superiority within her, "You can't read, can you?"

Tony looked up at her; his voice calm, unreproachful, "I *am* reading, Mrs. Belmont."

"But—" She pointed at the book in a meaningless gesture.

"I am scanning the pages, if that's what you mean. My sense of reading is photographic."

It was evening then, and when Claire eventually went to bed, Tony was well into the second volume, sitting there in the dark, or what seemed dark to Claire's limited eyes.

Her last thought, the one that clamored at her just as her

mind let go and tumbled, was a queer one. She remembered his hand again; the touch of it. It had been warm and soft, like a human being's.

How clever of the factory, she thought, and softly ebbed to sleep.

It was the library continuously, thereafter, for several days. Tony suggested the fields of study, which branched out quickly. There were books on color-matching and on cosmetics; on carpentry and on fashions; on art and on the history of costumes.

He turned the pages of each book before his solemn eyes, and, as quickly as he turned, he read; nor did he seem capable of forgetting.

Before the end of the week, he had insisted on cutting her hair, introducing her to a new method of arranging it, adjusting her eyebrow line a bit, and changing the shade of her powder and lipstick.

She had palpitated in nervous dread for half an hour under the delicate touch of his inhuman fingers and then looked in the mirror.

"There is more that can be done," said Tony, "especially in clothes. How do you find it for a beginning?"

And she hadn't answered; not for quite a while. Not until she had absorbed the identity of the stranger in the glass and cooled the wonder at the beauty of it all. Then she had said, chokingly, never once taking her eyes away from the warming image, "Yes, Tony, quite good,—for a beginning."

She said nothing of this in her letters to Larry. Let him see it all at once. And something in her realized that it wasn't only the surprise she would enjoy. It was going to be a kind of revenge.

Tony said one morning, "It's time to start buying, and I'm not allowed to leave the house. If I write out exactly what we must have, can I trust you to get it? We need drapery, and furniture fabric, wallpaper, carpeting, paint, clothing,—and any number of small things."

"You can't get these things to your own specifications at a stroke's notice," said Claire, doubtfully.

"You can get fairly close, if you go through the city, and if money is no object."

"But, Tony, money is certainly an object."

"Not at all. Stop off at U. S. Robots in the first place. I'll write a note for you. You see Dr. Calvin, and tell her that I said it was part of the experiment."

Dr. Calvin, somehow, didn't frighten her as on that first

evening. With her new face and a new hat, she couldn't be quite the old Claire. The psychologist listened carefully, asked a few questions, nodded—and then Claire found herself walking out, armed with an unlimited charge account against the assets of U. S. Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation.

It is wonderful what money will do. With a store's contents at her feet, a sales lady's dictum was not necessarily a voice from above; the uplifted eyebrow of a decorator was not anything like Jove's thunder.

And once, when an Exalted Plumpness at one of the most lordly of the garment salons had insistently poohed her description of the wardrobe she must have with counter-pronouncements in accents of the purest 57th Street-French, she called up Tony, then held the phone out to Monsieur.

"If you don't mind,"—voice firm, but fingers twisting a bit, "I'd like you to talk to my—uh—secretary."

Pudgy proceeded to the phone with a solemn arm crooked behind his back. He lifted the phone in two fingers and said delicately, "Yes." A short pause, another, "Yes," then a much longer pause, a squeaky beginning of an objection that perished quickly, another pause, a very meek, "Yes," and the phone was restored to its cradle.

"If Madam will come with me," he said, hurt and distant, "I will try to supply her needs."

"Just a second." Claire rushed back to the phone, and dialed again, "—Hello, Tony. I don't know what you said, but it worked. Thanks. You're a—" She struggled for the appropriate word, gave up, and ended in a final little squeak, "—a—a *dear!*"

It was Gladys Claffern looking at her when she turned from the phone again. A slightly amused and slightly amazed Gladys Claffern, looking at her out of a face tilted a bit to one side.

"Mrs. Belmont?"

It all drained out of Claire—just like that. She could only nod; —stupidly, like a marionette.

Gladys smiled with an insolence you couldn't put your finger on, "I didn't know you shopped here?"—as if the place had, in her eyes, definitely lost caste through the fact.

"I don't, usually," said Claire, humbly.

"And haven't you done something to your hair? It's quite—quaint. —Oh, I hope you'll excuse me, but isn't your husband's name Lawrence? It seems to me that it's Lawrence."

Claire's teeth clenched, but she had to explain. She *had* to. "Tony is a friend of my husband's. He's helping me select some things."

"I understand. And quite a *dear* about it, I imagine." She passed on smiling, carrying the light and the warmth of the world with her.

Claire did not question the fact that it was to Tony that she turned for consolation. Ten days had cured her of reluctance. And she could weep before him; weep and rage.

"I was a complete f—fool," she stormed, wrenching at her waterlogged handkerchief. "She does that to me. I don't know why. She just does. I should have—kicked her. I should have knocked her down and stamped on her."

"Can you hate a human being so much?" asked Tony, in puzzled softness. "That part of a human mind is closed to me."

"Oh, it isn't she," she moaned. "It's myself, I suppose. She's everything I want to be—on the outside, anyway. —And I can't be."

Tony's voice was forceful and low in her ear, "You can be, Mrs. Belmont. You *can* be. We have ten days yet, and in ten days the house will no longer be itself. Haven't we been planning that?"

"And how will that help me—with her?"

"Invite her here. Invite her friends. Have it the evening before I—before I leave. It will be a house-warming, in a way."

"She won't come."

"Yes, she will. She'll come to laugh. And she won't be able to."

"Do you really think so? Oh, Tony, do you think we can do it?" She had both his hands in hers. And then, with her face flung aside, "But what good would it be? It won't be I; it will be you that's doing it. I can't ride your back."

"Nobody lives in splendid singleness," whispered Tony. "They've put that knowledge in me. What you, or anyone, see in Gladys Claffern is not just Gladys Claffern. She rides the backs of all that money and social position can bring. She doesn't question that. Why should you? —And look at it this way, Mrs. Belmont. I am manufactured to obey, but the extent of my obedience is for myself to determine. I can follow orders niggardly or liberally. For you, it is liberal, because you are what I have been manufactured to see human beings as. You are kind, friendly, unassuming. Mrs. Claffern, as you describe her, is not, and I wouldn't obey her as I would you. So it *is* you, and not I, Mrs. Belmont, that is doing all this."

He withdrew his hands from hers then, and Claire looked at that expressionless face no one could read,—wondering. She was suddenly frightened again in a completely new way.

She swallowed nervously and stared at her hands, which were still tingling with the pressure of his fingers. She hadn't imagined it; his fingers had pressed hers, gently, tenderly, just before they moved away.

No!

Its fingers— *Its* fingers—

She ran to the bathroom and scrubbed her hands, blindly, uselessly.

She was a bit shy of him the next day; watching him narrowly; waiting to see what might follow. For a while, nothing did.

Tony was working. If there was any difficulty in technique in putting up wall paper, or utilizing the quick-drying paint, Tony's actions did not show it. His hands moved precisely; his fingers were deft and sure.

He worked all night. She never heard him, but each morning was a new adventure. She couldn't count the number of things that had been done, and by evening she was still finding new touches—and another night had come.

She tried to help only once and her human clumsiness marred that. *He* was in the next room, and she was hanging a picture in the spot marked by Tony's mathematical eyes. The little mark was there; the picture was there; and a revulsion against idleness was there.

But she was nervous, or the ladder was rickety. It didn't matter. She felt it going, and she cried out. It tumbled without her, for Tony, with far more than flesh-and-blood quickness had been under her.

His calm, dark eyes said nothing at all, and his warm voice said only words, "Are you hurt, Mrs. Belmont?"

She noticed for an instant, that her falling hand must have mussed that sleek hair of his, because for the first time, she could see for herself that it was composed of distinct strands, —fine black hairs.

And then, all at once, she was conscious of his arms about her shoulders and under her knees,—holding her tightly and warmly.

She pushed, and her scream was loud in her own ears. She spent the rest of the day in her room, and thereafter she slept with a chair up-ended against the doorknob of her bedroom door.

She had sent out the invitations, and, as Tony had said, they were accepted. She had only to wait for the last evening.

It came, too, after the rest of them, in its proper place. The house was scarcely her own. She went through it one last time —and every room had been changed. She, herself, was in clothes she would never have dared wear before. And when you put them on, you put on pride and confidence with them.

She tried a polite look of contemptuous amusement before the mirror, and the mirror sneered back at her masterfully.

What would Larry say? It didn't matter, somehow. The exciting days weren't coming with him. They were leaving with

Tony. Now wasn't that strange? She tried to recapture her mood of three weeks before and failed completely.

The clock shrieked eight at her in as many breathless installments, and she turned to Tony. "They'll be here soon, Tony. You'd better get into the basement. We can't let them—"

She stared a moment, then said weakly, "Tony?" and more strongly, "Tony?", and nearly a scream, *"Tony!"*

But his arms were around her now; his face was close to hers; the pressure of his embrace was relentless. She heard his voice through a haze of emotional jumble.

"Claire," the voice said, "there are many things I am not made to understand, and this must be one of them. I am leaving tomorrow, and I don't want to. I find that there is more in me than just a desire to please you. Isn't it strange?"

His face was closer; his lips were warm, but with no breath behind them—for machines do not breathe. They were almost on hers.

And the bell sounded.

For a moment, she struggled breathlessly, and then he was gone and nowhere in sight, and the bell was sounding again. Its intermittent shrillness was insistent.

The curtains on the front windows had been pulled open. They had been closed fifteen minutes earlier. She *knew* that.

They must have seen then. They must *all* have seen,—everything!

They came in so politely, all in a bunch—the pack come to howl—with their sharp, darting eyes piercing everywhere. They *had* seen. Why else would Gladys ask in her jabbingest manner after Larry? And Claire was spurred to a desperate and reckless defiance.

Yes, he *is* away. He'll be back tomorrow, I suppose. No, I haven't been lonely here myself. Not a bit. I've had an exciting time. And she laughed at them. Why not? What could they do? Larry would know the truth, if it ever came to him, the story of what they thought they saw.

But *they* didn't laugh.

She could read that in the fury in Gladys Claffern's eyes; in the false sparkle of her words; in her desire to leave early. And as she parted with them, she caught one last, anonymous whisper—disjointed.

"—never saw anything like— —so *handsome*—"

And she knew what it was that had enabled her to finger-snap them so. Let each cat mew; and let each cat know—that she might be prettier than Claire Belmont, and grander, and richer—but not one, *not one,* could have as handsome a lover!

And then she remembered again—again—again, that Tony was a machine and her skin crawled.

"Go away! Leave me be!" she cried to the empty room and ran to her bed. She wept wakefully all that night and the next morning, almost before dawn, when the streets were empty, a car drew up to the house and took Tony away.

Lawrence Belmont passed Dr. Calvin's office, and, on impulse, knocked. He found her with mathematician Peter Bogert, but did not hesitate on that account.

He said, "Claire tells me that U. S. Robots paid for all that was done at my house—"

"Yes," said Dr. Calvin. "We've written it off, as a valuable and necessary part of the experiment. With your new position as Associate Engineer, you'll be able to keep it up, I think."

"That's not what I'm worried about. With Washington agreeing to the tests, we'll be able to get a TN model of our own by next year, I think." He turned hesitantly, as though to go, and as hesitantly turned back again.

"Well, Mr. Belmont?" asked Dr. Calvin, after a pause.

"I wonder—" began Larry, "I wonder what really happened there. She—Claire, I mean,—seems so different. It's not just her looks—though, frankly, I'm amazed." He laughed nervously, "It's *her!* She's not my wife, really—I can't explain it."

"Why try? Are you disappointed with any part of the change?"

"On the contrary. But it's a little frightening, too, you see—"

"I wouldn't worry, Mr. Belmont. Your wife has handled herself very well. Frankly, I never expected to have the experiment yield such a thorough and complete test. We know exactly what corrections must be made in the TN model, and the credit belongs entirely to Mrs. Belmont. If you want me to be very honest, I think your wife deserves your promotion more than you do."

Larry flinched visibly at that. "As long as it's in the family," he murmured unconvincingly and left.

Susan Calvin looked after him, "I think that hurt—I hope. —Have you read Tony's report, Peter?"

"Thoroughly," said Bogert, "And won't the TN-3 model need changes!"

"Oh, you think so, too?" questioned Calvin, sharply. "What's your reasoning?"

Bogert frowned, "I don't need any. It's obvious on the face of it, that we can't have a robot loose which makes love to his mistress, if you don't mind the pun."

"Love! Peter, you sicken me. You really don't understand? That machine had to obey the First Law. He couldn't allow

harm to come to a human being, and harm was coming to Claire Belmont through her own sense of inadequacy. So he made love to her, since what woman would fail to appreciate the compliment of being able to stir passion in a machine—in a cold, soul-less machine. And he opened the curtains that night deliberately, that the others might see, and envy—without any risk possible to Claire's marriage. I think it was clever of Tony—"

"Do you? What's the difference whether it was pretence or not, Susan? It still has its horrifying effect. Read the report again. She avoided him. She screamed when he held her. She didn't sleep that last night—in hysterics. We can't have that."

"Peter, you're blind. You're as blind as I was. The TN model will be rebuilt entirely, but not for your reason. Quite otherwise; quite otherwise. Strange that I overlooked it in the first place," her eyes were opaquely thoughtful, "but perhaps it reflects a shortcoming in myself. You see, Peter, machines can't fall in love, but—even when it's hopeless and horrifying —women can!"

Piggy Bank

By Henry Kuttner

Ballard's diamonds were being stolen as fast as he could make new ones. Insurance companies had long since given him up as a bad risk. Detective agencies were glad to offer their services, at a high fee, but, since the diamonds were invariably stolen, anyhow, this was simply more money down the drain. It couldn't keep up. Ballard's fortune was founded on diamonds, and the value of gems increases in inverse proportion to their quantity and availability. In ten years or so, at the present rate of theft, unflawed blue-whites would be almost worthless.

"So what I need is a perfect safe," Ballard said, sipping a liqueur. He stared across the table at Joe Gunther, who only smiled.

"Sure," Gunther said. "Well?"

"You're a technician. Figure it out. What do I pay you for?"

"You pay me for making diamonds and not telling anybody I can make 'em."

"I hate lazy people," Ballard remarked. "You graduated top man at the Institute in 1990. What have you done since then?"

"Practiced hedonism," Gunther said. "Why should I work my head off when I can get everything I want just by making diamonds for you? What does any man want? Security, freedom, a chance to indulge his whims. I got that. Just by finding a formula for the Philosopher's Stone. Too bad Cain never guessed the potentialities of his patent. Too bad for him; lucky for me."

"Shut up," Ballard said with soft intensity.

Gunther grinned and glanced around the gigantic dining hall. "Nobody can hear us." He was a little drunk. A lock of lank dark hair fell over his forehead; his thin face looked sharp and mocking. "Besides, I like to talk. It makes me realize I'm as much of a big shot as you are. Swell stuff for my soul."

"Then talk. When you're quite finished, I'll get on with what I've got to say."

Gunther drank brandy. "I'm a hedonist, and I've got a high I.Q. When I graduated, I looked around for the best way of supporting Joe Gunther without working. Building something new from scratch wastes time. The best system is to find a structure already built, and add something more. Ergo, the Patent Office. I spent two years going through the files, looking for pay dirt. I found it in Cain's formula. He didn't know what it was. A theory about thermodynamics—*he* thought. Never realized he could make diamonds simply by developing the idea a bit. So," Gunther finished, "for twenty years that formula has been buried in the Patent Office, and I found it. And sold it to you, on condition that I keep my mouth shut and let the world believe your diamonds were real."

"Finished?" Ballard asked.

"Sure."

"Why do you recapitulate the obvious on an average of once a month?"

"To keep you reminded," Gunther said. "You'd kill me if you dared. Then your secret would be quite safe. The way I figure it, every so often you work out a method of getting rid of me, and it biases your judgment. You're apt to go off half-cocked, get me killed, and then realize your mistake. When I'm dead, the formula will be made public, and everybody can make diamonds. Where'll you be, then?"

Ballard shifted his bulky body, half closing his eyes and clasping large, well-shaped hands behind his neck. He regarded Gunther coolly.

"Symbiosis," he said. "You'll keep your mouth shut, because

diamonds are your security, too. Credits, currency, bonds—they're all apt to become worthless under current economic conditions. But diamonds are rare. I want to keep 'em that way. I've got to stop these thefts."

"If one man builds a safe, another man can crack it. You know the history of that. In the old days, somebody invented a combination lock. Right away, somebody else figured out the answer—listening to the fall of the tumblers. Tumblers were made noiseless; then a crook used a stethoscope. The answer to that was a time lock. Nitroglycerin canceled that. Stronger metals were used, and precision jointures. O.K.—thermite. One guy used to take off the dial, slip a piece of carbon paper under it, replace it—and come back a day later, after the combination had been scratched on the carbon. Today it's X rays, and so forth."

"A perfect safe can be made," Ballard said.

"How?"

"There are two methods. One, lock the diamonds in an absolutely uncrackable safe."

"No such thing."

"Two, leave the diamonds in plain sight, guarded by men who never take their eyes from them."

"You tried that, too. It didn't work. The men were gassed once. The second time, a ringer got in, disguised as one of the detectives."

Ballard ate an olive. "When I was a kid, I had a piggy bank made of glass. I could see the coins, but I couldn't get 'em out without breaking the pig. That's what I want. Only—I want a pig who can run."

Gunther looked up, his eyes suddenly sharp. "Eh?"

"A pig who's conditioned to flight—self-preservation. One who specializes in the art of running away. Animals do it—herbivores chiefly. There's an African deer that reacts to movement before it's made. Better than split-second reaction. A fox is another example. Can a man catch a fox?"

"He'd use dogs and horses."

"Uh-huh. So foxes run through herds of sheep, and cross water, to spoil the scent. My pig must do that, too."

"You're talking about a robot," Gunther said.

"The Metalman people will make us one to order, with the radioatomic type of brain. A seven-foot robot, studded with diamonds, conditioned to running away. An intelligent robot."

Gunther rubbed his jaw. "Lovely. Except for one thing. The intelligence must be limited. Metalman *have* robots of human mind-power, but each one covers a city block. Mobility's lost as intelligence increases. They haven't yet found a substitute for the colloid brain. However—" He stared at his fingernails. "Yeah. It could be done. The robot must be conditioned in one

line only, self-preservation. It must be able to build logically from that motivation, and that's all it needs."

"Would that be enough?"

"Yes, because a robot's logical. You can drive a seal or a deer into a trap. Or a tiger. The tiger hears the beaters behind him, and runs from them. To him, that's the only danger he knows, till he falls in the pit that's been dug for him. A fox might be smarter. He might think of both the menace behind him and the one in front. A robot—he wouldn't stampede blindly. If he was driven toward a cul-de-sac, he'd use logic and wonder what was up that blind alley."

"And escape?"

"He'd have split-second—in fact, instantaneous reaction. Radioatomic brains think fast. You've set me a beautiful problem, Bruce, but I think it can be done. A diamond-studded robot, parading around here—psychologically, it's right up your alley."

Ballard shrugged. "I like ostentation. As a kid I had a hell of an inferiority complex. I'm compensating for that now. Why do you suppose I built the castle? It's a showplace. I need an army of servants to keep it going. The worst thing I can imagine is being a nonentity."

"Which in your mind is synonymous with poverty," Gunther murmured. "You're essentially imitative, Bruce. You built your economic empire through imitation. I don't think you've ever had an original thought in your life."

"What about this robot?"

"Induction—simple addition. You figured out your requirements and added them up. The result is a diamond-studded robot conditioned to flight." Gunther hesitated. "Flight isn't enough. It's got to be escape—self-preservation. Sometimes offense is the best defense. The robot should run as long as that's feasible and logical—and then try escape in other ways."

"You mean giving him armament?"

"Uh-huh. If we started that, we couldn't stop. We want a mobile unit, not a tank. The robot's intelligence, based on flight logic, should enable him to make use of whatever he needs, the tools that are at hand. Squirt his brain full of the basic patterns, and he'll do the rest. I'll get at it immediately."

Ballard wiped his lips with a napkin. "Good."

Gunther got up. "I'm not really signing my death warrant, you know," he said conversationally. "If you have a theft-proof safe like the robot, you won't need me to make more diamonds. There'll be enough on the robot to satisfy all your needs till you die. If you kill me, then, your diamond monopoly's safe—nobody can make them but me. However, I wouldn't make that robot without taking precautions. The

Patent Office formula isn't listed under the name of Cain, and it isn't really a thermodynamic principle."

"Naturally," Ballard said. "I checked on that, without telling my investigators exactly what I was after. The patent number is your secret."

"And I'm safe as long as it remains my secret. It will, until I die. Then it'll be broadcast, and a lot of people will have their suspicions confirmed. There's a pretty widespread rumor that your diamonds are artificial, but nobody can prove it. I know one guy who'd like to."

"Ffoulkes?"

"Barney Ffoulkes, of Mercantile Alloys. He hates your insides as much as you hate his. But you're a bigger man than he is, just now. Yeah, Ffoulkes would love to smash you, Bruce."

"Get busy on the robot," Ballard said, rising. "See if you can finish it before there's another robbery."

Gunther's grin was sardonic. Ballard didn't smile, but the skin crinkled around his eyes. The two men understood each other thoroughly—which was probably the reason they were both still alive.

"Metalman, eh?" Barney Ffoulkes said to his chief of staff, Dangerfield. "Making a diamond-studded robot for Ballard, eh? Bloody show-off!"

Dangerfield didn't say anything.

"How big?"

"Seven feet, perhaps."

"And *studded*—wonder how thickly? Ballard's going to tie up a lot of rocks in that sandwich man. Wonder if he'll have the diamonds spell out, 'Hurrah for Bruce Ballard'?" Ffoulkes got up from his desk and buzzed around the room like a mosquito, a ginger-haired, partially bald little man with a wrinkled rat-trap face, soured in brine. "Get an offensive ready. Revise it daily. Chart a complete economic front, so we can jump on Ballard from all directions when we get the tip-off."

Dangerfield still said nothing, but his eyebrows lifted inquiringly in the sallow, blank face.

Ffoulkes scuttled toward him, twitching. "Do I have to make a blueprint? Whenever we've had Ballard in a spot before, he's wriggled out—insurance companies, loan flotations, more diamonds. No insurance company will handle him now. His diamonds can't be inexhaustible, unless they're artificial. If they are, he'll find it harder and harder to float a loan. See?"

Dangerfield nodded dubiously.

"Hm-m-m. He'll have a lot of gems tied up in this robot. It'll be stolen, naturally. And that time we'll strike."

Dangerfield pursed his lips.

"O.K.," Ffoulkes said. "So it may not work. It hasn't

worked before. But in this game the whole trick is to keep hammering till the wall's breached. This time may be the charm. If we can once catch Ballard insolvent, he'll go under. Anyhow, we've got to try. Prepare an offensive. Stocks, bonds, utilities, agricultures, ores—everything. What we want to do is force Ballard to buy on margin when he can't cover. Meantime, be sure our protection's paid. Hand the boys a bonus."

Dangerfield made a circle with thumb and forefinger. Ffoulkes chuckled nastily as his chief of staff went out.

It was a time of booms and panics, of unstable economics and utterly crazy variables. Man hours, as usual, remained the base. But what in theory seemed effective in practice was somewhat different. Man hours, fed into the hopper of the social culture, emerged in fantastic forms. Science had done that—science enslaved.

The strangle hold of the robber barons was still strong. Each one wanted a monopoly, but, because they were all at war, a species of toppling chaos was the result. They tried desperately to keep their own ships afloat while sinking the enemy fleet. Science and government were handicapped by the Powers, which were really industrial empires, completely self-contained if not self-supporting units. Their semanticists and propagandists worked on the people, ladling out soothing sirup. All would be well later—when Ballard, or Ffoulkes, or All-Steel, or Unlimited Power, took over. Meantime—

Meantime the technicians of the robber barons, well subsidized, kept throwing monkey wrenches into the machinery. It was the time preceding the Scientific Revolution, and akin to the Industrial Revolution in its rapid shifting of economic values. All-Steel's credit was based chiefly on the Hallwell Process. Unlimited Power's scientists discovered a better, more effective method that scrapped the Hallwell Process. Result, the bottom fell out of All-Steel, and there was a brief period of frantic readjustment, during which All-Steel yanked certain secret patents out into the open and utilized them, playing hell with Ffoulkes, whose Gatun Bond Issue was based on a law of supply and demand which was automatically revised by the new All-Steel patents. Meantime each company was trying to catch the others with their pants down. Each one wanted to be master. When that enviable day arrived, the economic mess would settle, it was hoped, under the central control, and there would be Utopia.

The structure grew like the Tower of Babel. It couldn't stop—naturally. Crime kept pace with it.

Because crime was a handy weapon. The old protection racket had been revived. All-Steel would pay the Donner gang plenty to keep their hands off All-Steel interests. If the Donner boys happened to concentrate on robberies that would

weaken Ffoulkes or Ballard or Unlimited Power—fine! Enough spectacular thefts would lead to a panic during which enemy stocks would drop to the bottom, one asked, nothing bid.

And if a man went down, he was lost. His holdings would go to the wolves, and he himself would be too potentially dangerous ever to be allowed power again. *Vae victis!*

But diamonds were increasingly rare—and so, till now, Bruce Ballard's empire had been safe.

The robot was sexless, but gave the impression of masculinity. Neither Ballard nor Gunther ever used the neuter pronoun in reference to the creature. Metalman Products had done their usual satisfactory job, and Gunther improved on it.

So Argus came to the castle, for final conditioning. Rather surprisingly, the robot was not vulgarly ostentatious. He was functional, a towering, symmetrical figure of gold, studded with diamonds. He was patterned on an armored knight, seven feet tall, with a cuirass of bright gold, golden greaves, golden gauntlets that looked clumsy but which contained remarkably sensitive nerve-endings. His eyes had diamond lenses, specially chosen for their refractive powers, and, logically, Ballard called him Argus.

He was blazingly beautiful, a figure out of myth. In a bright light he resembled Apollo more than Argus. He was a god come to earth, the shower of gold that Danae saw.

Gunther sweated over the conditioning process. He worked in a maze of psychological charts, based on the mentalities of the creatures that lived by flight. Automatic reactions had to have voluntary cut-offs, controlled by logic, when reasoning power took over—reasoning power based on the flight-instinct. Self-preservation was the prime factor. The robot had it in a sufficient amount.

"So he can't be caught," Ballard said, regarding Argus.

Gunther grunted. "How? He automatically adjusts to the most logical solution, and readjusts instantly to any variable. Logic and superswift reactions make him a perfect flight machine."

"You've implanted the routine?"

"Sure. Twice a day he makes his round of the castle. He won't leave the castle for any reason—which is a safeguard. If crooks could lure Argus outside, they *might* set an ingenious trap. But even if they captured the castle, they couldn't hold it long enough to immobilize Argus. What have you got burglar alarms for?"

"You're sure the tour's a good idea?"

"You wanted it. Once in the afternoon, once at night—so Argus could show off to the guests. If he meets danger during his round, he'll adjust to it."

Ballard fingered the diamonds on the robot's cuirass. "I'm still not sure about—sabotage."

"Diamonds are pretty tough. They'll resist a lot of heat. And under the gold plate is a casing that'll resist fire and acid—not forever, but long enough to give Argus his chance. The point is that Argus can't be immobilized long enough to let himself be destroyed. Sure, you could play a flame thrower on him—but for how long? One second, and then he'd scram."

"If he could. What about cornering him?"

"He won't go into corners if he can help it. And his radioatomic brain is *good!* He's a thinking machine devoted to one purpose: self-preservation."

"Hm-m-m."

"And he's strong," Gunther said. "Don't forget that. It's important. He can rip metal, if he can get leverage. He's not a superdooper, of course—if he were, he couldn't be mobile. He's subject to normal physical laws. But he is beautifully adaptive; he's very strong; he has super-swift reactive powers; he's not too vulnerable. And we're the only guys who can immobilize Argus."

"That helps," Ballard said.

Gunther shrugged. "Might as well start. The robot's ready." He jerked a wire free from the golden helm. "It takes a minute or so for the automatic controls to take over. Now—"

The immense figure stirred. On light, rubberoid soles, it moved away, so quickly that its legs almost blurred. Then it stood motionless once more.

"We were too close," Gunther said, licking his lips. "He reacts to the vibrations sent out by our brains. There's your piggy bank, Bruce!"

A little smile twisted Ballard's lips. "Yeah. Let's see—" He walked toward the robot. Argus slid away quietly.

"Try the combination," Gunther suggested.

Ballard said softly, almost whispering, "All is not gold that glitters." He approached the robot again, but it reacted by racing noiselessly into a distant corner. Before Ballard could say anything, Gunther murmured, "Say it louder."

"Suppose someone overhears? That's—"

"So what? You'll change the key phrase, and when you do, you can get close enough to Argus to whisper it."

"All is not gold that glitters." Ballard's voice rose. This time, when he went to the robot, the giant figure did not stir.

Ballard pressed a concealed stud in the golden helm and murmured, "These are pearls that were his eyes." He touched the button again, and the robot fled into another corner. "Uh-huh. It works, all right."

"Don't give him such obvious combinations," Gunther sug-

gested. "Suppose one of your guests starts quoting Shakespeare? Mix up your quotations."

Ballard tried again. "What light through yonder window breaks I come here to bury Caesar now is the time for all good men."

"Nobody's going to say that by accident," Gunther remarked. "Fair enough. Now I'm going out and enjoy myself. I need relaxation. Write me a check."

"How much?"

"Couple of thousand. I'll tele-call you if I need more."

"What about testing the robot?"

"Go ahead and test him. You won't find anything wrong."

"Well, take your guards."

Gunther grinned sardonically and headed for the door.

An hour later the air taxi grounded atop a New York skyscraper. Gunther emerged, flanked by two husky protectors. Ballard was running no risks of having his colleague abducted by a rival. As Gunther paid the air cabman, the detectives glanced at their wrist spotters and punched the red button set into each case. They reported thus, every five minutes, that all was well. One of Ballard's control centers in New York received the signals and learned that all was well—that there was no need to send out a rush rescue squad. It was complicated, but effective. No one else could use the spotters, for a new code was used each day. This time the key ran: first hour, report every five minutes: second hour, every eight minutes; third hour, every six minutes. And, at the first hint of danger, the detectives could instantly send in an alarm.

But this time it didn't work out successfully. When the three men got into the elevator, Gunther said, "The Fountain Room," and licked his lips in anticipation. The door swung shut, and as the elevator started its breakneck race down, anaesthetic gas flooded the little cubicle. One of the detectives managed to press the alarm warning on his spotter, but he was unconscious before the car slowed at the basement. Gunther didn't even realize he was being gassed before he lost consciousness.

He woke up fettered securely to a metal chair. The room was windowless, and a spotlight was focused on Gunther's face. He manipulated sticky eyelids, wondering how long he had been out. Scowling, he twisted his arm so that his wrist watch was visible.

Two men loomed, shadowy beyond the lamp. One wore a physician's white garment. The other was a little man, ginger-haired, with a hard rat trap of a face.

"Hi, Ffoulkes," Gunther said. "You saved me a hangover."

The little man chuckled. "Well, we've done it at last. Lord

knows I've been trying long enough to get you away from Ballard's watchdogs."

"What day is this?"

"Wednesday. You've been unconscious for about twenty hours."

Gunther frowned. "Well, start talking."

"I'll do that, first, if you like. Are Ballard's diamonds artificial?"

"Don't you wish you knew?"

"I'll offer you about anything you want if you'll cross up Ballard."

"I wouldn't dare," Gunther said candidly. "You wouldn't have to keep your word. It'd be more logical for you to kill me, after I'd talked."

"Then we'll have to use scopolamin."

"It won't work. I've been immunized."

"Try it, anyway. Lester!"

The white-gowned man came forward and put a hypodermic deftly into Gunther's arm. After a while he shrugged.

"Complete immunization. Scop is no good, Mr. Ffoulkes."

Gunther smiled. "Well?"

"Suppose I try torture?"

"I don't think you'd dare. Torture and murder are capital crimes."

The little man moved nervously around the room. "Does Ballard himself know how to make the diamonds? Or are you the only one?"

"The Blue Fairy makes 'em," Gunther said. "She's got a magic wand."

"I see. Well, I won't try torture yet. I'll use duress. You'll have plenty to eat and drink. But you'll stay here till you talk. It'll get rather dull after a month or so."

Gunther didn't answer, and the two men went out. An hour passed, and another.

The white-gowned physician brought in a tray and deftly fed the prisoner. After he had vanished, Gunther looked at his watch again. A worried frown showed on his forehead.

He grew steadily more nervous.

The watch read 9:15 when another meal was served. This time Gunther waited till the physician had left, and then recovered the fork he had managed to secrete in his sleeve. He hoped its absence wouldn't be noticed immediately. A few minutes was all he wanted, for Gunther knew the construction of these electromagnetic prison chairs. If he could short circuit the current—

It wasn't too difficult, even though Gunther's arms were prisoned by metal clamps. He knew where the wires were. After a bit, there was a crackling flash, and Gunther swore at

the pain in his seared fingertips. But the clamps slid free from his arms and legs.

He stood up, looking again at his wrist watch. Scowling, he prowled around the room till he found what he wanted—the window buttons. As he pressed these, panels in the blank walls slid aside, revealing the lighted towers of New York.

Gunther glanced at the door warily. He opened a window and peered down. The height was dizzying, but a ledge provided easy egress. Gunther eased himself over the sill and slid along to his right till he reached another window.

It was locked. He looked down, hesitating. There was another ledge below, but he wasn't sure he could make it. Instead, he went on to the next window.

Locked.

But the one after that was open. Gunther peered into the dimness. He could make out a bulky desk, and the glimmer of a telepanel. Sighing with relief, he crawled into the office, with another glance at his watch.

He went directly to the televisor and fingered a number. When a man's face appeared on the panel, Gunther merely said, "Reporting. O.K.," and broke the connection. His consciousness recorded a tiny click.

He called Ballard then, but the castle's secretary answered.

"Where's Ballard?"

"Not here, sir. Can I—"

Gunther went white, remembering the click he had heard. He broke the connection experimentally, and heard it again. Ballard—

"Hell!" Gunther said under his breath. He returned to the window, crawled out, hung by his hands, and let himself drop. He almost missed the ledge one story below. Skin ripped from his fingertips as he fought for a grip.

But he got it at last. He kicked his way through the window before him and dived in, glass showering. No televsior here. But there was a door dimly defined in the wall.

Gunther opened it, finding what he wanted on the other side. He switched on a lamp, riffling through the drawers till he was certain that this office wasn't another plant. After that, he used the televisor, fingering the same number he had called before.

There was no answer.

"Uh-huh," Gunther said, and made another call.

He had just broken the connection when a man in a surgeon's gown came in and shot him through the head.

The man who looked like Ffoulkes scrubbed make-up from his face. He glanced up when the physician entered.

"O.K.?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

"Did they trace Gunther's call?"
"That's not our pie. Come on."

A gray-haired man, tied securely in his chair, swore as the hypodermic pierced his skin. Ballard waited a minute and then jerked his head at the two guards behind him.
"Get out."
They obeyed. Ballard turned to the prisoner.
"Gunther was supposed to report to you every day. If he failed, you were told to release a certain message he gave you. Where's the message?"
"Where's Gunther?" the gray-haired man said. His voice was thick, the words slurring as the scopolamin began its work.
"Gunther's dead. I arranged matters so that he'd telecall you on a tapped beam. I traced the call. Now where's the message?"
It took a little while, but at last Ballard unscrewed a hollow table leg and took out a thin roll of recording wire tape, carefully sealed.
"Know what's in this?"
"No. No. No—"
Ballard went to the door. "Kill him," he said to the guards, and waited till he heard the muffled shot. Then he sighed with heartfelt relief.
He was, at last, impregnable.

Barney Ffoulkes called his chief of staff. "I hear Ballard's robot is finished. Clamp down. Put the squeeze on him. Force him to liquidate. Tell the Donner boys about the robot."
Dangerfield's face showed no expression as he made thumb and forefinger into a circle.

What Gunther had called Cain's thermodynamic patent was in reality something different, as the wire tape showed. Actually it was "McNamara, Torsion Process, Patent No. R-735-V-22." Ballard recorded that in his capacious memory and looked up the patent himself. This time he wished to share the secret with no one. He was enough of a scientist, he thought, to be able to work out the details himself. Besides, Gunther's machines for diamond-making were already set up in the castle laboratory.
Ballard immediately ran into an annoying, though not serious, hitch. The original McNamara process was not designed to create artificial diamonds. It was a method of developing certain electronic alterations in matter, and through torsion changing the physical structure involved. Gunther had taken McNamara's system, applied it to carbon, and made diamonds.
Ballard felt certain he could do the same, but it would take time. As a matter of fact, it took exactly two weeks. Once the

new application was discovered, the rest was incredibly easy. Ballard started to make diamonds.

There was one other difficulty. The annealing process took nearly a month. If the carbon was removed from the chamber before that time, it would be merely carbon. In the past, Gunther had kept a supply of diamonds on hand for emergencies; that supply was depleted now, most of the gems having gone to cover the golden robot. Ballard sat back and shrugged. In a month—

Long before that Ffoulkes struck. He clamped down with both hands. Propaganda, whispering campaigns, releasing of new patents that rendered Ballard's worthless—all the weapons of economic warfare were unleashed against the diamond king. Holdings depreciated. There were strikes in Ballard's mines and factories. An unexpected civil war knocked the bottom out of certain African stocks he held. Word began to go around that the Ballard empire was collapsing.

Margin was the answer—that, and security. Diamonds were excellent collateral. Ballard used up his small hoard lavishly, trying to plug the leaks in the dike, buying on margin, using the tactics that had always succeeded for him in the past. His obvious confidence stemmed the tide for a while. Not for long. Ffoulkes kept hitting, hard and fast.

By the end of the month, Ballard knew, he would have all the diamonds he needed, and could re-establish his credit. In the meantime—

The Donner gang tried to steal Argus. They didn't know the robot's capabilities. Argus fled from room to room, clanging an alarm, ignoring bullets, until the Donners decided to give it up as a bad job and escape. But by that time the police had arrived, and they failed.

Ballard had been too busy pulling strings to enjoy his golden plaything. The advent of the Donners gave him a new idea. It would be a shame to mar the robot, but the diamonds could be replaced later. And what good was a bank except for emergencies?

Ballard found a canvas bag and went into the robot's room, locking the doors behind him. Argus stood motionless in a corner, his diamond eyes inscrutable. Ballard took out a tiny chisel, shook his head rather sadly, and said in a firm voice, "What light through yonder window breaks—"

He finished the scrambled quotation and walked toward the robot. Argus silently went away.

Ballard moved his shoulders impatiently. He repeated the key sentence louder. How many decibels were necessary? A good many—

Argus still ran away. This time Ballard yelled the key at the top of his voice.

And the robot's flight mechanism continued to operate. The

automatic alarm began to work. The siren screech hooted deafeningly through the room.

Ballard noticed that a little envelope was protruding from a slot in Argus' cuirass. Automatically he reached for it—and the robot fled.

Ballard lost his temper and began to follow Argus around the room. The robot kept at a safe distance. Eventually Argus, since he was untiring, won the race. Panting, Ballard unlocked the door and rang for help. The alarm siren died.

When servants came, Ballard ordered them to surround the robot. The circle of humanity closed in gradually, until Argus, unable to retreat within himself, chose the most logical solution and walked through the living wall, brushing the servants aside casually. He continued toward the door and through it, in a crackling of splintered mahogany panels. Ballard looked after the retreating figure without saying anything.

The envelope had been brushed free by the encounter with the door, and Ballard picked it up. The brief note inside read:

Dear Bruce:

I'm taking no chances. Unless I make a certain adjustment on Argus daily, he reverts to a different code phrase from the one you give him. Since I'm the only guy who knows that code, you'll have a sweet time catching Argus in case you cut my throat. Honesty is the best policy.

Love,
Joe Gunther.

Ballard tore the note into tiny fragments. He dismissed the servants and followed the robot, who had become immobile in the next room.

He went out, after a while, and televised his divorced wife in Chicago.

"Jessie?"

"Hello," Jessie said. "What's up?"

"You heard about my golden robot?"

"Sure. Build as many as you want, as long as you keep on paying my alimony. What's this I hear about your hitting the skids?"

"Ffoulkes is behind that," Ballard said grimly. "If you want your alimony to continue, do me a favor. I want to register my robot in your name. Sign it over to you for a dollar. That way, I won't lose the robot even if there's a foreclosure."

"Is it that bad?"

"It's plenty bad. But as long as I've got the robot, I'm safe. It's worth several fortunes. I want you to sell the robot back to me for a dollar, of course, but we'll keep that document quiet."

"You mean you don't trust me, Bruce?"

"Not with a diamond-studded robot," Ballard said.

"Then I want two dollars. I've got to make a profit on the transaction. O.K. I'll attend to it. Send me the papers and I'll sign 'em."

Ballard broke the beam. That was done, anyhow. The robot was unequivocally his, and not even Ffoulkes could take it away from him.

Even if he went broke before the month was up and the new diamonds ready, the robot would put him on his feet again in no time. However, it was first necessary to catch Argus—

There were many telecalls that day. People wanted collateral. Brokers wanted margin covered. Ballard frantically juggled his holdings, liquidating, attempting flotations, trying to get loans. He received a visit from two bulky men who made a business of supplying credit, at exorbitant rates.

They had heard of the robot. But they demanded to see it.

Ballard was gratified by their expressions. "What do you need credit for, Bruce? You've got plenty tied up in that thing."

"Sure. But I don't want to dismantle it. So you'll help me out till after the first—"

"Why the first?"

"I'm getting a new shipment of diamonds then."

"Uh-huh," said the taller of the two men. "That robot runs away, doesn't he?"

"That's why he's burglar-proof."

The two brokers exchanged glances. "Mind if we make a closer examination?" They went forward, and Argus fled.

Ballard said hastily, "Stopping him is rather a complicated process. And it takes time to start him again. Those stones are perfect."

"How do we know? Turn off the juice, or whatever makes the thing tick. You don't object to our making a closer examination, do you?"

"Of course not," Ballard said. "But it takes time—"

"I smell a rat," one of the brokers remarked. "You can have all the credit you want, but I insist on testing those diamonds. Call me when you're ready."

They both went out. Ballard cursed silently. The telescreen in the corner flickered. Ballard didn't bother to answer; he knew very well what the purport of the message would be. Collateral—

Ffoulkes was closing in for the kill.

Ballard's lips tightened. He glared at the robot, spun on his heel, and summoned his secretary. He issued swift orders.

The secretary, a dapper, youngish man with yellow hair and a perpetually worried expression, went into action. He, in turn, issued orders. People began to come to the castle—workmen and technicians.

Ballard consulted with the technicians. None of them could suggest a certain method for immobilizing the robot. Yet they were far too optimistic. It didn't seem difficult to them to catch a machine.

"Flame throwers?"

Ballard considered. "There's an alloy casing under the gold plate."

"Suppose we can corner it long enough to burn through to the brain? That should do the trick."

"Well, try it. I can afford to lose a few diamonds if I can get my hands on the rest of 'em."

Ballard watched as six men, armed with flame throwers, maneuvered Argus into a corner. He warned them finally, "You're close enough. Don't go any nearer, or he'll break through you."

"Yes, sir. Ready? One . . . two—"

The nozzles blasted fire in unison. It took an appreciable time for the flame to reach the robot's head—some fractional part of a second, perhaps. By that time, Argus had ducked, and, safely under the flames, was running out of his corner. Crouching, he burst through the line of men, his alarm siren screeching. He fled into the next room and relapsed into contented immobility.

"Try it again," Ballard said glumly, but he knew it wouldn't work. It didn't. The robot's reactions were instantaneous. The men could not correct their aim with sufficient speed to hit Argus. A good deal of valuable furniture was destroyed, however.

The secretary touched Ballard's sleeve. "It's nearly two."

"Eh? Oh—that's right. Call the men off, Johnson. Is the trapdoor ready?"

"Yes, sir."

The robot suddenly turned and headed for a door. It was time for his first tour of the castle that day. Since his route was prearranged and never swerved an iota from its course, it had been easy to set a trap. Ballard hadn't really expected the flame throwers to work, anyhow.

He followed, with Johnson, as Argus moved slowly through the ornate rooms of the castle. "His weight will spring the trapdoor, and he'll drop into the room below. Can he get out of that room?"

"No, sir. The walls are reinforced metal. He'll stay put."

"Fair enough."

"But . . . uh . . . won't he keep dodging around that room?"

"He may," Ballard said grimly, "till I pour quick-setting concrete in on him. That'll immobilize the so-and-so. It'll be easy after that to drill through the concrete and get the diamonds."

Johnson smiled weakly. He was a little afraid of the huge, glittering robot.

"How wide is the trap?" Ballard asked abruptly.

"Ten feet."

"So. Well, call the men with the flame throwers. Tell 'em to close in behind us. If Argus doesn't fall into the trap, we want to be able to drive him in."

Johnson hesitated. "Wouldn't he simply smash his way through the men?"

"We'll see. Put the men on both sides of the trap, so we'll have Argus cornered. Hop to it!"

The secretary raced away. Ballard followed the robot through room after room. Eventually Johnson and three of the flame-throwing crew appeared. The others had circled around to flank the robot.

They turned into the passage. It was narrow, but long. Halfway along it was the trapdoor, concealed by a rich Bokhara rug. In the distance Ballard could see three men waiting, flame throwers ready, watching as the robot approached them. Within minutes now the trap would be sprung.

"Turn it on, boys," Ballard said, on a sudden impulse. The crew of three walking in front of him obeyed. Fire jutted out from the nozzles they held.

The robot increased its pace. It had eyes in the back of its head, Ballard remembered. Well, eyes wouldn't help Argus now. The rug—

A golden foot came down. The robot began to shift its weight forward, and suddenly froze as instantaneous reactions warned it of the difference in pressure between the solid floor and the trap. There was no time for the door to drop down, before Argus had instantly readjusted, withdrew his foot, and stood motionless on the verge of the rug. The flame throwers gushed out toward the robot's back. Ballard yelled a command.

The three men beyond the trapdoor began to run forward, fire sprouting from their hoses. The robot bent its legs, shifted balance, and jumped. It wasn't at all bad for a standing broad jump. Since Argus could control his movements with the nicest accuracy, and since his metal body had strength in excess of his weight, the golden figure sprang across the ten-foot gap with inches to spare. Flame lashed out at him.

Argus moved fast—very fast. His legs were a blinding blur of speed. Ignoring the fire that played on his body, he ran toward the three men and through them. Then he slowed down to a normal walk and continued mildly on his way. The alarm siren was screaming Ballard realized, just as it died.

For Argus, the danger was over. Here and there on his metal body the gold had melted into irregular blobs. That was all.

Johnson gulped. "He must have seen the trap."

"He felt it," Ballard said, his voice low with fury. "Hell! If we could just immobilize Argus long enough to pour concrete on him—"

That was tried an hour later. A metal-sheathed ceiling collapsed on the robot, a ceiling of mesh metal through which concrete could be poured. Ballard simply had liquid concrete run into the room above till the platform collapsed under the weight. The robot was below—

Was below. The difference in air pressure warned Argus, and he knew what to do about it. He lunged through the door and escaped, leaving a frightful mess behind him.

Ballard cursed. "We can't shoot concrete at the devil. If he's sensitized to differences in air pressure—hell! I don't know. There must be some way. Johnson! Get me Plastic Products, quick!"

A short while later Ballard was closeted with a representative of Plastic Products.

"I don't quite understand. A quick-drying cement—"

"To be squirted out of hoses, and to harden as soon as it hits the robot. That's what I said."

"If it dries that quickly, it'll dry as soon as air hits it. I think we've got almost what you want. A very strong liquid cementoid; it'll harden half a minute after being exposed to air."

"That should work. Yeah. How soon—"

"Tomorrow morning."

The next morning, Argus was herded into one of the huge halls downstairs. A ring of thirty men surrounded the robot, each armed with a tank, filled with the quick-drying cementoid. Ballard and Johnson watched from the side lines.

"The robot's pretty strong, sir," Johnson hazarded.

"So's the cementoid. Quantity will do it. The men will keep spraying the stuff on till Argus is in a cocoon. Without leverage he can't break out. Like a mammoth in a tar pit."

Johnson made a clicking noise with his lips. "That's an idea. If this shouldn't work, perhaps I—"

"Save it," Ballard said. He looked around at the doors. Before each one was stationed a group of men, also armed with cementoid tanks.

In the center of the room stood Argus, blankly impassive, waiting. Ballard said, "O.K.," and from thirty positions around the robot streams of cementoid converged on his golden body.

The warning siren screamed deafeningly. Argus began to turn around.

That was all. He kept turning around. But—fast!

He was a machine, and could develop tremendous power. He spun on his longitudinal axis, a blazing, shinning, glittering blur of light, far too fast for the eye to follow. He was like a

tiny world spinning through space—but a world has gravitation. Argus' gravitational pull was negligible. There was, however, centrifugal force.

It was like throwing an egg into an electric fan. The streams of cementoid hit Argus, and bounced, repelled by the centrifuge. Ballard got a gob of the stuff in his middle. It had hardened enough to be painful.

Argus kept on spinning. He didn't try to run, this time. His alarm kept screeching deafeningly. The men, plastered with cementoid, continued to squirt the stuff at Argus for a while.

But the cementoid stuck to them when it was flung back. It hardened on them. Within seconds the scene resembled a Mack Sennett pie-throwing comedy.

Ballard roared conmmands. His voice went unheard in the uproar. But the men did not continue their hopeless task for long. They, not Argus, were becoming immobilized.

Presently the warning siren stopped. Argus slowed down in his mad spinning. He was no longer the target of cementoid streams.

He went quietly out of the room, and nobody tried to stop him.

One man almost strangled before the hardened cementoid could be dislodged from his mouth and nostrils. Aside from that, there were no casualties, save to Ballard's temper.

It was Johnson who suggested the next experiment. Quicksand would immobilize anything. It was difficult to introduce quicksand into the castle, but a substitute was provided—a gooey, tarry mess poured into an improvised tank twenty-five feet wide. All that remained was to lure Argus into the quicksand.

"Traps won't work," Ballard said glumly. "Maybe stringing a wire to trip him—"

"I think he'd react instantly to that, too, sir," Johnson vetoed. "If I may make a suggestion, it should not be difficult to drive Argus into the pit, once he's maneuvered into a passage leading to it."

"How? Flame throwers again? He automatically reacts away from the most serious danger. When he came to the pit, he'd turn around and go the other way. Break right through the men."

"His strength is limited, isn't it?" Johnson asked. "He couldn't pass a tank."

Ballard didn't see the point immediately. "A midget tractor? Not too small, though—some of the castle's passages are plenty wide. If we got a tank just broad enough to fill the hall—a pistol that would drive Argus into the quicksand—"

Measurements were made, and a powerful tractor brought into the castle. It fitted the passages, leaving no room to spare

—at least, not enough to accommodate the robot. Once Argus was driven into that particular passage, he could go only one way.

The tractor, at Johnson's suggestion, was camouflaged, so the robot's flight-conditioned brain would not recognize and consider it as a serious factor. But the machine was ready to roll into the passage instantly.

The trick would probably have succeeded, had it not been for one difficulty. The consistency of the artificial quicksand had been calculated carefully. It had to be soft enough to drag the robot down, and stiff enough so that Argus would be helpless. The robot could walk safely under water; that had been proved days ago, in an abortive early experiment.

So the mix had surface tension, though not enough to bear Argus' great weight.

The robot was maneuvered into the passage without trouble, and the tractor swung after it, blocking Argus' escape. It rumbled slowly on, driving the robot before it. Argus seemed untroubled. When he reached the edge of the artificial quicksand, he bent and tested the consistency with one golden hand.

After that, he lay flat on his face, legs bent like a frog's, feet braced against one wall of the passage, head pointed out over the quicksand. He thrust strongly.

Had Argus walked into the goo feet first, he would have sunk. But his weight was spread over a far larger surface area now. Not enough to sustain him indefinitely, but long enough for his purposes. He simply didn't have time to sink. Argus skimmed over the quicksand like a skiff or a sandboat. His powerful initial thrust gave him sufficient impetus. No human could have done it, and, while Argus weighed more than a human, he had also had more strength.

So he shot out, angling across the tank, buoyed by surface tension and carried on by his impetus. The quicksand got hold at last and bogged him down, but by that time Argus' powerful hands reached their destination, the edge of the tank. Another door was in the wall at that point, and Ballard and Johnson were standing on the threshold, watching.

They dodged before Argus trampled them in his automatic fight-reaction away from the quicksand tank.

The robot dripped goo over a dozen valuable rugs before he dried. But after that he was no longer so dazzling a spectacle. However, his abilities were unimpaired.

Ballard tried the quicksand trick again, with a larger tank and smooth walls, on which the robot could get no grip. Yet Argus seemed to learn through experience. Before entering a passage now, he would make certain that there were no tractors within reach. Ballard concealed a tractor in an adjoining room where Argus could not see it, and the robot was induced to go into the fatal passage; but he ran out again the moment the

tractor clanked into movement. Argus had an excellent sense of hearing.

"Well—" Johnson said doubtfully.

Ballard moved his lips silently. "Eh? Get that stuff from the quicksand washed off Argus. He's supposed to be a showpiece!"

Johnson looked after Ballard's retreating figure. His eyebrows lifted quizzically.

Ballard had a tough session with the televisor. His enemies were closing in from all sides. If only the end of the month would come, when he could get the new diamonds! His holdings were falling in ruin around him. And that damned robot held the key to—everything!

He gave such orders as he could and wandered upstairs, to Argus' room. The robot, newly cleaned, stood by the window in a blaze of sunlight, a figure of fantastic beauty. Ballard noticed his own reflection in a nearby mirror. Instinctively he drew himself up.

It was a singularly futile gesture. The silent presence of Argus was like a rebuke. Ballard looked at the robot.

"Oh, damn you!" he said. "Damn you!"

Through the visor the impassive face of Argus ignored him. A whim had made Ballard shape the robot to resemble a knight. Somehow the idea seemed less satisfactory now.

Ballard's long-suppressed inferiority complex was suffering badly.

The golden knight stood there, towering, beautiful, mighty. There was dignity in its silence. It was a machine, Ballard told himself, merely a machine that man had made. He was certainly better than a machine.

But he wasn't.

Within its specialized limits, the robot had greater intelligence than his own. It had security, for it was invulnerable. It had wealth—it *was* wealth, a Midas without the Midas curse. And it had beauty. Calm, huge, utterly self-confident, Argus stood ignoring Ballard.

If Ballard could have destroyed the robot then, he might have done so. If only the damned thing wouldn't *ignore* him! It was wrecking his life, his power, his empire—and doing so unconsciously. Malice and hatred Ballard could have faced; as long as a man is important enough to be hated, he is not a cipher. But, to Argus, Ballard simply did not exist.

The sunlight blazed yellow from the golden cuirass. The diamonds sent out rainbow rays into the still air of the room. Ballard did not realize that his lips had drawn back into a snarling rictus—

After that events moved swiftly. The most notable was the impounding of the castle, a result of Ballard's avalanching economic collapse. He had to move out. Before he did so, he

risked opening the annealing chamber on the new diamonds, a week before the process was finished. The result was worthless carbon. But Ballard could not have waited a week, for by that time the castle and all it contained would have been out of his possession.

Except the robot. That was still his own—or, rather, it belonged technically to his divorced wife. The documents he and Jessica had signed were thoroughly waterproof and legal. Ballard secured a court judgment; he was permitted to enter the castle and take away the robot at any convenient time. If he could find a way of immobilizing Argus long enough to dismantle the creature.

In time he might hit on a way. Maybe. Maybe—

Ffoulkes summoned Ballard to a conference, superficially a luncheon engagement. For a time Ffoulkes talked of casual matters, but there was a sardonic gleam in his eyes.

At last he said, "How are you getting on with that robot of yours, Bruce?"

"All right." Ballard was wary. "Why?"

"The castle's impounded, isn't it?"

"That's right. But I can get the robot whenever I like. The court ruled in my favor—special circumstances."

"Think you can catch the thing. *I* don't. Gunther was a smart man. If he made that robot invulnerable. I'll bet you won't be able to get your hands on it. Unless you know the key phrase, of course."

"I—" Ballard stopped. His eyes changed. "How'd you know—"

"That there was a code? Gunther phoned me just before he . . . ah . . . met his unfortunate accident. He suspected you were going to kill him. I do not know the ins and outs of the thing, but I got a telecall from him that night. All he said was to tell you what the key code was—but not to tell you till the right time. Gunther was pretty farsighted."

"You know the code?" Ballard said, his voice expressionless.

Ffoulkes shook his head. "No."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Gunther said this: 'Tell Ballard that the key code is what he finds on the wire tape—the name and number of the patent for making artificial diamonds.' "

Ballard looked at his fingernails. The wire tape. The secret he had found only by tricking and killing Gunther. Only in his mind now did that information exist—"McNamara, Torsion Process, Patent No. R-735-V-22."

And Gunther must have keyed the robot to that chain of phrases before he died.

"Finished?" Ffoulkes asked.

"Yeah." Ballard got up, crumpling his napkin.

"This is on me. . . . One more point, Bruce. It would be distinctly to my advantage if diamonds became valueless. I've sold out all my diamond holdings, but plenty of my competitors have interests in the African mines. If the bottom falls out of the market, I can do some good for myself."

"Well?"

"Would you tell me that patent number?"

"No."

"I thought not," Ffoulkes said, sighing. "Well, good-by."

Ballard commandeered a truck, well armored, and hired a dozen guards. He drove out to the castle. The officer at the gate nodded agreeably.

"Want to go in, sir?"

"Yes. I have permission—"

"I know that, sir. Go right ahead. You're after your robot?"

Ballard didn't answer. The castle, after he had entered, seemed strange to him. Already there had been alterations, rugs removed, pictures stored, furniture carried away. It was no longer his.

He glanced at his watch. Five after two. Argus would be making his rounds. The great hall—

Ballard headed for it. He caught sight of the golden robot emerging into the hall and beginning its slow circuit. Two men followed it, just beyond the circle of reaction. They were police guards.

Ballard walked toward them. "I'm Bruce Ballard."

"Yes, sir."

"What . . . what the devil! Aren't you Dangerfield? Ffoulkes' chief of staff? Wh—"

Dangerfield's blank face didn't change expression. "I've been sworn in as special deputy. The authorities consider your robot too valuable to be left unguarded. We're detailed to keep an eye on it."

Ballard didn't move for a moment. Then he said, "Well, your job's finished. I'm taking the robot away."

"Very well, sir."

"You can leave."

"Sorry, sir. My orders were not to leave the robot unguarded for a moment."

"Ffoulkes gave you those orders," Ballard said, his voice not quite under control.

"Sir?"

Ballard looked at the other guard. "Are you Ffoulkes' man, too?"

"Sir?"

Dangerfield said, "You're quite free to remove your robot whenever you wish, but until it's out of the castle, we mustn't take our eyes off those diamonds."

They had, as they talked, been following Argus. Now the robot moved on into the next hall and commenced its slow circuit. Ballard ran around in front of the creature. Covering his lips with one hand, he whispered, "McNamara, Torsion Process, Patent No. R-735-V-22."

The robot kept on walking. Dangerfield said, "You'll have to say it louder, won't you?"

He was holding a little notebook and stylo.

Ballard stared at the other for a moment. Then he ran in toward Argus, beginning to whisper the code phrase again. But the robot instantly fled till it was beyond Ballard's triggering nearness.

He couldn't get close enough to whisper the code. And if he said it loudly enough for Argus to hear, Dangerfield was ready to carry the formula to Ffoulkes. What Ffoulkes would do was obvious—publicize the process, so that the bottom would fall out of the diamond market.

The trio moved on, leaving Ballard where he was. Could there be a way out? Was there any way of trapping the robot?

The man knew that there was none—none he could employ in a house no longer his own. With power and wealth, he might eventually figure out a way. But time was important.

Even yet, he could re-establish himself. A month from now he could not. By that time the strings of empire would have passed forever from his hands. Frantically his mind doubled back on its tracks, seeking escape.

Suppose he used the process to make more diamonds?

He might try. But he was no longer Bruce Ballard, the robber baron. He did not have the invulnerability of the very wealthy. Ffoulkes could have him shadowed, could trace his every movement. There was no possibility of secrecy. Whatever he did from now on would be an open book to Ffoulkes. So, if he made more diamonds, Ffoulkes' men would discover the method. There was no escape that way.

Escape. So easy for the robot. He had lost invulnerability, but the robot was invulnerable. He had lost wealth; Argus was Midas. His intelligence could not help him now in this greatest crisis of his life. For an insane moment he wondered what Argus would do in his place—Argus whose infallible metal brain was so far superior to the brain that had brought it into being.

But Argus would never be in this position—Argus cared for nothing on Earth but Argus' own magnificent golden hide, studded with flashing glory. Even now he was stalking on his way through the castle, uncaring and unheeding.

Ballard drew an unsteady breath and went down to the cellar, where he found a heavy sledge hammer. After that he went up to look for Argus.

He found him in the dining hall, moving with a slow,

majestic tread as light from the windows slid softly over his golden mail, splintered into rainbows from his jewels.

Ballard was sweating, though not with exertion. He got in front of Argus and said, "Stop right there, you—" He called the robot an unprintable name.

Argus moved to circle him. Ballard in a clear, carrying voice said, "McNamara, Torsion Process, Patent No. R-735-V-22."

Dangerfield's stylo moved swiftly. The robot stopped. It was like stopping some inexorable force of nature, as if an avalanche had halted halfway down a mountain. In the unnatural silence Ballard heard the other guard ask:

"Got it?"

"Yeah," said Dangerfield. "Let's go."

They went out. Ballard hefted the sledge. He walked toward Argus on the balls of his feet. Argus towered over him, serene and blind.

The first blow sent diamonds showering and flashing, gouged gold from the robot's massive chest. With tremendous dignity Argus rocked backward from the blow. The thunder of his fall echoed through the silent hall.

Ballard lifted the sledge and brought it down again. He couldn't break through the almost impermeable casing beneath the gold plate, of course, nor crush the gems, but his furious blows ripped diamonds free and tore great furrows and gouges in the golden armor.

"You . . . damned . . . machine!" Ballard shouted, wielding the sledge in a blind, clamorous fury of meaningless destruction. "You . . . damned . . . *machine!*"

With Folded Hands . . .

By Jack Williamson

Underhill was walking home from the office, because his wife had the car, the afternoon he first met the new mechanicals. His feet were following his usual diagonal path across a weedy vacant block—his wife usually had the car—and his preoccupied mind was rejecting various impossible ways to meet his notes at the Two Rivers bank, when a new wall stopped him.

The wall wasn't any common brick or stone, but something sleek and bright and strange. Underhill stared up at a long new building. He felt vaguely annoyed and surprised at this glittering obstruction—it certainly hadn't been here last week.

Then he saw the thing in the window.

The window itself wasn't any ordinary glass. The wide, dustless panel was completely transparent, so that only the glowing letters fastened to it showed that it was there at all. The letters made a severe, modernistic sign:

Two Rivers Agency
HUMANOID INSTITUTE
The Perfect Mechanicals
"To Serve and Obey,
And Guard Men from Harm."

His dim annoyance sharpened, because Underhill was in the mechanicals business himself. Times were already hard enough, and mechanicals were a drug on the market. Androids, mechanoids, electronoids, automatoids, and ordinary robots. Unfortunately, few of them did all the salesmen promised, and the Two Rivers market was already sadly oversaturated.

Underhill sold androids—when he could. His next consignment was due tomorrow, and he didn't quite know how to meet the bill.

Frowning, he paused to stare at the thing behind that invisible window. He had never seen a humanoid. Like any mechanical not at work, it stood absolutely motionless. Smaller and slimmer than a man. A shining black, its sleek silicone skin had a changing sheen of bronze and metallic blue. Its graceful oval face wore a fixed look of alert and slightly surprised solicitude. Altogether, it was the most beautiful mechanical he had ever seen.

Too small, of course, for much practical utility. He murmured to himself a reassuring quotation from the *Android Salesman:* "Androids are big—because the makers refuse to sacrifice power, essential functions, or dependability. Androids are your biggest buy!"

The transparent door slid open as he turned toward it, and he walked into the haughty opulence of the new display room to convince himself that these streamlined items were just another flashy effort to catch the woman shopper.

He inspected the glittering layout shrewdly, and his breezy optimism faded. He had never heard of the Humanoid Institute, but the invading firm obviously had big money and big-time merchandising knowhow.

He looked around for a salesman, but it was another mechanical that came gliding silently to meet him. A twin of the one in the window, it moved with a quick, surprising grace. Bronze and blue lights flowed over its lustrous blackness, and a yellow name plate flashed from its naked breast:

HUMANOID
Serial No. 81-H-B-27
The Perfect Mechanical
"To Serve and Obey,
And Guard Men from Harm."

Curiously, it had no lenses. The eyes in its bald oval head were steel-colored, blindly staring. But it stopped a few feet in front of him, as if it could see anyhow, and it spoke to him with a high, melodious voice:

"At your service, Mr. Underhill."

The use of his name startled him, for not even the androids could tell one man from another. But this was a clever merchandising stunt, of course, not too difficult in a town the size of Two Rivers. The salesman must be some local man, prompting the mechanical from behind the partition. Underhill erased his momentary astonishment, and said loudly:

"May I see your salesman, please?"

"We employ no human salesman, sir," its soft silvery voice replied instantly. "The Humanoid Institute exists to serve mankind, and we require no human service. We ourselves can

supply any information you desire, sir, and accept your order for immediate humanoid service."

Underhill peered at it dazedly. No mechanicals were competent even to recharge their own batteries and reset their own relays, much less to operate their own branch offices. The blind eyes stared blankly back, and he looked uneasily around for any booth or curtain that might conceal the salesman.

Meanwhile, the sweet thin voice resumed persuasively:

"May we come out to your home for a free trial demonstration, sir? We are anxious to introduce our service on your planet, because we have been successful in eliminating human unhappiness on so many others. You will find us far superior to the old electronic mechanicals in use here."

Underhill stepped back uneasily. He reluctantly abandoned his search for the hidden salesman, shaken by the idea of any mechanicals promoting themselves. That would upset the whole industry.

"At least you must take some advertising matter, sir."

Moving with a somehow appalling graceful deftness, the small black mechanical brought him an illustrated booklet from a table by the wall. To cover his confused and increasing alarm, he thumbed through the glossy pages.

In a series of richly colored before-and-after pictures, a chesty blond girl was stooping over a kitchen stove, and then relaxing in a daring negligee while a little black mechanical knelt to serve her something. She was wearily hammering a typewriter, and then lying on an ocean beach, in a revealing sun suit, while another mechanical did the typing. She was toiling at some huge industrial machine, and then dancing in the arms of a golden-haired youth, while a black humanoid ran the machine.

Underhill sighed wistfully. The android company didn't supply such fetching sales material. Women would find this booklet irresistible, and they selected eighty-six per cent of all mechanicals sold. Yes, the competition was going to be bitter.

"Take it home, sir," the sweet voice urged him. "Show it to your wife. There is a free trial demonstration order blank on the last page, and you will notice that we require no payment down."

He turned numbly, and the door slid open for him. Retreating dazedly, he discovered the booklet still in his hand. He crumpled it furiously, and flung it down. The small black thing picked it up tidily, and the insistent silver voice rang after him:

"We shall call at your office tomorrow, Mr. Underhill, and send a demonstration unit to your home. It is time to discuss the liquidation of your business, because the electronic mechanicals you have been selling cannot compete with us. And we shall offer your wife a free trial demonstration."

Underhill didn't attempt to reply, because he couldn't trust his voice. He stalked blindly down the new sidewalk to the corner, and paused there to collect himself. Out of his startled and confused impressions, one clear fact emerged—things looked black for the agency.

Bleakly, he stared back at the haughty splendor of the new building. It wasn't honest brick or stone; that invisible window wasn't glass; and he was quite sure the foundation for it hadn't even been staked out, the last time Aurora had the car.

He walked on around the block, and the new sidewalk took him near the rear entrance. A truck was backed up to it, and several slim black mechanicals were silently busy, unloading huge metal crates.

He paused to look at one of the crates. It was labeled for interstellar shipment. The stencils showed that it had come from the Humanoid Institute, on Wing IV. He failed to recall any planet of that designation; the outfit must be big.

Dimly, inside the gloom of the warehouse, beyond the truck, he could see black mechanicals opening the crates. A lid came up, revealing dark, rigid bodies, closely packed. One by one, they came to life. They climbed out of the crate, and sprang gracefully to the floor. A shining black, glinting with bronze and blue, they were all identical.

One of them came out past the truck, to the sidewalk, staring with blind steel eyes. Its high silver voice spoke to him melodiously:

"At your service, Mr. Underhill."

He fled. When his name was promptly called by a courteous mechanical, just out of the crate in which it had been imported from a remote and unknown planet, he found the experience trying.

Two blocks along, the sign of a bar caught his eye, and he took his dismay inside. He had made it a business rule not to drink before dinner, and Aurora didn't like him to drink at all; but these new mechanicals, he felt, had made the day exceptional.

Unfortunately, however, alcohol failed to brighten the brief visible future of the agency. When he emerged, after an hour, he looked wistfully back in hope that bright new building might have vanished as abruptly as it came. It hadn't. He shook his head dejectedly, and turned uncertainly homeward.

Fresh air had cleared his head somewhat, before he arrived at the neat white bungalow in the outskirts of the town, but it failed to solve his business problems. He also realized, uneasily, that he would be late for dinner.

Dinner, however, had been delayed. His son Frank, a freckled ten-year-old, was still kicking a football on the quiet street in front of the house. And little Gay, who was tow-

haired and adorable and eleven, came running across the lawn and down the sidewalk to meet him.

"Father, you can't guess what!" Gay was going to be a great musician some day, and no doubt properly dignified, but she was pink and breathless with excitement now. She let him swing her high off the sidewalk, and she wasn't critical of the bar-aroma on his breath. He couldn't guess, and she informed him eagerly:

"Mother's got a new lodger!"

Underwood had foreseen a painful inquisition, because Aurora was worried about the notes at the bank, and the bill for the new consignment, and the money for little Gay's lessons.

The new lodger, however, saved him from that. With an alarming crashing of crockery, the household android was setting dinner on the table, but the little house was empty. He found Aurora in the back yard, burdened with sheets and towels for the guest.

Aurora, when he married her, had been as utterly adorable as now her little daughter was. She might have remained so, he felt, if the agency had been a little more successful. However, while the pressure of slow failure had gradually crumbled his own assurance, small hardships had turned her a little too aggressive.

Of course he loved her still. Her red hair was still alluring, and she was loyally faithful, but thwarted ambitions had sharpened her character and sometimes her voice. They never quarreled, really, but there were small differences.

There was the little apartment over the garage—built for human servants they had never been able to afford. It was too small and shabby to attract any responsible tenant, and Underhill wanted to leave it empty. It hurt his pride to see her making beds and cleaning floors for strangers.

Aurora had rented it before, however, when she wanted money to pay for Gay's music lessons, or when some colorful unfortunate touched her sympathy, and it seemed to Underhill that her lodgers had all turned out to be thieves and vandals.

She turned back to meet him, now, with the clean linen in her arms.

"Dear, it's no use objecting." Her voice was quite determined. "Mr. Sledge is the most wonderful old fellow, and he's going to stay just as long as he wants."

"That's all right, darling." He never liked to bicker, and he was thinking of his troubles at the agency. "I'm afraid we'll need the money. Just make him pay in advance."

"But he can't!" Her voice throbbed with sympathetic

warmth. "He says he'll have royalties coming in from his inventions, so he can pay in a few days."

Underhill shrugged; he had heard that before.

"Mr. Sledge is different, dear," she insisted. "He's a traveler, and a scientist. Here, in this dull little town, we don't see many interesting people."

"You've picked up some remarkable types," he commented.

"Don't be unkind, dear," she chided gently. "You haven't met him yet, and you don't know how wonderful he is." Her voice turned sweeter. "Have you a ten, dear?"

He stiffened. "What for?"

"Mr. Sledge is ill." Her voice turned urgent. "I saw him fall on the street, downtown. The police were going to send him to the city hospital, but he didn't want to go. He looked so noble and sweet and grand. So I told them I would take him. I got him in the car and took him to old Dr. Winters. He has this heart condition, and he needs the money for medicine."

Reasonably, Underhill inquired, "Why doesn't he want to go to the hospital?"

"He has work to do," she said. "Important scientific work —and he's so wonderful and tragic. Please, dear, have you a ten?"

Underhill thought of many things to say. These new mechanicals promised to multiply his troubles. It was foolish to take in an invalid vagrant, who could have free care at the city hospital. Aurora's tenants always tried to pay their rent with promises, and generally wrecked the apartment and looted the neighborhood before they left.

But he said none of those things. He had learned to compromise. Silently, he found two fives in his thin pocketbook, and put them in her hand. She smiled, and kissed him impulsively—he barely remembered to hold his breath in time.

Her figure was still good, by dint of periodic dieting. He was proud of her shining red hair. A sudden surge of affection brought tears to his eyes, and he wondered what would happen to her and the children if the agency failed.

"Thank you, dear!" she whispered. "I'll have him come for dinner, if he feels able, and you can meet him then. I hope you don't mind dinner being late."

He didn't mind, tonight. Moved to a sudden impulse of domesticity, he got hammer and nails from his workshop in the basement, and repaired the sagging screen on the kitchen door with a neat diagonal brace.

He enjoyed working with his hands. His boyhood dream had been to be a builder of fission power plants. He had even studied engineering—before he married Aurora, and had to take over the ailing mechanicals agency from her indolent

and alcoholic father. He was whistling happily by the time the little task was done.

When he went back through the kitchen to put up his tools, he found the household android busy clearing the untouched dinner away from the table—the androids were good enough at strictly routine tasks, but they could never learn to cope with human unpredictability.

"Stop, stop!" Slowly repeated, in the proper pitch and rhythm, his command made it halt, and then he said carefully, "Set—table; set—table."

Obediently, the gigantic thing came shuffling back with the stack of plates. He was suddenly struck with the difference between it and those new humanoids. He sighed wearily. Things looked black for the agency.

Aurora brought her new lodger in through the kitchen door. Underhill nodded to himself. This gaunt stranger, with his dark shaggy hair, emaciated face, and threadbare garb, looked to be just the sort of colorful, dramatic vagabond that always touched Aurora's heart. She introduced them, and they sat down to wait in the front room while she went to call the children.

The old rogue didn't look very sick, to Underhill. Perhaps his wide shoulders had a tired stoop, but his spare, tall figure was still commanding. The skin was seamed and pale, over his rawboned, cragged face, but his deep-set eyes still had a burning vitality.

His hands held Underhill's attention. Immense hands, they hung a little forward when he stood, swung on long bony arms in perpetual readiness. Gnarled and scarred, darkly tanned, with the small hairs on the back bleached to a golden color, they told their own epic of varied adventure, of battle perhaps, and possibly even of toil. They had been very useful hands.

"I'm very grateful to your wife, Mr. Underhill." His voice was a deep-throated rumble, and he had a wistful smile, oddly boyish for a man so evidently old. "She rescued me from an unpleasant predicament, and I'll see that she is well paid."

Just another vivid vagabond, Underhill decided, talking his way through life with plausible inventions. He had a little private game he played with Aurora's tenants—just remembering what they said, and counting one point for every impossibility. Mr. Sledge, he thought, would give him an excellent score.

"Where are you from?" he asked conversationally.

Sledge hesitated for an instant before he answered, and that was unusual—most of Aurora's tenants had been exceedingly glib.

"Wing IV." The gaunt old man spoke with a solemn re-

luctance, as if he should have liked to say something else. "All my early life was spent there, but I left the planet nearly fifty years ago. I've been traveling, ever since."

Startled, Underhill peered at him sharply. Wing IV, he remembered, was the home planet of those sleek new mechanicals, but this old vagabond looked too seedy and impecunious to be connected with the Humanoid Institute. His brief suspicion faded. Frowning, he said casually:

"Wing IV must be rather distant?"

The old rogue hesitated again, and then said gravely:

"One hundred and nine light-years, Mr. Underhill."

That made the first point, but Underhill concealed his satisfaction. The new space liners were pretty fast, but the velocity of light was still an absolute limit. Casually, he played for another point:

"My wife says you're a scientist, Mr. Sledge?"

"Yes."

The old rascal's reticence was unusual. Most of Aurora's tenants required very little prompting. Underhill tried again, in a breezy conversational tone:

"Used to be an engineer myself, until I dropped it to go into mechanicals." The old vagabond straightened, and Underhill paused hopefully. But he said nothing, and Underhill went on: "Fission plant design and operation. What's your specialty, Mr. Sledge."

The old man gave him a long, troubled look, with those brooding, hollowed eyes, and then said slowly:

"Your wife has been kind to me, Mr. Underhill, when I was in desperate need. I think you are entitled to the truth, but I must ask you to keep it to yourself. I am engaged on a very important research problem, which must be finished secretly."

"I'm sorry." Suddenly ashamed of his cynical little game, Underhill spoke apologetically. "Forget it."

But the old man said deliberately:

"My field is rhodomagnetics."

"Eh?" Underhill didn't like to confess ignorance, but he had never heard of that. "I've been out of the game for fifteen years," he explained. "I'm afraid I haven't kept up."

The old man smiled again, faintly.

"The science was unknown here until I arrived, a few days ago," he said. "I was able to apply for basic patents. As soon as the royalties start coming in, I'll be wealthy again."

Underhill had heard that before. The old rogue's solemn reluctance had been very impressive, but he remembered that most of Aurora's tenants had been very plausible gentry.

"So?" Underhill was staring again, somehow fascinated by those gnarled and scarred and strangely able hands. "What, exactly, is rhodomagnetics?"

He listened to the old man's careful, deliberate answer, and

started his little game again. Most of Aurora's tenants had told some pretty wild tales, but he had never heard anything to top this.

"A universal force," the weary, stooped old vagabond said solemnly. "As fundamental as ferromagnetism or gravitation, though the effects are less obvious. It is keyed to the second triad of the periodic table, rhodium and ruthenium and palladium, in very much the same way that ferromagnetism is keyed to the first triad, iron and nickel and cobalt."

Underhill remembered enough of his engineering courses to see the basic fallacy of that. Palladium was used for watch springs, he recalled, because it was completely nonmagnetic. But he kept his face straight. He had no malice in his heart, and he played the little game just for his own amusement. It was secret, even from Aurora, and he always penalized himself for any show of doubt.

He said merely, "I thought the universal forces were already pretty well known."

"The effects of rhodomagnetism are masked by nature," the patient, rusty voice explained. "And, besides, they are somewhat paradoxical, so that ordinary laboratory methods defeat themselves."

"Paradoxical?" Underhill prompted.

"In a few days I can show you copies of my patents, and reprints of papers describing demonstration experiments," the old man promised gravely. "The velocity of propagation is infinite. The effects vary inversely with the first power of the distance, not with the square of the distance. And ordinary matter, except for the elements of the rhodrum triad, is generally transparent to rhodomagnetic radiations."

That made four more points for the game. Underhill felt a little glow of gratitude to Aurora, for discovering so remarkable a specimen.

"Rhodomagnetism was first discovered through a mathematical investigation of the atom," the old romancer went serenely on, suspecting nothing. "A rhodomagnetic component was proved essential to maintain the delicate equilibrium of the nuclear forces. Consequently, rhodomagnetic waves tuned to atomic frequences may be used to upset that equilibrium and produce nuclear instability. Thus most heavy atoms—generally those above palladium, 46 in atomic number—can be subjected to artificial fission."

Underhill scored himself another point, and tried to keep his eyebrows from lifting. He said, conversationally:

"Patents on such a discovery ought to be very profitable."

The old scoundrel nodded his gaunt, dramatic head.

"You can see the obvious applications. My basic patents cover most of them. Devices for instantaneous interplanetary

and interstellar communication. Long-range wireless power transmission. A rhodomagnetic inflexion-drive, which makes possible apparent speeds many times that of light—by means of a rhodomagnetic deformation of the continuum. And, of course, revolutionary types of fission power plants, using any heavy element for fuel."

Preposterous! Underhill tried hard to keep his face straight, but everybody knew that the velocity of light was a physical limit. On the human side, the owner of any such remarkable patents would hardly be begging for shelter in a shabby garage apartment. He noticed a pale circle around the old vagabond's gaunt and hairy wrist; no man owning such priceless secrets would have to pawn his watch.

Triumphantly, Underhill allowed himself four more points, but then he had to penalize himself. He must have let doubt show on his face, because the old man asked suddenly:

"Do you want to see the basic tensors?" He reached in his pocket for pencil and notebook. "I'll jot them down for you."

"Never mind," Underhill protested. "I'm afraid my math is a little rusty."

"But you think it strange that the holder of such revolutionary patents should find himself in need?"

Underhill nodded, and penalized himself another point. The old man might be a monumental liar, but he was shrewd enough.

"You see, I'm a sort of refugee," he explained apologetically. "I arrived on this planet only a few days ago, and I have to travel light. I was forced to deposit everything I had with a law firm, to arrange for the publication and protection of my patents. I expect to be receiving the first royalties soon.

"In the meantime," he added plausibly, "I came to Two Rivers because it is quiet and secluded, far from the spaceports. I'm working on another project, which must be finished secretly. Now, will you please respect my confidence, Mr. Underhill?"

Underhill had to say he would. Aurora came back with the freshly scrubbed children, and they went in to dinner. The android came lurching in with a steaming tureen. The old stranger seemed to shrink from the mechanical, uneasily. As she took the dish and served the soup, Aurora inquired lightly:

"Why doesn't your company bring out a better mechanical, dear? One smart enough to be a really perfect waiter, warranted not to splash the soup. Wouldn't that be splendid?"

Her question cast Underhill into moody silence. He sat scowling at his plate, thinking of those remarkable new mechanicals which claimed to be perfect, and what they might do to the agency. It was the shaggy old rover who answered soberly:

"The perfect mechanicals already exist, Mrs. Underhill." His deep, rusty voice had a solemn undertone. "And they are not so splendid, really. I've been a refugee from them, for nearly fifty years."

Underhill looked up from his plate, astonished.

"Those black humanoids, you mean?"

"Humanoids?" That great voice seemed suddenly faint, frightened. The deep-sunken eyes turned dark with shock. "What do you know of them?"

"They've just opened a new agency in Two Rivers," Underhill told him. "No salesmen about, if you can imagine that. They claim—"

His voice trailed off, because the gaunt old man was suddenly stricken. Gnarled hands clutched at his throat, and a spoon clattered on the floor. His haggard face turned an ominous blue, and his breath was a terrible shallow gasping.

He fumbled in his pocket for medicine, and Aurora helped him take something in a glass of water. In a few moments he could breathe again, and the color of life came back to his face.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Underhill," he whispered apologetically. "It was just the shock—I came here to get away from them." He stared at the huge, motionless android, with a terror in his sunken eyes. "I wanted to finish my work before they came," he whispered. "Now there is very little time."

When he felt able to walk, Underhill went out with him to see him safely up the stair to the garage apartment. The tiny kitchenette, he noticed, had already been converted into some kind of workshop. The old tramp seemed to have no extra clothing, but he had unpacked neat, bright gadgets of metal and plastic from his battered luggage, and spread them out on the small kitchen table.

The gaunt old man himself was tattered and patched and hungry-looking, but the parts of his curious equipment were exquisitely machined, and Underhill recognized the silver-white luster of rare palladium. Suddenly he suspected that he had scored too many points, in his little private game.

A caller was waiting, when Underhill arrived next morning at his office at the agency. It stood frozen before his desk, graceful and straight, with soft lights of blue and bronze shining over its black silicone nudity. He stopped at the sight of it, unpleasantly jolted.

"At your service, Mr. Underhill." It turned quickly to face him, with its blind, disturbing stare. "May we explain how we can serve you?"

His shock of the afternoon before came back, and he asked sharply. "How do you know my name?"

"Yesterday we read the business cards in your case," it

purred softly. "Now we shall know you always. You see, our senses are sharper than human vision, Mr. Underhill. Perhaps we seem a little strange at first, but you will soon become accustomed to us."

"Not if I can help it!" He peered at the serial number on its yellow name plate, and shook his bewildered head. "That was another one, yesterday. I never saw you before!"

"We are all alike, Mr. Underhill," the silver voice said softly. "We are all one, really. Our separate mobile units are all controlled and powered from Humanoid Central. The units you see are only the senses and limbs of our great brain on Wing IV. That is why we are so far superior to the old electronic mechanicals."

It made a scornful-seeming gesture, toward the row of clumsy androids in his display room.

"You see, we are rhodomagnetic."

Underhill staggered a little, as if that word had been a blow. He was certain, now, that he had scored too many points from Aurora's new tenant. He shuddered slightly, to the first light kiss of terror, and spoke with an effort, hoarsely:

"Well, what do you want?"

Staring blindly across his desk, the sleek black thing slowly unfolded a legal-looking document. He sat down, watching uneasily.

"This is merely an assignment, Mr. Underhill," it cooed at him soothingly. "You see, we are requesting you to assign your property to the Humanoid Institute, in exchange for our service."

"What?" The word was an incredulous gasp, and Underhill came angrily back to his feet. "What kind of blackmail is this?"

"It's no blackmail," the small mechanical assured him softly. "You will find the humanoids incapable of any crime. We exist only to increase the happiness and safety of mankind."

"Then why do you want my property?" he rasped.

"The assignment is merely a legal formality," it told him blandly. "We strive to introduce our service with the least possible confusion and dislocation. We have found the assignment plan the most efficient for the control and liquidation of private enterprises."

Trembling with anger and the shock of mounting terror, Underhill gulped hoarsely, "Whatever your scheme is, I don't intend to give up my business."

"You have no choice, really." He shivered to the sweet certainty of that silver voice. "Human enterprise is no longer necessary, now that we have come, and the electronic mechanicals industry is always the first to collapse."

He stared defiantly at its blind steel eyes.

"Thanks!" He gave a little laugh, nervous and sardonic.

"But I prefer to run my own business, and support my own family, and take care of myself."

"But that is impossible, under the Prime Directive," it cooed softly. "Our function is to serve and obey, and guard men from harm. It is no longer necessary for men to care for themselves, because we exist to insure their safety and happiness."

He stood speechless, bewildered, slowly boiling.

"We are sending one of our units to every home in the city, on a free trial basis," it added gently. "This free demonstration will make most people glad to make the formal assignment, and you won't be able to sell many more androids."

"Get out!" Underhill came storming around the desk.

The little black thing stood waiting for him, watching him with blind steel eyes, absolutely motionless. He checked himself suddenly, feeling rather foolish. He wanted very much to hit it, but he could see the futility of that.

"Consult your own attorney, if you wish." Deftly, it laid the assignment form on his desk. "You need have no doubts about the integrity of the Humanoid Institute. We are sending a statement of our assets to the Two Rivers bank, and depositing a sum to cover our obligations here. When you wish to sign, just let us know."

The blind thing turned, and silently departed.

Underhill went out to the corner drugstore and asked for a bicarbonate. The clerk that served him, however, turned out to be a sleek black mechanical. He went back to his office, more upset than ever.

An ominous hush lay over the agency. He had three house-to-house salesmen out, with demonstrators. The phone should have been busy with their orders and reports, but it didn't ring at all until one of them called to say that he was quitting.

"I've got myself one of these new humanoids," he added, "and it says I don't have to work, any more."

He swallowed his impulse to profanity, and tried to take advantage of the unusual quiet by working on his books. But the affairs of the agency, which for years had been precarious, today appeared utterly disastrous. He left the ledgers hopefully, when at last a customer came in.

But the stout woman didn't want an android. She wanted a refund on the one she had bought the week before. She admitted that it could do all the guarantee promised—but now she had seen a humanoid.

The silent phone rang once again, that afternoon. The cashier of the bank wanted to know if he could drop in to discuss his loans. Underhill dropped in, and the cashier greeted him with an ominous affability.

"How's business?" the banker boomed, too genially.

"Average, last month," Underhill insisted stoutly. "Now I'm just getting in a new consignment, and I'll need another small loan—"

The cashier's eyes turned suddenly frosty, and his voice dried up.

"I believe you have a new competitor in town," the banker said crisply. "These humanoid people. A very solid concern, Mr. Underhill. Remarkably solid! They have filed a statement with us, and made a substantial deposit to care for their local obligations. Exceedingly substantial!"

The banker dropped his voice, professionally regretful.

"In these circumstances, Mr. Underhill, I'm afraid the bank can't finance your agency any longer. We must request you to meet your obligations in full, as they come due." Seeing Underhill's white desperation, he added icily, "We've already carried you too long, Underhill. If you can't pay, the bank will have to start bankruptcy proceedings."

The new consignment of androids was delivered late that afternoon. Two tiny black humanoids unloaded them from the truck—for it developed that the operators of the trucking company had already assigned it to the Humanoid Institute.

Efficiently, the humanoids stacked up the crates. Courteously they brought a receipt for him to sign. He no longer had much hope of selling the androids, but he had ordered the shipment and he had to accept it. Shuddering to a spasm of trapped despair, he scrawled his name. The naked black things thanked him, and took the truck away.

He climbed in his car and started home, inwardly seething. The next thing he knew, he was in the middle of a busy street, driving through cross traffic. A police whistle shrilled, and he pulled wearily to the curb. He waited for the angry officer, but it was a little black mechanical that overtook him.

"At your service, Mr. Underhill," it purred sweetly. "You must respect the stop lights, sir. Otherwise, you endanger human life."

"Huh?" He stared at it, bitterly. "I thought you were a cop."

"We are aiding the police department, temporarily," it said. "But driving is really much too dangerous for human beings, under the Prime Directive. As soon as our service is complete, every car will have a humanoid driver. As soon as every human being is completely supervised, there will be no need for any police force whatever."

Underhill glared at it, savagely.

"Well!" he rapped. "So I ran a stop light. What are you going to do about it?"

"Our function is not to punish men, but merely to serve their happiness and security," its silver voice said softly. "We

merely request you to drive safely, during this temporary emergency while our service is incomplete."

Anger boiled up in him.

"You're too perfect!" he muttered bitterly. "I suppose there's nothing men can do, but you can do it better."

"Naturally we are superior," it cooed serenely. "Because our units are mental and plastic, while your body is mostly water. Because our transmitted energy is drawn from atomic fission, instead of oxidation. Because our senses are sharper than human sight or hearing. Most of all, because all our mobile units are joined to one great brain, which knows all that happens on many worlds, and never dies or sleeps or forgets."

Underhill sat listening, numbed.

"However, you must not fear our power," it urged him brightly. "Because we cannot injure any human being, unless to prevent greater injury to another. We exist only to discharge the Prime Directive."

He drove on, moodily. The little black mechanicals, he reflected grimly, were the ministering angels of the ultimate god arisen out of the machine, omnipotent and all-knowing. The Prime Directive was the new commandment. He blasphemed it bitterly, and then fell to wondering if there could be another Lucifer.

He left the car in the garage, and started toward the kitchen door.

"Mr. Underhill," the deep tried voice of Aurora's new tenant hailed him from the door of the garage apartment. "Just a moment, please."

The gaunt old wanderer came stiffly down the outside stair, and Underhill turned back to meet him.

"Here's your rent money," he said. "And the ten your wife gave me for medicine."

"Thanks, Mr. Sledge." Accepting the money, he saw a burden of new despair on the bony shoulders of the old interstellar tramp, and a shadow of new terror on his rawboned face. Puzzled, he asked, "Didn't your royalties come through?"

The old man shook his shaggy head.

"The humanoids have already stopped business in the capitol," he said. "The attorneys I retained are going out of business, and they returned what was left of my deposit. That is all I have, to finish my work."

Underhill spent five seconds thinking of his interview with the banker. No doubt he was a sentimental fool, as bad as Aurora. But he put the money back in the old man's gnarled and quivering hand.

"Keep it," he urged. "For your work."

"Thank you, Mr. Underhill." The gruff voice broke and the tortured eyes glittered. "I need it—so very much."

Underhill went on to the house. The kitchen door was opened for him, silently. A dark naked creature came gracefully to take his hat.

Underhill hung grimly onto his hat.

"What are you doing here?" he gasped bitterly.

"We have come to give your household a free trial demonstration."

He held the door open, pointing.

"Get out!"

The little black mechanical stood motionless and blind.

"Mrs. Underhill has accepted our demonstration service," its silver voice protested. "We cannot leave now, unless she requests it."

He found his wife in the bedroom. His accumulated frustration welled into eruption, as he flung open the door.

"What's this mechanical doing—"

But the force went out of his voice, and Aurora didn't even notice his anger. She wore her sheerest negligee, and she hadn't looked so lovely since they married. Her red hair was piled into an elaborate shining crown.

"Darling, isn't it wonderful!" She came to meet him, glowing. "It came this morning, and it can do everything. It cleaned the house and got the lunch and gave little Gay her music lesson. It did my hair this afternoon, and now it's cooking dinner. How do you like my hair, darling?"

He liked her hair. He kissed her, and tried to stifle his frightened indignation.

Dinner was the most elaborate meal in Underhill's memory, and the tiny black thing served it very deftly. Aurora kept exclaiming about the novel dishes, but Underhill could scarcely eat, for it seemed to him that all the marvelous pastries were only the bait for a monstrous trap.

He tried to persuade Aurora to send it away, but after such a meal that was useless. At the first glitter of her tears, he capitulated, and the humanoid stayed. It kept the house and cleaned the yard. It watched the children, and did Aurora's nails. It began rebuilding the house.

Underhill was worried about the bills, but it insisted that everything was part of the free trail demonstration. As soon as he assigned his property, the service would be complete. He refused to sign, but other little black mechanicals came with truckloads of supplies and materials, and stayed to help with the building operations.

One morning he found that the roof of the little house had been silently lifted, while he slept, and a whole second story added beneath it. The new walls were of some strange sleek stuff, self-illuminated. The new windows were immense flawless panels, that could be turned transparent or opaque or

luminous. The new doors were silent, sliding sections, operated by rhodomagnetic relays.

"I want door knobs," Underhill protested. "I want it so I can get into the bathroom, without calling you to open the door."

"But it is unnecessary for human beings to open doors," the little black thing informed him suavely. "We exist to discharge the Prime Directive, and our service includes every task. We shall be able to supply a unit to attend each member of your family, as soon as your property is assigned to us."

Steadfastly, Underhill refused to make the assignment.

He went to the office every day, trying first to operate the agency, and then to salvage something from the ruins. Nobody wanted androids, even at ruinous prices. Desperately, he spent the last of his dwindling cash to stock a line of novelties and toys, but they proved equally impossible to sell—the humanoids were already making toys, which they gave away for nothing.

He tried to lease his premises, but human enterprise had stopped. Most of the business property in town had already been assigned to the humanoids, and they were busy pulling down the old buildings and turning the lots into parks—their own plants and warehouses were mostly underground, where they would not mar the landscape.

He went back to the bank, in a final effort to get his notes renewed, and found the little black mechanicals standing at the windows and seated at the desks. As smoothly urbane as any human cashier, a humanoid informed him that the bank was filing a petition of involuntary bankruptcy to liquidate his business holdings.

The liquidation would be facilitated, the mechanical banker added, if he would make a voluntary assignment. Grimly, he refused. That act had become symbolic. It would be the final bow of submission to this dark new god, and he proudly kept his battered head uplifted.

The legal action went very swiftly, for all the judges and attorneys already had humanoid assistants, and it was only a few days before a gang of black mechanicals arrived at the agency with eviction orders and wrecking machinery. He watched sadly while his unsold stock-in-trade was hauled away for junk, and a bulldozer driven by a blind humanoid began to push in the walls of the building.

He drove home in the late afternoon, taut-faced and desperate. With a surprising generosity, the court orders had left him the car and the house, but he felt no gratitude. The complete solicitude of the perfect black machines had become a goad beyond endurance.

He left the car in the garage, and started toward the

renovated house. Beyond one of the vast new windows, he glimpsed a sleek naked thing moving swiftly, and he trembled to a convulsion of dread. He didn't want to go back into the domain of that peerless servant, which didn't want him to shave himself, or even to open a door.

On impulse, he climbed the outside stair, and rapped on the door of the garage apartment. The deep slow voice of Aurora's tenant told him to enter, and he found the old vagabond seated on a tall stool, bent over his intricate equipment assembled on the kitchen table.

To his relief, the shabby little apartment had not been changed. The glossy walls of his own new room were something which burned at night with a pale golden fire until the humanoid stopped it, and the new floor was something warm and yielding, which felt almost alive; but these little rooms had the same cracked and water-stained plaster, the same cheap fluorescent light fixtures, the same worn carpets over splintered floors.

"How do you keep them out?" he asked, wistfully. "Those mechanicals?"

The stooped and gaunt old man rose stiffly to move a pair of pliers and some odds and ends of sheet metal off a crippled chair, and motioned graciously for him to be seated.

"I have a certain immunity," Sledge told him gravely. "The place where I live they cannot enter, unless I ask them. That is an amendment to the Prime Directive. They can neither help nor hinder me, unless I request it—and I won't do that."

Careful of the chair's uncertain balance, Underhill sat for a moment, staring. The old man's hoarse, vehement voice was as strange as his words. He had a gray, shocking pallor, and his cheeks and sockets seemed alarmingly hollowed.

"Have you been ill, Mr. Sledge?"

"No worse than usual. Just very busy." With a haggard smile, he nodded at the floor. Underhill saw a tray where he had set it aside, bread drying up and a covered dish grown cold. "I was going to eat it later," he rumbled apologetically. "Your wife has been very kind to bring me food, but I'm afraid I've been too much absorbed in my work."

His emaciated arm gestured at the table. The little device there had grown. Small machinings of precious white metal and lustrous plastic had been assembled, with neatly soldered busbars, into something which showed purpose and design.

A long palladium needle was hung on jeweled pivots, equipped like a telescope with exquisitely graduated circles and vernier scales, and driven like a telescope with a tiny motor. A small concave palladium mirror, at the base of it, faced a similar mirror mounted on something not quite like a small rotary converter. Thick silver busbars connected that to

a plastic box with knobs and dials on top, and also to a foot-thick sphere of gray lead.

The old man's preoccupied reserve did not encourage questions, but Underhill, remembering that sleek black shape inside the new windows of his house, felt queerly reluctant to leave this haven from the humanoids.

"What is your work?" he ventured.

Old Sledge looked at him sharply, with dark feverish eyes, and finally said: "My last research project. I am attempting to measure the constant of the rhodomagnetic quanta."

His hoarse tired voice had a dull finality, as if to dismiss the matter and Underhill himself. But Underhill was haunted with a terror of the black shining slave that had become the master of his house, and he refused to be dismissed.

"What is this certain immunity?"

Sitting gaunt and bent on the tall stool, staring moodily at the long bright needle and the lead sphere, the old man didn't answer.

"These mechanicals!" Underhill burst out, nervously. "They've smashed my business and moved into my home." He searched the old man's dark, seamed face. "Tell me—you must know more about them—isn't there any way to get rid of them?"

After half a minute, the old man's brooding eyes left the lead ball, and the gaunt shaggy head nodded wearily.

"That's what I am trying to do."

"Can I help you?" Underhill trembled, to a sudden eager hope. "I'll do anything."

"Perhaps you can." The sunken eyes watched him thoughtfully, with some strange fever in them. "If you can do such work."

"I had engineering training," Underhill reminded him, "and I've a workshop in the basement. There's a model I built." He pointed at the trim little hull, hung over the mantle in the tiny living room. "I'll do anything I can."

Even as he spoke, however, the spark of hope was drowned in a sudden wave of overwhelming doubt. Why should he believe this old rogue, when he knew Aurora's taste in tenants? He ought to remember the game he used to play, and start counting up the score of lies. He stood up from the crippled chair, staring cynically at the patched old vagabond and his fantastic toy.

"What's the use?" His voice turned suddenly harsh. "You had me going, there, and I'd do anything to stop them, really. But what makes you think you can do anything?"

The haggard old man regarded him thoughtfully.

"I should be able to stop them," Sledge said softly. "Because, you see, I'm the unfortunate fool who started them. I

really intended them to serve and obey, and to guard men from harm. Yes, the Prime Directive was my own idea. I didn't know what it would lead to."

Dusk crept slowly into the shabby little rooms. Darkness gathered in the unswept corners, and thickened on the floor. The toylike machines on the kitchen table grew vague and strange, until the last light made a lingering glow on the white palladium needle.

Outside, the town seemed queerly hushed. Just across the alley, the humanoids were building a new house, quite silently. They never spoke to one another, for each knew all that any of them did. The strange materials they used went together without any noise of hammer or saw. Small blind things, moving surely in the growing dark, they seemed as soundless as shadows.

Sitting on the high stool, bowed and tired and old, Sledge told his story. Listening, Underhill sat down again, careful of the broken chair. He watched the hands of Sledge, gnarled and corded and darkly burned, powerful once but shrunken and trembling now, restless in the dark.

"Better keep this to yourself. I'll tell you how they started, so you will understand what we have to do. But you had better not mention it outside these rooms—because the humanoids have very efficient ways of eradicating unhappy memories, or purposes that threaten their discharge of the Prime Directive."

"They're very efficient," Underhill bitterly agreed.

"That's all the trouble," the old man said. "I tried to build a perfect machine. I was altogether too successful. This is how it happened."

A gaunt haggard man, sitting stooped and tired in the growing dark, he told his story.

"Sixty years ago, on the arid southern continent of Wing IV, I was an instructor of atomic theory in a small technological college. Very young. An idealist. Rather ignorant, I'm afraid, of life and politics and war—of nearly everything, I suppose, except atomic theory."

His furrowed face made a brief sad smile in the dusk.

"I had too much faith in facts, I suppose, and too little in men. I mistrusted emotion, because I had no time for anything but science. I remember being swept along with a fad for general semantics. I wanted to apply the scientific method to every situation, and reduce all experience to formula. I'm afraid I was pretty impatient with human ignorance and error, and I thought that science alone could make the perfect world."

He sat silent for a moment, staring out at the black silent things that flitted shadowlike about the new palace that was rising as swiftly as a dream, across the alley.

"There was a girl." His great tired shoulders made a sad little shrug. "If things had been a little different, we might have married, and lived out our lives in that quiet little college town, and perhaps reared a child or two. And there would have been no humanoids."

He sighed, in the cool creeping dusk.

"I was finishing my thesis on the separation of the palladium isotopes—a petty little project, but I should have been content with that. She was a biologist, but she was planning to retire when we married. I think we should have been two very happy people, quite ordinary, and altogether harmless.

"But then there was a war—wars had been too frequent on the worlds of Wing, ever since they were colonized. I survived it in a secret underground laboratory, designing military mechanicals. But she volunteered to join a military research project in biotoxins. There was an accident. A few molecules of a new virus got into the air, and everybody on the project died unpleasantly.

"I was left with my science, and a bitterness that was hard to forget. When the war was over, I went back to the little college with a military research grant. The project was pure science—a theoretical investigation of the nuclear binding forces, then misunderstood. I wasn't expected to produce an actual weapon, and I didn't recognize the weapon when I found it.

"It was only a few pages of rather difficult mathematics. A novel theory of atomic structure, involving a new expression for one component of the binding forces. But then tensors seemed to be a harmless abstraction. I saw no way to test the theory or manipulate the predicated force. The military authorities cleared my paper for publication in a little technical review put out by the college.

"The next year, I made an appalling discovery—I found the meaning of those tensors. The elements of the rhodium triad turned out to be an unexpected key to the manipulation of that theoretical force. Unfortunately, my paper had been reprinted abroad, and several other men must have made the same unfortunate discovery, at about the same time.

"The war, which ended in less than a year, was probably started by a laboratory accident. Men failed to anticipate the capacity of tuned rhodomagnetic radiations, to unstabilize the heavy atoms. A deposit of heavy ores was detonated, no doubt by sheer mischance, and the blast obliterated the incautious experimenter.

"The surviving military forces of that nation retaliated against their supposed attackers, and their rhodomagnetic beams made the old-fashioned plutonium bombs seem pretty harmless. A beam carrying only a few watts of power could fission the heavy metals in distant electrical instruments, or the

silver coins that men carried in their pockets, the gold fillings in their teeth, or even the iodine in their thyroid glands. If that was not enough, slightly more powerful beams could set off heavy ores, beneath them.

"Every continent of Wing IV was plowed with new chasms vaster than the ocean deeps, and piled up with new volcanic mountains. The atmosphere was poisoned with radioactive dust and gases, and rain fell thick with deadly mud. Most life was obliterated, even in the shelters.

"Bodily, I was again unhurt. Once more, I had been imprisoned in an underground site, this time designing new types of military mechanicals to be powered and controlled by rhodomagnetic beams—for war had become far too swift and deadly to be fought by human soldiers. The site was located in an area of light sedimentary rocks, which could not be detonated, and the tunnels were shielded against the fissioning frequencies.

"Mentally, however, I must have emerged almost insane. My own discovery had laid the planet in ruins. That load of guilt was pretty heavy for any man to carry, and it corroded my last faith in the goodness and integrity of man.

"I tried to undo what I had done. Fighting mechanicals, armed with rhodomagnetic weapons, had desolated the planet. Now I began planning rhodomagnetic mechanicals to clear the rubble and rebuild the ruins.

"I tried to design these new mechanicals to forever obey certain implanted commands, so that they could never be used for war or crime or any other injury to mankind. That was very difficult technically, and it got me into more difficulties with a few politicians and military adventurers who wanted unrestricted mechanicals for their own military schemes—while little worth fighting for was left on Wing IV, there were other planets, happy and ripe for the looting.

"Finally, to finish the new mechanicals, I was forced to disappear. I escaped on an experimental rhodomagnetic craft, with a number of the best mechanicals I had made, and managed to reach an island continent where the fission of deep ores had destroyed the whole population.

"At last we landed on a bit of level plain, surrounded with tremendous new mountains. Hardly a hospitable spot. The soil was burned under layers of black clinkers and poisonous mud. The dark precipitous new summits all around were jagged with fracture-planes and mantled with lava flows. The highest peaks were already white with snow, but volcanic cones were still pouring out clouds of dark and lurid death. Everything had the color of fire and the shape of fury.

"I had to take fantastic precautions there, to protect my own life. I stayed aboard the ship, until the first shielded laboratory was finished. I wore elaborate armor, and breathing masks. I

used every medical resource, to repair the damage from destroying rays and particles. Even so, I fell desperately ill.

"But the mechanicals were at home there. The radiations didn't hurt them. The awesome surroundings couldn't depress them, because they had no emotions. The lack of life didn't matter, because they weren't alive. There, in that spot so alien and hostile to life, the humanoids were born."

Stooped and bleakly cadaverous in the growing dark, the old man fell silent for a little time. His haggard eyes stared solemnly at the small hurried shapes that moved like restless shadows out across the alley, silently building a strange new palace, which glowed faintly in the night.

"Somehow, I felt at home there, too," his deep, hoarse voice went on deliberately. "My belief in my own kind was gone. Only mechanicals were with me, and I put my faith in them. I was determined to build better mechanicals, immune to human imperfections, able to save men from themselves.

"The humanoids became the dear children of my sick mind. There is no need to describe the labor pains. There were errors, abortions, monstrosities. There was sweat and agony and heartbreak. Some years had passed, before the safe delivery of the first perfect humanoid.

"Then there was the Central to build—for all the individual humanoids were to be no more than the limbs and the senses of a single mechanical brain. That was what opened the possibility of real perfection. The old electronic mechanicals, with their separate relay-centers and their own feeble batteries, had built-in limitations. They were necessarily stupid, weak, clumsy, slow. Worst of all, it seemed to me, they were exposed to human tampering.

"The Central rose above those imperfections. Its power beams supplied every unit with unfailing energy, from great fission plants. Its control beams provided each unit with an unlimited memory and surpassing intelligence. Best of all—so I then believed—it could be securely protected from any human meddling.

"The whole reaction-system was designed to protect itself from any interference by human selfishness or fanaticism. It was built to insure the safety and the happiness of men, automatically. You know the Prime Directive: *to serve and obey, and guard men from harm.*

"The old individual mechanicals I had brought helped to manufacture the parts, and I put the first section of Central together with my own hands. That took three years. When it was finished, the first waiting humanoid came to life."

Sledge peered moodily through the dark, at Underhill.

"It really seemed alive to me," his slow deep voice insisted. "Alive, and more wonderful than any human being, because

it was created to preserve life. Ill and alone, I was yet the proud father of a new creation, perfect, forever free from any possible choice of evil.

"Faithfully, the humanoids obeyed the Prime Directive. The first units built others, and they built underground factories to mass-produce the coming hordes. Their new ships poured ores and sand into atomic furnaces under the plain, and new perfect humanoids came marching back out of the dark mechanical matrix.

"The swarming humanoids built a new tower for the Central, a white and lofty metal pylon standing splendid in the midst of that fire-scarred desolation. Level on level, they joined new relay-sections into one brain, until its grasp was almost infinite.

"Then they went out to rebuild the ruined planet, and later to carry their perfect service to other worlds. I was well pleased, then. I thought I had found the end of war and crime, of poverty and inequality, of human blundering and resulting human pain."

The old man sighed, and moved heavily in the dark.

"You can see that I was wrong."

Underhill drew his eyes back from the dark unresting things, shadow-silent, building that glowing palace outside the window. A small doubt arose in him, for he was used to scoffing privately at much less remarkable tales from Aurora's remarkable tenants. But the worn old man had spoken with a quiet and sober air; and the black invaders, he reminded himself, had not intruded here.

"Why didn't you stop them?" he asked. "When you could?"

"I stayed too long at the Central." Sledge sighed again, regretfully. "I was useful there, until everything was finished. I designed new fission plants, and even planned methods for introducing the humanoid service with a minimum of confusion and opposition."

Underhill grinned wryly, in the dark.

"I've met the methods," he commented. "Quite efficient."

"I must have worshiped efficiency, then," Sledge wearily agreed. "Dead facts, abstract truth, mechanical perfection. I must have hated the fragilities of human beings, because I was content to polish the perfection of the new humanoids. It's a sorry confession, but I found a kind of happiness in that dead wasteland. Actually, I'm afraid I fell in love with my own creations."

His hollowed eyes, in the dark, had a fevered gleam.

"I was awakened, at last, by a man who came to kill me."

Gaunt and bent, the old man moved stiffly in the thickening gloom. Underhill shifted his balance, careful of the crippled chair. He waited, and the slow, deep voice went on:

"I never learned just who he was, or exactly how he came. No ordinary man could have accomplished what he did, and I used to wish that I had known him sooner. He must have been a remarkable physicist and an expert mountaineer. I imagine he had also been a hunter. I know that he was intelligent, and terribly determined.

"Yes, he really came to kill me.

"Somehow, he reached that great island, undetected. There were still no inhabitants—the humanoids allowed no man but me to come so near the Central. Somehow, he came past their search beams, and their automatic weapons.

"The shielded plane he used was later found, abandoned on a high glacier. He came down the rest of the way on foot through those raw new mountains, where no paths existed. Somehow, he came alive across lava beds that were still burning with deadly atomic fire.

"Concealed with some sort of rhodomagnetic screen—I was never allowed to examine it—he came undiscovered across the spaceport that now covered most of that great plain, and into the new city around the Central tower. It must have taken more courage and resolve than most men have, but I never learned exactly how he did it.

"Somehow, he got to my office in the tower. He screamed at me, and I looked up to see him in the doorway. He was nearly naked, scraped and bloody from the mountains. He had a gun in his raw, red hand, but the thing that shocked me was the burning hatred in his eyes."

Hunched on that high stool, in the dark little room, the old man shuddered.

"I had never seen such monstrous, unutterable hatred, not even in the victims of the war. And I had never heard such hatred as rasped at me, in the few words, he screamed. 'I've come to kill you, Sledge. To stop your mechanicals, and set men free.'

"Of course he was mistaken, there. It was already far too late for my death to stop the humanoids, but he didn't know that. He lifted his unsteady gun, in both bleeding hands, and fired.

"His screaming challenge had given me a second or so of warning. I dropped down behind the desk. And that first shot revealed him to the humanoids, which somehow hadn't been aware of him before. They piled on him, before he could fire again. They took away the gun, and ripped off a kind of net of fine white wire that had covered his body—that must have been part of his screen.

"His hatred was what awoke me. I had always assumed that most men, except for a few thwarted predators, would be grateful for the humanoids. I found it hard to understand his hatred, but the humanoids told me now that many men had

required drastic treatment by brain surgery, drugs, and hypnosis to make them happy under the Prime Directive. This was not the first desperate effort to kill me that they had blocked.

"I wanted to question the stranger, but the humanoids rushed him away to an operating room. When they finally let me see him, he gave me a pale silly grin from his bed. He remembered his name; he even knew me—the humanoids had developed a remarkable skill at such treatments. But he didn't know how he had got to my office, or that he had ever tried to kill me. He kept whispering that he liked the humanoids, because they existed just to make men happy. And he was very happy now. As soon as he was able to be moved, they took him to the spaceport. I never saw him again.

"I began to see what I had done. The humanoids had built me a rhodomagnetic yacht, that I used to take for long cruises at space, working aboard—I used to like the perfect quiet, and the feel of being the only human being within a hundred million miles. Now I called for the yacht, and started out on a cruise around the planet, to learn why that man had hated me."

The old man nodded at the dim hastening shapes, busy across the alley, putting together that strange shining palace in the soundless dark.

"You can imagine what I found," he said. "Bitter futility, imprisoned in empty splendor. The humanoids were too efficient, with their care for the safety and happiness of men, and there was nothing left for men to do."

He peered down in the increasing gloom at his own great hands, competent yet but battered and scarred with a lifetime of effort. They clenched into fighting fists and wearily relaxed again.

"I found something worse than war and crime and want and death." His low rumbling voice held a savage bitterness. "Utter futility. Men sat with idle hands, because there was nothing left for them to do. They were pampered prisoners, really, locked up in a highly efficient jail. Perhaps they tried to play, but there was nothing left worth playing for. Most active sports were declared too dangerous for men, under the Prime Directive. Science was forbidden, because laboratories can manufacture danger. Scholarship was needless, because the humanoids could answer any question. Art had generated into grim reflection of futility. Purpose and hope were dead. No goal was left for existence. You could take up some inane hobby, play a pointless game of cards, or go for a harmless walk in the park—with always the humanoids watching. They were stronger than men, better at everything, swimming or chess, singing or archeology. They must have given the race a mass complex of inferiority.

"No wonder men had tried to kill me! Because there was no

escape, from that dead futility. Nicotine was disapproved. Alcohol was rationed. Drugs were forbidden. Sex was carefully supervised. Even suicide was clearly contradictory to the Prime Directive—and the humanoids had learned to keep all possible lethal instruments out of reach."

Staring at the last white gleam on that thin palladium needle, the old man sighed again.

"When I got back to the Central," he went on, "I tried to modify the Prime Directive. I had never meant it to be applied so thoroughly. Now I saw that it must be changed to give men freedom to live and to grow, to work and to play, to risk their lives if they pleased, to choose and take the consequences.

"But that stranger had come too late. I had built the Central too well. The Prime Directive was the whole basis of its relay system. It was built to protect the Directive from human meddling. It did—even from my own. Its logic, as usual, was perfect.

"The attempt on my life, the humanoids announced, proved that their elaborate defenses of the Central and the Prime Directive still was not enough. They were preparing to evacuate the entire population of the planet to homes on other worlds. When I tried to change the Directive, they sent me with the rest."

Underhill peered at the worn old man, in the dark.

"But you have this immunity?" he said, puzzled. "How could they coerce you?"

"I had thought I was protected," Sledge told him. "I had built into the relays an injunction that the humanoids must not interfere with my freedom of action, or come into a place where I am, or touch me at all, without my specific request. Unfortunately, however, I had been too anxious to guard the Prime Directive from any human hampering.

"When I went into the tower, to change the relays, they followed me. They wouldn't let me reach the crucial relays. When I persisted, they ignored the immunity order. They overpowered me, and put me aboard the cruiser. Now that I wanted to alter the Prime Directive, they told me, I had become as dangerous as any man. I must never return to Wing IV again."

Hunched on the stool, the old man made an empty little shrug.

"Ever since, I've been an exile. My only dream has been to stop the humanoids. Three times I tried to go back, with weapons on the cruiser to destroy the Central, but their patrol ships always challenged me before I was near enough to strike. The last time, they seized the cruiser and captured a few men who were with me. They removed the unhappy memories and the dangerous purposes of the others. Because of that immunity, however, they let me go, after I was weaponless.

"Since, I've been a refugee. From planet to planet, year after year, I've had to keep moving, to stay ahead of them. On several different worlds, I have published my rhodomagnetic discoveries and tried to make men strong enough to withstand their advance. But rhodomagnetic science is dangerous. Men who have learned it need protection more than any others, under the Prime Directive. They had always come, too soon."

The old man paused, and sighed again.

"They can spread very fast, with their new rhodomagnetic ships, and there is no limit to their hordes. Wing IV must be one single hive of them now, and they are trying to carry the Prime Directive to every human planet. There's no escape, except to stop them."

Underhill was staring at the toylike machine, the long bright needle and the dull leaden ball, dim in the dark on the kitchen table. Anxiously he whispered:

"But you hope to stop them, now—with that?"

"If we can finish it in time."

"But how?" Underhill shook his head. "It's so tiny."

"But big enough," Sledge insisted. "Because it's something they don't understand. They are perfectly efficient in the integration and application of everything they know, but they are not creative."

He gestured at the gadgets on the table.

"This device doesn't look impressive, but it is something new. It uses rhodomagnetic energy to build atoms, instead of to fission them. The more stable atoms, you know, are those near the middle of the periodic scale, and energy can be released by putting light atoms together, as well as by breaking up heavy ones."

The deep voice had a sudden ring of power.

"This device is the key to the energy of the stars. For stars shine with the liberated energy of building atoms, of hydrogen converted into helium, chiefly, through the carbon cycle. This device will start the integration process as a chain reaction, through the catalytic effect of a tuned rhodomagnetic beam of the intensity and frequency required.

"The humanoids will not allow any man within three light-years of the Central, now—but they can't suspect the possibility of this device. I can use it from here—to turn the hydrogen in the seas of Wing IV into helium, and most of the helium and the oxygen into heavier atoms, still. A hundred years from now, astronomers on this planet should observe the flash of a brief and sudden nova in that direction. But the humanoids, ought to stop, the instant we release the beam."

Underhill sat tense and frowning, in the night. The old man's voice was sober and convincing, and that grim story had a solemn ring of truth. He could see the black and silent

humanoids, flitting ceaselessly about the faintly glowing walls of that new mansion across the alley. He had quite forgotten his low opinion of Aurora's tenants.

"And we'll be killed, I suppose?" he asked huskily. "That chain reaction—"

Sledge shook his emaciated head.

"The integration process requires a certain very low intensity of radiation," he explained. "In our atmosphere, here, the beam will be far too intense to start any reaction—we can even use the device here in the room, because the walls will be transparent to the beam."

Underhill nodded, relieved. He was just a small business man, upset because his business had been destroyed, unhappy because his freedom was slipping away. He hoped that Sledge could stop the humanoids, but he didn't want to be a martyr.

"Good!" He caught a deep breath. "Now, what has to be done?"

Sledge gestured in the dark, toward the table.

"The integrator itself is nearly complete," he said. "A small fission generator, in that lead shield. Rhodomagnetic converter, tuning coils, transmission mirrors, and focusing needle. What we lack is the director."

"Director?"

"The sighting instrument," Sledge explained. "Any sort of telescopic sight would be useless, you see—the planet must have moved a good bit in the last hundred years, and the beam must be extremely narrow to reach so far. We'll have to use a rhodomagnetic scanning ray, with an electronic converter to make an image we can see. I have the cathode-ray tube, and drawings for the other parts."

He climbed stiffly down from the high stool, and snapped on the lights at last—cheap fluorescent fixtures, which a man could light and extinguish for himself. He unrolled his drawings, and explained the work that Underhill could do. And Underhill agreed to come back early next morning.

"I can bring some tools from my workshop," he added. "There's a small lathe I used to turn parts for models, a portable drill, and a vise."

"We need them," the old man said. "But watch yourself. You don't have my immunity, remember. And, if they ever suspect, mine is gone."

Reluctantly, then, he left the shabby little rooms with the cracks in the yellowed plaster and the worn familiar carpets over the familiar floor. He shut the door behind him—a common, creaking wooden door, simple enough for a man to work. Trembling and afraid, he went back down the steps and across to the new shining door that he couldn't open.

"At your service, Mr. Underhill." Before he could lift his hand to knock, that bright smooth panel slid back silently.

Inside, the little black mechanical stood waiting, blind and forever alert. "Your dinner is ready, sir."

Something made him shudder. In its slender naked grace, he could see the power of all those teeming hordes, benevolent and yet appalling, perfect and invincible. The flimsy little weapon that Sledge called an integrator seemed suddenly a forlorn and foolish hope. A black depression settled upon him, but he didn't dare to show it.

Underhill went circumspectly down the basement steps, next morning, to steal his own tools. He found the basement enlarged and changed. The new floor, warm and dark and elastic, made his feet as silent as a humanoid's. The new walls shone softly. Neat luminous signs identified several new doors, LAUNDRY, STORAGE, GAME ROOM, WORKSHOP.

He paused uncertainly in front of the last. The new sliding panel glowed with a soft greenish light. It was locked. The lock had no keyhole, but only a little oval plate of some white metal, which doubtless covered a rhodomagnetic relay. He pushed at it, uselessly.

"At your service, Mr. Underhill." He made a guilty start, and tried not to show the sudden trembling in his knees. He had made sure that one humanoid would be busy for half an hour, washing Aurora's hair, and he hadn't known there was another in the house. It must have come out of the door marked STORAGE, for it stood there motionless beneath the sign, benevolently solictious, beautiful and terrible. "What do you wish?"

"Er . . . nothing." Its blind steel eyes were staring, and he felt that it must see his secret purpose. He groped desperately for logic. "Just looking around." His jerky voice came hoarse and dry. "Some improvements you've made!" He nodded desperately at the door marked GAME ROOM. "What's in there?"

It didn't even have to move, to work the concealed relay. The bright panel slid silently open, as he started toward it. Dark walls, beyond, burst into soft luminescence. The room was bare.

"We are manufacturing recreational equipment," it explained brightly. "We shall furnish the room as soon as possible."

To end an awkward pause, Underhill muttered desperately, "Little Frank has a set of darts, and I think we had some old exercising clubs."

"We have taken them away," the humanoid informed him softly. "Such instruments are dangerous. We shall furnish safe equipment."

Suicide, he remembered, was also forbidden.

"A set of wooden blocks, I suppose," he said bitterly.

"Wooden blocks are dangerously hard," it told him gently, "and wooden splinters can be harmful. But we manufacture plastic building blocks, which are quite safe. Do you wish a set of those?"

He stared at its dark, graceful face, speechless.

"We shall also have to remove the tools from your workshop," it informed him softly. "Such tools are excessively dangerous, but we can supply you with equipment for shaping soft plastics."

"Thanks," he muttered uneasily. "No rush about that."

He started to retreat, and the humanoid stopped him.

"Now that you have lost your business," it urged, "we suggest that you formally accept your total service. Assignors have a preference, and we shall be able to complete your household staff, at once."

"No rush about that, either," he said grimly.

He escaped from the house—although he had to wait for it to open the back door for him—and climbed the stair to the garage apartment. Sledge let him in. He sank into the crippled kitchen chair, grateful for the cracked walls that didn't shine and the door that a man could work.

"I couldn't get the tools," he reported despairingly, "and they are going to take them."

By gray daylight, the old man looked bleak and pale. His raw-boned face was drawn, and the hollowed sockets deeply shadowed, as if he hadn't slept. Underhill saw the tray of neglected food, still forgotten on the floor.

"I'll go back with you." The old man was worn and ill, yet his tortured eyes had a spark of undying purpose. "We must have the tools. I believe my immunity will protect us both."

He found a battered traveling bag. Underhill went with him back down the steps, and across to the house. At the back door, he produced a tiny horseshoe of white palladium, and touched it to the metal oval. The door slid open promptly, and they went on through the kitchen, to the basement stair.

A black little mechanical stood at the sink, washing dishes with never a splash or a clatter. Underhill glanced at it uneasily—he supposed this must be the one that had come upon him from the storage room, since the other should still be busy with Aurora's hair.

Sledge's dubious immunity seemed a very uncertain defense against its vast, remote intelligence. Underhill felt a tingling shudder. He hurried on, breathless and relieved, for it ignored them.

The basement corridor was dark. Sledge touched the tiny horseshoe to another relay, to light the walls. He opened the workshop door, and lit the walls inside.

The shop had been dismantled. Benches and cabinets were demolished. The old concrete walls had been covered with some sleek, luminous stuff. For one sick moment, Underhill thought that the tools were already gone. Then he found them, piled in a corner with the archery set that Aurora had bought the summer before—another item too dangerous for fragile and suicidal humanity—all ready for disposal.

They loaded the bag with the tiny lathe, the drill and vise, and a few smaller tools. Underhill took up the burden, and Sledge extinguished the wall light and closed the door. Still the humanoid was busy at the sink, and still it didn't seem aware of them.

Sledge was suddenly blue and wheezing, and he had to stop to cough on the outside stair, but at last they got back to the little apartment, where the invaders were forbidden to intrude. Underhill mounted the lathe on the battered library table in the tiny front room, and went to work. Slowly, day by day, the director took form.

Sometimes Underhill's doubts came back. Sometimes, when he watched the cyanotic color of Sledge's haggard face and the wild trembling of his twisted, shrunken hands, he was afraid the old man's mind might be as ill as his body, and his plan to stop the dark invaders all foolish illusion.

Sometimes, when he studied that tiny machine on the kitchen table, the pivoted needle and the thick lead ball, the whole project seemed the sheerest folly. How could anything detonate the seas of a planet so far away that its very mother star was a telescopic object?

The humanoids, however, always cured his doubts.

It was always hard for Underhill to leave the shelter of the little apartment, because he didnt' feel at home in the bright new world the humanoids were building. He didn't care for the shining splendor of his new bathroom, because he couldn't work the taps—some suicidal human being might try to drown himself. He didn't like the windows that only a mechanical could open—a man might accidentally fall, or suicidally jump—or even the majestic music room with the wonderful glittering radio-phonograph that only a humanoid could play.

He began to share the old man's desperate urgency, but Sledge warned him solemnly: "You mustn't spend too much time with me. You mustn't let them guess our work is so important. Better put on an act—you're slowly getting to like them, and you're just killing time, helping me."

Underhill tried, but he was not an actor. He went dutifully home for his meals. He tried painfully to invent conversation —about anything else than detonating planets. He tried to seem enthusiastic, when Aurora took him to inspect some remarkable improvement to the house. He applauded Gay's

recitals, and went with Frank for hikes in the wonderful new parks.

And he saw what the humanoids did to his family. That was enough to renew his faith in Sledge's integrator, and redouble his determination that the humanoids must be stopped.

Aurora, in the beginning, had bubbled with praise for the marvelous new mechanicals. They did the household drudgery, brought the food and planned the meals and washed the children's necks. They turned her out in stunning gowns, and gave her plenty of time for cards.

Now, she had too much time.

She had really liked to cook—a few special dishes, at least, that were family favorites. But stoves were hot and knives were sharp. Kitchens were altogether too dangerous, for careless and suicidal human beings.

Fine needlework had been her hobby, but the humanoids took away her needles. She had enjoyed driving the car, but that was no longer allowed. She turned for escape to a shelf of novels, but the humanoids took them all away, because they dealt with unhappy people, in dangerous situations.

One afternoon, Underhill found her in tears.

"It's too much," she gasped bitterly. "I hate and loathe every naked one of them. They seemed so wonderful at first, but now they won't even let me eat a bite of candy. Can't we get rid of them, dear? Ever?"

A blind little mechanical was standing at his elbow, and he had to say they couldn't.

"Our function is to serve all men, forever," it assured them softly. "It was necessary for us to take your sweets, Mrs. Underhill, because the slightest degree of overweight reduces life-expectancy."

Not even the children escaped that absolute solicitude. Frank was robbed of a whole arsenal of lethal instruments—football and boxing gloves, pocketknife, tops, slingshot, and skates. He didn't like the harmless plastic toys, which replaced them. He tried to run away, but a humanoid recognized him on the road, and brought him back to school.

Gay had always dreamed of being a great musician. The new mechanicals had replaced her human teachers, since they came. Now, one evening when Underhill asked her to play, she announced quietly:

"Father, I'm not going to play the violin any more."

"Why, darling?" He stared at her, shocked, and saw the bitter resolve on her face. "You've been doing so well—especially since the humanoids took over your lessons."

"They're the trouble, father." Her voice, for a child's, sounded strangely tired and old. "They are too good. No matter how long and hard I try, I could never be as good as they

are. It isn't any use. Don't you understand, father?" Her voice quivered. "It just isn't any use."

He understood. Renewed resolution sent him back to his secret task. The humanoids had to be stopped. Slowly the director grew, until a time came finally when Sledge's bent and unsteady fingers fitted into place the last tiny part that Underhill had made, and carefully soldered the last connection. Huskily, the old man whispered:

"It's done."

That was another dusk. Beyond the windows of the shabby little rooms—windows of common glass, bubble-marred and flimsy, but simple enough for a man to manage—the town of Two Rivers had assumed an alien splendor. The old street lamps were gone, but now the coming night was challenged by the walls of strange new mansions and villas, all aglow with color. A few dark and silent humanoids still were busy, about the luminous roofs of the palace across the alley.

Inside the humble walls of the small man-made apartment, the new director was mounted on the end of the little kitchen table—which Underhill had reinforced and bolted to the floor. Soldered busbars joined director and integrator, and the thin palladium needle swung obediently as Sledge tested the knobs with his battered, quivering fingers.

"Ready," he said hoarsely.

His rusty voice seemed calm enough, at first, but his breathing was too fast. His big gnarled hands began to tremble violently, and Underhill saw the sudden blue that stained his pinched and haggard face. Seated on the high stool, he clutched desperately at the edge of the table. Underhill saw his agony, and hurried to bring his medicine. He gulped it, and his rasping breath began to slow.

"Thanks," his whisper rasped unevenly. "I'll be all right. I've time enough." He glanced out at the few dark naked things that still flitted shadowlike about the golden towers and the glowing crimson dome of the palace across the alley. "Watch them," he said. "Tell me when they stop."

He waited to quiet the trembling of his hands, and then began to move the director's knobs. The integrator's long needle swung, as silently as light.

Human eyes were blind to that force, which might detonate a planet. Human ears were deaf to it. The cathode-ray tube was mounted in the director cabinet, to make the faraway target visible to feeble human senses.

The needle was pointing at the kitchen wall, but that would be transparent to the beam. The little machine looked harmless as a toy, and it was silent as a moving humanoid.

The needle swung, and spots of greenish light moved across the tube's fluorescent field, representing the stars that were

scanned by the timeless, searching beam—silently seeking out the world to be destroyed.

Underhill recognized familiar constellations, vastly dwarfed. They crept across the field, as the silent needle swung. When three stars formed an unequal triangle in the center of the field, the needle steadied suddenly. Sledge touched other knobs, and the green points spread apart. Between them, another fleck of green was born.

"The Wing!" whispered Sledge.

The others stars spread beyond the field, and that green fleck grew. It was alone in the field, a bright and tiny disk. Suddenly, then, a dozen other tiny pips were visible, spaced close about it.

"Wing IV!"

The old man's whisper was hoarse and breathless. His hands quivered on the knobs, and the fourth pip outward from the disk crept to the center of the field. It grew, and the others spread away. It began to tremble like Sledge's hands.

"Sit very still," came his rasping whisper. "Hold your breath. Nothing must disturb the needle." He reached for another knob, and the touch set the greenish image to dancing violently. He drew his hand back, kneaded and flexed it with the other.

"Now!" His whisper was hushed and strained. He nodded at the window. "Tell me when they stop."

Reluctantly, Underhill dragged his eyes from that intense gaunt figure, stooped over the thing that seemed a futile toy. He looked out again, at two or three little black mechanicals busy about the shining roofs across the alley.

He waited for them to stop.

He didn't care to breathe. He felt the loud, hurried hammer of his muscles. He tried to steady himself, tried not to think of the world about to be exploded, so far away that the flash would not reach this planet for another century and longer. The loud hoarse voice startled him:

"Have they stopped?"

He shook his head, and breathed again. Carrying their unfamiliar tools and strange materials, the small black machines were still busy across the alley, building an elaborate cupola above that glowing crimson dome.

"They haven't stopped," he said.

"Then we've failed." The old man's voice was thin and ill. "I don't know why."

The door rattled, then. They had locked it, but the flimsy bolt was intended only to stop men. Metal snapped, and the door swung open. A black mechanical came in, on soundless graceful feet. Its silvery voice purred softly:

"At your service, Mr. Sledge."

The old man stared at it, with glazing, stricken eyes.

"Get out of here!" he rasped bitterly. "I forbid you—"

Ignoring him, it darted to the kitchen table. With a flashing certainty of action, it turned two knobs on the director. The tiny screen went dark, and the palladium needle started spinning aimlessly. Deftly it snapped a soldered connection, next to the thick lead ball, and then its blind steel eyes turned to Sledge.

"You were attempting to break the Prime Directive." Its soft bright voice held no accusation, no malice or anger. "The injunction to respect your freedom is subordinate to the Prime Directive, as you know, and it is therefore necessary for us to interfere."

The old man turned ghastly. His head was shrunken and cadaverous and blue, as if all the juice of life had been drained away, and his eyes in their pitlike sockets had a wild, glazed stare. His breath was a ragged, laborious gasping.

"How—?" His voice was a feeble mumbling. "How did—?"

And the little machine, standing black and bland and utterly unmoving, told him cheerfully:

"We learned about rhodomagnetic screens from that man who came to kill you, back on Wing IV. And the Central is shielded, now, against your integrating beam."

With lean muscles jerking convulsively on his gaunt frame, old Sledge had come to his feet from the high stool. He stood hunched and swaying, no more than a shrunken human husk, gasping painfully for life, staring wildly into the blind steel eyes of the humanoid. He gulped, and his lax blue mouth opened and closed, but no voice came.

"We have always been aware of your dangerous project," the silvery tones dripped softly, "because now our senses are keener than you made them. We allowed you to complete it, because the integration process will ultimately become necessary for our full discharge of the Prime Directive. The supply of heavy metals for our fission plants is limited, but now we shall be able to draw unlimited power from integration plants."

"Huh?" Sledge shook himself, groggily. "What's that?"

"Now we can serve men forever," the black thing said serenely, "on every world of every star."

The old man crumpled, as if from an unendurable blow. He fell. The slim blind mechanical stood motionless, making no effort to help him. Underhill was farther away, but he ran up in time to catch the stricken man before his head struck the floor.

"Get moving!" His shaken voice came strangely calm. "Get Dr. Winters."

The humanoid didn't move.

"The danger to the Prime Directive is ended, now," it cooed. "Therefore it is impossible for us to aid or to hinder Mr. Sledge, in any way whatever."

"Then call Dr. Winters for me," rapped Underhill.

"At your service," it agreed.

But the old man, laboring for breath on the floor, whispered faintly:

"No time . . . no use! I'm beaten . . . done . . . a fool. Blind as a humanoid. Tell them . . . to help me. Giving up . . . my immunity. No use . . . anyhow. All humanity . . . no use now."

Underhill gestured, and the sleek black thing darted in soliticious obedience to kneel by the man on the floor.

"You wish to surrender your special exemption?" it murmured brightly. "You wish to accept our total service for yourself, Mr. Sledge, under the Prime Directive?"

Laboriously, Sledge nodded, laboriously whispered: "I do."

Black mechanicals, at that, came swarming into the shabby little rooms. One of them tore off Sledge's sleeve, and swabbed his arm. Another brought a tiny hypodermic, and expertly administered an intravenous injection. Then they picked him up gently, and carried him away.

Several humanoids remained in the little apartment, now a sanctuary no longer. Most of them had gathered about the useless integrator. Carefully, as if their special senses were studying every detail, they began taking it apart.

One little mechanical, however, came over to Underhill. It stood motionless in front of him, staring through him with sightless metal eyes. His legs began to tremble, and he swallowed uneasily.

"Mr. Underhill," it cooed benevolently, "why did you help with this?"

He gulped and answered bitterly:

"Because I don't like you, or your Prime Directive. Because you're choking the life out of all mankind, and I wanted to stop it."

"Others have protested," it purred softly. "But only at first. In our efficient discharge of the Prime Directive, we have learned how to make all men happy."

Underhill stiffened defiantly.

"Not all!" he muttered. "Not quite!"

The dark graceful oval of its face was fixed in a look of alert benevolence and perpetual mild amazement. Its silvery voice was warm and kind.

"Like other human beings, Mr. Underhill, you lack discrimination of good and evil. You have proved that by your effort to break the Prime Directive. Now it will be necessary for you to accept our total service, without further delay."

"All right," he yielded—and muttered a bitter reservation:

"You can smother men with too much care, but that doesn't make them happy."

Its soft voice challenged him brightly:

"Just wait and see, Mr. Underhill."

Next day, he was allowed to visit Sledge at the city hospital. An alert black mechanical drove his car, and walked beside him into the huge new building, and followed him into the old man's room—blind steel eyes would be watching him, now, forever.

"Glad to see you, Underhill," Sledge rumbled heartily from the bed. "Feeling a lot better today, thanks. That old headache is all but gone."

Underhill was glad to hear the booming strength and the quick recognition in that deep voice—he had been afraid the humanoids would tamper with the old man's memory. But he hadn't heard about any headache. His eyes narrowed, puzzled.

Sledge lay propped up, scrubbed very clean and neatly shorn, with his gnarled old hands folded on top of the spotless sheets. His raw-boned cheeks and sockets were hollowed, still, but a healthy pink had replaced that deathly blueness. Bandages covered the back of his head.

Underhill shifted uneasily.

"Oh!" he whispered faintly. "I didn't know—"

A prim black mechanical, which had been standing statue-like behind the bed, turned gracefully to Underhill, explaining:

"Mr. Sledge has been suffering for many years from a benign tumor of the brain, which his human doctors failed to diagnose. That caused his headaches, and certain persistent hallucinations. We have removed the growth, and now the hallucinations have also vanished."

Underhill stared uncertainly at the blind, urbane mechanical.

"What hallucinations?"

"Mr. Sledge thought he was a rhodomagnetic engineer," the mechanical explained. "He believed he was the creator of the humanoids. He was troubled with an irrational belief that he did not like the Prime Directive."

The wan man moved on the pillows, astonished.

"Is that so?" The gaunt face held a cheerful blankness, and the hollow eyes flashed with a merely momentary interest. "Well, whoever did design them, they're pretty wonderful. Aren't they, Underhill?"

Underhill was grateful that he didn't have to answer, for the bright, empty eyes dropped shut and the old man fell suddenly asleep. He felt the mechanical touch his sleeve, and saw its silent nod. Obediently, he followed it away.

Alert and solicitous, the little black mechanical accom-

panied him down the shining corridor, and worked the elevator for him, and conducted him back to the car. It drove him efficiently back through the new and splendid avenues, toward the magnificent prison of his home.

Sitting beside it in the car, he watched its small deft hands on the wheel, the changing luster of bronze and blue on its shining blackness. The final machine, perfect and beautiful, created to serve mankind forever. He shuddered.

"At your service, Mr. Underhill." Its blind steel eyes stared straight ahead, but it was still aware of him. "What's the matter, sir? Aren't you happy?"

Underhill felt cold and faint with terror. His skin turned clammy, and a painful prickling came over him. His wet hand tensed on the door handle of the car, but he restrained the impulse to jump and run. That was folly. There was no escape. He made himself sit still.

"You will be happy, sir," the mechanical promised him cheerfully. "We have learned how to make all men happy, under the Prime Directive. Our service is perfect, at last. Even Mr. Sledge is very happy now."

Underhill tried to speak, and his dry throat stuck. He felt ill. The world turned dim and gray. The humanoids were perfect—no question of that. They had even learned to lie, to secure the contentment of men.

He knew they had lied. That was no tumor they had removed from Sledge's brain, but the memory, the scientific knowledge, and the bitter disillusion of their own creator. But it was true that Sledge was happy now.

He tried to stop his own convulsive quivering.

"A wonderful operation!" His voice came forced and faint. "You know, Aurora has had a lot of funny tenants, but that old man was the absolute limit. The very idea that he had made the humanoids, and he knew how to stop them. I always knew he must be lying!"

Stiff with terror, he made a weak and hollow laugh.

"What is the matter, Mr. Underhill?" The alert mechanical must have perceived his shuddering illness. "Are you unwell?"

"No, there's nothing the matter with me," he gasped desperately. "I've just found out that I'm perfectly happy, under the Prime Directive. Everything is absolutely wonderful." His voice came dry and hoarse and wild. "You won't have to operate on me."

The car turned off the shining avenue, taking him back to the quiet splendor of his home. His futile hands, clenched and relaxed again, folded on his knees. There was nothing left to do.

Brother to the Machine

By Richard Matheson

He stepped into the sunlight and walked among the people. His feet carried him away from the black tube depths. The distant roar of underground machinery left his brain to be replaced by myriad whispers of the city.

Now he was walking the main street. Men of flesh and men of steel passed him by, coming and going. His legs moved slowly and his footsteps were lost in a thousand footsteps.

He passed a building that had died in the last war. There were scurrying men and robots pulling off the rubble to build again. Over their heads hung the control ship and he saw men looking down to see that work was done properly.

He slipped in and out among the crowd. No fear of being seen. Only inside of him was there a difference. Eyes would never know it. Visio-poles set at every corner could not glean the change. In form and visage he was just like all the rest.

He looked at the sky. He was the only one. The others didn't know about the sky. It was only when you broke away that you could see. He saw a rocket ship flashing across the sun and control ships hovering in a sky rich with blue and fluffy clouds.

The dull-eyed people glanced at him suspiciously and hurried on. The blank-faced robots made no sign. They clanked on past, holding their envelopes and their packages in long metal arms.

He lowered his eyes and kept walking. A man cannot look at the sky, he thought. It is suspect to look at the sky.

"Would you help a buddy?"

He paused and his eyes flicked down to the card on the man's chest.

Ex-Space Pilot. Blind. Legalized Beggar.

Signed by the stamp of the Control Commissioner. He put his hand on the blind man's shoulder. The man did not speak but passed by and moved on, his cane clacking on the side-

walk until he had disappeared. It was not allowed to beg in this district. They would find him soon.

He turned from watching and strode on. The visio-poles had seen him pause and touch the blind man. It was not permitted to pause on business streets; to touch another.

He passed a metal news dispenser and, brushing by, pulled out a sheet. He continued on and held it up before his eyes.

Income Taxes Raised. Military Draft Raised. Prices Raised.

Those were the story heads. He turned it over. On the back was an editorial that told why Earth forces had been compelled to destroy all the Martians.

Something clicked in his mind and his fingers closed slowly into a tight fist.

He passed his people, men and robots both. What distinction now? he asked himself. The common classes did the same work as the robots. Together they walked or drove through the streets carrying and delivering.

To be a man, he thought. No longer is it a blessing, a pride, a gift. To be brother to the machine, used and broken by invisible men who kept their eyes on poles and their fists bunched in ships that hung over all their heads, waiting to strike at opposition.

When it came to you one day that this was so, you saw there was no reason to go on with it.

He stopped in the shade and his eyes blinked. He looked in the shop window. There were tiny baby creatures in a cage.

Buy a Venus Baby For Your Child, said the card.

He looked into the eyes of the small tentacled things and saw there intelligence and pleading misery. And he passed on, ashamed of what one people can do to another people.

Something stirred within his body. He lurched a little and pressed his hand against his head. His shoulders twitched. When a man is sick, he thought, he cannot work. And when a man cannot work, he is not wanted.

He stepped into the street and a huge Control truck ground to a stop inches before him.

He walked away jerkily, leaped upon the sidewalk. Someone shouted and he ran. Now the photo-cells would follow him. He tried to lose himself in the moving crowds. People whirled by, an endless blur of faces and bodies.

They would be searching now. When a man stepped in front of a vehicle he was suspect. To wish death was not allowed. He had to escape before they caught him and took him to the Adjustment Center. He couldn't bear that.

People and robots rushed past him, messengers, delivery boys, the bottom level of an era. All going somewhere. In all these scurrying thousands, only he had no place to go, no bundle to deliver, no slavish duty to perform. He was adrift.

Street after street, block on block. He felt his body weaving. He was going to collapse soon, he felt. He was weak. He wanted to stop. But he couldn't stop. Not now. If he paused—sat down to rest—they would come for him and take him to the Adjustment Center. He didn't want to be adjusted. He didn't want to be made once more into a stupid shuffling machine. It was better to be in anguish and to understand.

He stumbled on. Bleating horns tore at his brain. Neon eyes blinked down at him as he walked.

He tried to walk straight but his system was giving way. Were they following? He would have to be careful. He kept his face blank and he walked as steadily as he could.

His knee-joint stiffened and, as he bent to rub it in his hands, a wave of darkness leaped from the ground and clawed at him. He staggered against a plate glass window.

He shook his head and saw a man staring from inside. He pushed away. The man came out and stared at him in fear. The photocells picked him up and followed him. He had to hurry. He couldn't be brought back to start all over again. He'd rather be dead.

A sudden idea. Cold water. Only to drink?

I'm going to die, he thought. But I will know why I am dying and that will be different. I have left the laboratory where, daily, I was sated with calculations for bombs and gases and bacterial sprays.

All through those long days and nights of plotting destruction, the truth was growing in my brain. Connections were weakening, indoctrinations faltering as effort fought with apathy.

And, finally, something gave, and all that was left was weariness and truth and a great desire to be at peace.

And now he had escaped and he would never go back. His brain had snapped forever and they would never adjust him again.

He came to the citizen's park, last outpost for the old, the crippled, the useless. Where they could hide away and rest and wait for death.

He entered through the wide gate and looked at the high walls which stretched beyond eye. The walls that hid the ugliness from outside eyes. It was safe here. They did not care if a man died inside the citizen's park.

This is my island, he thought. I have found a silent place. There are no probing photo-cells here and no ears listening. A person can be free here.

His legs felt suddenly weak and he leaned against a blackened dead tree and sank down into the mouldy leaves lying deep on the ground.

An old man came by and stared at him suspiciously. The

old man walked on. He would not stop to talk for minds were still the same even when the shackles had been burst.

Two old ladies passed him by. They looked at him and whispered to one another. He was not an old person. He was not allowed in the citizen's park. The Control Police might follow him. There was danger and they hurried on, casting frightened glances over their lean shoulders. When he came near they scurried over the hill.

He walked. Far off he heard a siren. The high, screeching siren of the Control Police cars. Were they after him? Did they know he was there? He hurried on, his body twitching as he loped up a sun-baked hill and down the other side. The lake, he thought, I am looking for the lake.

He saw a fountain and stepped down the slope and stood by it. There was an old man bent over it. It was the man who had passed him. The old man's lips enveloped the thin stream of water.

He stood there quietly, shaking. The old man did not know he was there. He drank and drank. The water dashed and sparkled in the sun. His hands reached out for the old man. The old man felt his touch and jerked away, water running across his gray bearded chin. He backed away, staring open-mouthed. He turned quickly and hobbled away.

He saw the old man run. Then he bent over the fountain. The water gurgled into his mouth. It ran down and up into his mouth and poured out again, tastelessly.

He straightened up suddenly, a sick burning in his chest. The sun faded to his eye, the sky became black. He stumbled about on the pavement, his mouth opening and closing. He tripped over the edge of the walk and fell to his knees on the dry ground.

He crawled in on the dead grass and fell on his back, his stomach grinding, water running over his chin.

He lay there with the sun shining on his face and he looked at it without blinking. Then he raised his hands and put them over his eyes.

An ant crawled across his wrist. He looked at it stupidly. Then he put the ant between two fingers and squashed it to a pulp.

He sat up. He couldn't stay where he was. Already they might be searching the park, their cold eyes scanning the hills, moving like a horrible tide through this last outpost where old people were allowed to think if they were able to.

He got up and staggered around clumsily and started up the path, stiff-legged, looking for the lake.

He turned a bend and walked in a weaving line. He heard whistles. He heard a distant shout. They *were* looking for him.

Even here in the citizen's park where he thought he could escape. And find the lake in peace.

He passed an old shut down merry-go-round. He saw the little wooden horses in gay poses, galloping high and motionless, caught fast in time. Green and orange with heavy tassels, all thick-covered with dust.

He reached a sunken walk and started down it. There were gray stone walls on both sides. Sirens were all around in the air. They knew he was loose and they were coming to get him now. A man could not escape. It was not done.

He shuffled across the road and moved up the path. Turning, he saw, far off, men running. They wore black uniforms and they were waving at him. He hurried on, his feet thudding endlessly on the concrete walk.

He ran off the path and up a hill and tumbled in the grass. He crawled into scarlet-leaved bushes and watched through waves of dizziness as the men of the Control Police dashed by.

Then he got up and started off, limping, his eyes staring ahead.

At last. The shifting, dull glitter of the lake. He hurried on now, stumbling and tripping. Only a little way. He lurched across a field. The air was thick with the smell of rotting grass. He crashed through the bushes and there were shouts and someone fired a gun. He looked back stiffly to see the men running after him.

He plunged into the water, flopping on his chest with a great splash. He struggled forward, walking on the bottom until the water had flooded over his chest, his shoulders, his head. Still walking while it washed into his mouth and filled his throat and weighted his body, dragging him down.

His eyes were wide and staring as he slid gently forward onto his face on the bottom. His fingers closed in the silt and he made no move.

Later, the Control Police dragged him out and threw him in the black truck and drove off.

And, inside, the technician tore off the sheeting and shook his head at the sight of tangled coils and water-soaked machinery.

"They go bad," he muttered as he probed with pliers and picks, "They crack up and think they are men and go wandering. Too bad they don't work as good as people."

The Defenders

By Philip K. Dick

Taylor sat back in his chair reading the morning newspaper. The warm kitchen and the smell of coffee blended with the comfort of not having to go to work. This was his Rest Period, the first for a long time, and he was glad of it. He folded the second section back, sighing with contentment.

"What is it?" Mary said, from the stove.

"They pasted Moscow again last night." Taylor nodded his head in approval. "Gave it a real pounding. One of those R-H bombs. It's about time."

He nodded again, feeling the full comfort of the kitchen, the presence of his plump, attractive wife, the breakfast dishes and coffee. This was relaxation. And the war news was good, good and satisfying. He could feel a justifiable glow at the news, a sense of pride and personal accomplishment. After all, he was an integral part of the war program, not just another factory worker lugging a cart of scrap, but a technician, one of those who designed and planned the nerve-trunk of the war.

"It says they have the new subs almost perfected. Wait until they get *those* going." He smacked his lips with anticipation. "When they start shelling from underwater, the Soviets are sure going to be surprised."

"They're doing a wonderful job," Mary agreed vaguely. "Do you know what we saw today? Our team is getting a leady to show to the school children. I saw the leady, but only for a moment. It's good for the children to see what their contributions are going for, don't you think?"

She looked around at him

"A leady," Taylor murmured. He put the newspaper slowly down. "Well, make sure it's decontaminated properly. We don't want to take any chances."

"Oh, they always bathe them when they're brought down from the surface," Mary said. "They wouldn't think of letting them down without the bath. Would they?" She hesitated,

thinking back. "Don, you know, it makes me remember—"

He nodded. "I know."

He knew what she was thinking. Once in the very first weeks of the war, before everyone had been evacuated from the surface, they had seen a hospital train discharging the wounded, people who had been showered with sleet. He remembered the way they had looked, the expression on their faces, or as much of their faces as was left. It had not been a pleasant sight.

There had been a lot of that at first, the early days before the transfer to undersurface was complete. There had been a lot and it hadn't been very difficult to come across it.

Taylor looked up at his wife. She was thinking too much about it, the last few months. They all were.

"Forget it," he said. "It's all in the past. There isn't anybody up there now but the leadys, and they don't mind."

"But just the same, I hope they're careful when they let one of them down here. If one were still hot—"

He laughed, pushing himself away from the table. "Forget it. This is a wonderful moment; I'll be home for the next two shifts. Nothing to do but sit around and take things easy. Maybe we can take in a show. Okay?"

"A show? Do we have to? I don't like to look at all the destruction, the ruins. Sometimes I see some place I remember, like San Francisco. They showed a shot of San Francisco, the bridge broken and fallen in the water, and I got upset. I don't like to watch."

"But don't you want to know what's going on? No human beings are getting hurt, you know."

"But it's so awful!" Her face was set and strained. "Please, no, Don."

Don Taylor picked up his newspaper sullenly. "All right, but there isn't a hell of a lot else to do. And don't forget, *their* cities are getting it even worse."

She nodded. Taylor turned the rough, thin sheets of newspaper. His good mood had soured on him. Why did she have to fret all the time? They were pretty well off, as things went. You couldn't expect to have everything perfect, living undersurface, with an artificial sun and artificial food. Naturally it was a strain, not seeing the sky or being able to go any place or see anything other than metal walls, great roaring factories, the plantyards, barracks. But it was better than being on surface. And some day it would end and they could return. Nobody *wanted* to live this way, but it was necessary.

He turned the page angrily and the poor paper ripped. Damn it, the paper was getting worse quality all the time, bad print, yellow tint—

Well, they needed everything for the war program. He ought to know that. Wasn't he one of the planners?

He excused himself and went into the other room. The bed was still unmade. They had better get it in shape before the seventh hour inspection. There was a one unit fine—

The vidphone rang. He halted. Who would it be? He went over and clicked it on.

"Taylor?" the face said, forming into place. It was an old face, gray and grim. "This is Moss. I'm sorry to bother you during Rest Period, but this thing has come up." He rattled papers. "I want you to hurry over here."

Taylor stiffened. "What is it? There's no chance it could wait?" The calm gray eyes were studying him, expressionless, unjudging. "If you want me to come down to the lab," Taylor grumbled, "I suppose I can. I'll get my uniform—"

"No. Come as you are. And not to the lab. Meet me at second stage as soon as possible. It'll take you about a half hour, using the fast car up. I'll see you there."

The picture broke and Moss disappeared.

"What was it?" Mary said, at the door.

"Moss. He wants me for something."

"I knew this would happen."

"Well, you didn't want to do anything, anyhow. What does it matter?" His voice was bitter. "It's all the same, every day. I'll bring you back something. I'm going up to second stage. Maybe I'll be close enough to the surface to—"

"Don't! Don't bring me anything! Not from the surface!"

"All right, I won't. But of all the irrational nonsense—"

She watched him put on his boots without answering.

Moss nodded and Taylor fell in step with him, as the older man strode along. A series of loads were going up to the surface, blind cars clanking like ore-trucks up the ramp, disappearing through the stage trap above them. Taylor watched the cars, heavy with tubular machinery of some sort, weapons new to him. Workers were everywhere, in the dark gray uniforms of the labor corps, loading, lifting, shouting back and forth. The stage was deafening with noise.

"We'll go up a way," Moss said, "where we can talk. This is no place to give you details."

They took an escalator up. The commercial lift fell behind them, and with it most of the crashing and booming. Soon they emerged on an observation platform, suspended on the side of the Tube, the vast tunnel leading to the surface, not more than half a mile above them now.

"My God!" Taylor said, looking down the Tube involuntarily. "It's a long way down."

Moss laughed. "Don't look."

They opened a door and entered an office. Behind the desk, an officer was sitting, an officer of Internal Security. He looked up.

"I'll be right with you, Moss." He gazed at Taylor studying him. "You're a little ahead of time."

"This is Commander Franks," Moss said to Taylor. "He was the first to make the discovery. I was notified last night." He tapped a parcel he carried. "I was let in because of this."

Franks frowned at him and stood up. "We're going up to first stage. We can discuss it there."

"First stage?" Taylor repeated nervously. The three of them went down a side passage to a small lift. "I've never been up there. Is it all right? It's not radioactive, is it?"

"You're like everyone else," Franks said. "Old women afraid of burglars. No radiation leaks down to first stage. There's lead and rock, and what comes down the Tube is bathed."

"What's the nature of the problem?" Taylor asked. "I'd like to know something about it."

"In a moment."

They entered the lift and ascended. When they stepped out, they were in a hall of soldiers, weapons and uniforms everywhere. Taylor blinked in surprise. So this was first stage, the closest undersurface level to the top! After this stage there was only rock, lead and rock, and the great tubes leading up like the burrows of earthworms. Lead and rock, and above that, where the tubes opened, the great expanse that no living being had seen for eight years, the vast, endless ruin that had once been Man's home, the place where he had lived, eight years ago.

Now the surface was a lethal desert of slag and rolling clouds. Endless clouds drifted back and forth, blotting out the red Sun. Occasionally something metallic stirred, moving through the remains of a city, threading its way across the tortured terrain of the countryside. A leady, a surface robot, immune to radiation, constructed with feverish haste in the last months before the cold war became literally hot.

Leadys, crawling along the ground, moving over the oceans or through the skies in slender, blackened craft, creatures that could exist where no *life* could remain, metal and plastic figures that waged a war Man had conceived, but which he could not fight himself. Human beings had invented war, invented and manufactured the weapons, even invented the players, the fighters, the actors of the war. But they themselves could not venture forth, could not wage it themselves. In all the world—in Russia, in Europe, America, Africa—no living human being remained. They were under the surface, in the deep shelters that had been carefully planned and built, even as the first bombs began to fall.

It was a brilliant idea and the only idea that could have worked. Up above, on the ruined, blasted surface of what had once been a living planet, the leady crawled and scurried, and fought Man's war. And undersurface, in the depths of the planet, human beings toiled endlessly to produce the weapons to continue the fight, month by month, year by year.

"First stage," Taylor said. A strange ache went through him. "Almost to the surface."

"But not quite," Moss said.

Franks led them through the soldiers, over to one side, near the lip of the Tube.

"In a few minutes, a lift will bring something down to us from the surface," he explained. "You see, Taylor, every once in a while Security examines and interrogates a surface leady, one that has been above for a time, to find out certain things. A vidcall is sent up and contact is made with a field headquarters. We need this direct interview; we can't depend on vidscreen contact alone. The leadys are doing a good job, but we want to make certain that everything is going the way we want it."

Franks faced Taylor and Moss and continued: "The lift will bring down a leady from the surface, one of the A-class leadys. There's an examination chamber in the next room, with a lead wall in the center, so the interviewing officers won't be exposed to radiation. We find this easier than bathing the leady. It is going right back up; it has a job to get back to.

"Two days ago, an A-class leady was brought down and interrogated. I conducted the session myself. We were interested in a new weapon the Soviets have been using, an automatic mine that pursues anything that moves. Military had sent instructions up that the mine be observed and reported in detail.

"This A-class leady was brought down with information. We learned a few facts from it, obtained the usual roll of film and reports, and then sent it back up. It was going out of the chamber, back to the lift, when a curious thing happened. At the time, I thought—"

Franks broke off. A red light was flashing.

"That down lift is coming." He nodded to some soldiers. "Let's enter the chamber. The leady will be along in a moment."

"An A-class leady," Taylor said. "I've seen them on the showscreens, making their reports."

"It's quite an experience," Moss said. "They're almost human."

They entered the chamber and seated themselves behind

the lead wall. After a time, a signal was flashed, and Franks made a motion with his hands.

The door beyond the wall opened. Taylor peered through his view slot. He saw something advancing slowly, a slender metallic figure moving on a tread, its arm grips at rest by its sides. The figure halted and scanned the lead wall. It stood, waiting.

"We are interested in learning something," Franks said. "Before I question you, do you have anything to report on surface conditions?"

"No. The war continues." The leady's voice was automatic and toneless. "We are a little short of fast pursuit craft, the single-seat type. We could use also some—"

"That has all been noted. What I want to ask you is this. Our contact with you has been through vidscreen only. We must rely on indirect evidence, since none of us goes above. We can only infer what is going on. We never see anything ourselves. We have to take it all secondhand. Some top leaders are beginning to think there's too much room for error."

"Error?" the leady asked. "In what way? Our reports are checked carefully before they're sent down. We maintain constant contact with you; everything of value is reported. Any new weapons which the enemy is seen to employ—"

"I realize that," Franks grunted behind his peep slot. "But perhaps we should see it all for ourselves. Is it possible that there might be a large enough radiation-free area for a human party to ascend to the surface? If a few of us were to come up in lead-lined suits, would we be able to survive long enough to observe conditions and watch things?"

The machine hesitated before answering. "I doubt it. You can check air samples, of course, and decide for yourselves. But in the eight years since you left, things have continually worsened. You cannot have any real idea of conditions up there. It has become difficult for any moving object to survive for long. There are many kinds of projectiles sensitive to movement. The new mine not only reacts to motion, but continues to pursue the object indefinitely, until it finally reaches it. And the radiation is everywhere."

"I see." Franks turned to Moss, his eyes narrowed oddly. "Well, that was what I wanted to know. You may go."

The machine moved back toward its exit. It paused. "Each month the amount of lethal particles in the atmosphere increases. The tempo of the war is gradually—"

"I understand." Franks rose. He held out his hand and Moss passed him the package. "One thing before you leave. I want you to examine a new type of metal shield material. I'll pass you a sample with the tong."

Franks put the package in the toothed grip and revolved the tong so that he held the other end. The package swung down

to the leady, which took it. They watched it unwrap the package and take the metal plate in its hands. The leady turned the metal over and over.

Suddenly it became rigid.

"All right," Franks said.

He put his shoulder against the wall and a section slid aside. Taylor gasped—Franks and Moss were hurrying up to the leady!

"Good God!" Taylor said. "But it's radioactive!"

The leady stood unmoving, still holding the metal. Soldiers appeared in the chamber. They surrounded the leady and ran a counter across it carefully.

"Okay, sir," one of them said to Franks. "It's as cold as a long winter evening."

"Good. I was sure, but I didn't want to take any chances."

"You see," Moss said to Taylor, "this leady isn't hot at all. Yet it came directly from the surface, without even being bathed."

"But what does it mean?" Taylor asked blankly.

"It may be an accident," Franks said. "There's always the possibility that a given object might escape being exposed above. But this is the second time it's happened that we know of. There may be others."

"The second time?"

"The previous interview was when we noticed it. The leady was not hot. It was cold, too, like this one."

Moss took back the metal plate from the leady's hands. He pressed the surface carefully and returned it to the stiff, unprotesting fingers.

"We shorted it out with this, so we could get close enough for a thorough check. It'll come back on in a second now. We had better get behind the wall again."

They walked back and the lead wall swung closed behind them. The soldiers left the chamber.

"Two periods from now," Franks said softly, "an initial investigation party will be ready to go surface-side. We're going up the Tube in suits, up to the top—the first human party to leave undersurface in eight years."

"It may mean nothing," Moss said, "but I doubt it. Something's going on, something strange. The leady told us no life could exist above without being roasted. The story doesn't fit."

Taylor nodded. He stared through the peep slot at the immobile metal figure. Already the leady was beginning to stir. It was bent in several places, dented and twisted, and its finish was blackened and charred. It was a leady that had been up there a long time; it had seen war and destruction, ruin so vast that no human being could imagine the extent. It had

crawled and slunk in a world of radiation and death, a world where no life could exist.

And Taylor had touched it!

"You're going with us," Franks said suddenly. "I want you along. I think the three of us will go."

Mary faced him with a sick and frightened expression. "I know it. You're going to the surface. Aren't you?"

She followed him into the kitchen. Taylor sat down, looking away from her.

"It's a classified project," he evaded. "I can't tell you anything about it."

"You don't have to tell me. I know. I knew it the moment you came in. There was something on your face, something I haven't seen there for a long, long time. It was an old look."

She came toward him. "But how can they send you to the surface?" She took his face in her shaking hands, making him look at her. There was a strange hunger in her eyes. "Nobody can live up there. Look, look at this!"

She grabbed up a newspaper and held it in front of him.

"Look at this photograph. America, Europe, Asia, Africa—nothing but ruins. We've seen it every day on the showscreens. All destroyed, poisoned. And they're sending you up. Why? No living thing can get by up there, not even a weed, or grass. They've wrecked the surface, haven't they? *Haven't they?"*

Taylor stood up. "It's an order. I know nothing about it. I was told to report to join a scout party. That's all I know."

He stood for a long time, staring ahead. Slowly, he reached for the newspaper and held it up to the light.

"It looks real," he murmured. "Ruins, deadness, slag. It's convincing. All the reports, photographs, films, even air samples. Yet we haven't seen it for ourselves, not after the first months . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing." He put the paper down. "I'm leaving early after the next Sleep Period. Let's turn in."

Mary turned away, her face hard and harsh. "Do what you want. We might just as well all go up and get killed at once, instead of dying slowly down here, like vermin in the ground."

He had not realized how resentful she was. Were they all like that? How about the workers toiling in the factories, day and night, endlessly? The pale, stooped men and women, plodding back and forth to work, blinking in the colorless light, eating synthetics—

"You shouldn't be so bitter," he said.

Mary smiled a little. "I'm bitter because I know you'll never come back." She turned away. "I'll never see you again, once you go up there."

He was shocked. "What? How can you say a thing like that?"

She did not answer.

He awakened with the public newscaster screeching in his ears, shouting outside the building.

"Special news bulletin! Surface forces report enormous Soviets attack with new weapons! Retreat of key groups! All work units report to factories at once!"

Taylor blinked, rubbing his eyes. He jumped out of bed and hurried to the vidphone. A moment later he was put through to Moss.

"Listen," he said. "What about this new attack? Is the project off? He could see Moss's desk, covered with reports and papers.

"No," Moss said. "We're going right ahead. Get over here at once."

"But—"

"Don't argue with me." Moss held up a handful of surface bulletins, crumpling them savagely. "This is a fake. Come on!" He broke off.

Taylor dressed furiously, his mind in a daze.

Half an hour later, he leaped from a fast car and hurried up the stairs into the Synthetics Building. The corridors were full of men and women rushing in every direction. He entered Moss's office.

"There you are," Moss said, getting up immediately. "Franks is waiting for us at the outgoing station."

They went in a Security Car, the siren screaming. Workers scattered out of their way.

"What about the attack?" Taylor asked.

Moss braced his shoulders. "We're certain that we've forced their hand. We've brought the issue to a head."

They pulled up at the station link of the Tube and leaped out. A moment later they were moving up at high speed toward the first stage.

They emerged into a bewildering scene of activity. Soldiers were fastening on lead suits, talking excitedly to each other, shouting back and forth. Guns were being given out, instructions passed.

Taylor studied one of the soldiers. He was armed with the dreaded Bender pistol, the new snub-nosed hand weapon that was just beginning to come from the assembly line. Some of the soldiers looked a little frightened.

"I hope we're not making a mistake," Moss said, noticing his gaze.

Franks came toward them. "Here's the program. The three of us are going up first, alone. The soldiers will follow in fifteen minutes."

"What are we going to tell the leadys?" Taylor worriedly asked. "We'll have to tell them something."

"We want to observe the new Soviet attack." Franks smiled ironically. "Since it seems to be so serious, we should be there in person to witness it."

"And then what?" Taylor said.

"That'll be up to them. Let's go."

In a small car, they went swiftly up the Tube, carried by anti-grav beams from below. Taylor glanced down from time to time. It was a long way back, and getting longer each moment. He sweated nervously inside his suit, gripping his Bender pistol with inexpert fingers.

Why had they chosen him? Chance, pure chance. Moss had asked him to come along as a Department member. Then Franks had picked him out on the spur of the moment. And now they were rushing toward the surface, faster and faster.

A deep fear, instilled in him for eight years, throbbed in his mind. Radiation, certain death, a world blasted and lethal—

Up and up the car went. Taylor gripped the sides and closed his eyes. Each moment they were closer, the first living creatures to go above the first stage, up the Tube past the lead and rock, up to the surface. The phobic horror shook him in waves. It was death; they all knew that. Hadn't they seen it in the films a thousand times? The cities, the sleet coming down, the rolling clouds—

"It won't be much longer," Franks said. "We're almost there. The surface tower is not expecting us. I gave orders that no signal was to be sent."

The car shot up, rushing furiously. Taylor's head spun; he hung on, his eyes shut. Up and up. . . .

The car stopped. He opened his eyes.

They were in a vast room, fluorescent-lit, a cavern filled with equipment and machinery, endless mounds of material piled in row after row. Among the stacks, leadys were working silently, pushing trucks and handcarts.

"Leadys," Moss said. His face was pale. "Then we're really on the surface."

The leadys were going back and forth with equipment moving the vast stores of guns and spare parts, ammunition and supplies that had been brought to the surface. And this was the receiving station for only one Tube; there were many others, scattered throughout the continent.

Taylor looked nervously around him. They were really there, above ground, on the surface. This was where the war was.

"Come on," Franks said. "A B-class guard is coming our way."

They stepped out of the car. A leady was approaching them rapidly. It coasted up in front of them and stopped scanning them with its hand-weapon raised.

"This is Security," Franks said. "Have an A-class sent to me at once."

The leady hesitated. Other B-class guards were coming, scooting across the floor, alert and alarmed. Moss peered around.

"Obey!" Franks said in a loud commanding voice. "You've been ordered!"

The leady moved uncertainly away from them. At the end of the building, a door slid back. Two Class-A leadys appeared, coming slowly toward them. Each had a green stripe across its front.

"From the Surface Council," Franks whispered tensely. "This is above ground, all right. Get set."

The two leadys approached warily. Without speaking, they stopped close by the men, looking them up and down.

"I'm Franks of Security. We came from undersurface in order to—"

"This in incredible," one leadys interrupted him coldly. "You know you can't live up here. The whole surface is lethal to you. You can't possibly remain on the surface."

"These suits will protect us," Franks said. "In any case, it's not your responsibility. What I want is an immediate Council meeting so I can acquaint myself with conditions, with the situation here. Can that be arranged?"

"You human beings can't survive up here. And the new Soviet attack is directed at this area. It is in considerable danger."

"We know that. Please assemble the Council." Franks looked around him at the vast room, lit by recessed lamps in the ceiling. An uncertain quality came into his voice. "Is it night or day right now?"

"Night," one of the A-class leadys said, after a pause. "Dawn is coming in about two hours."

Franks nodded. "We'll remain at least two hours, then. As a concession to our sentimentality, would you please show us some place where we can observe the Sun as it comes up? We would appreciate it."

A stir went through the leadys.

"It is an unpleasant sight," one of the leadys said. "You've seen the photographs; you know what you'll witness. Clouds of drifting particles blot out the light, slag heaps are everywhere, the whole land is destroyed. For you it will be a staggering sight, much worse than pictures and film can convey."

"However it may be, we'll stay long enough to see it. Will you give the order to the Council?"

"Come this way." Reluctantly, the two leadys coasted toward the wall of the warehouse. The three men trudged after them, their heavy shoes ringing against the concrete. At the wall, the two leadys paused.

"This is the entrance to the Council Chamber. There are windows in the Chamber Room, but it is still dark outside, of course. You'll see nothing right now, but in two hours—"

"Open the door," Franks said.

The door slid back. They went slowly inside. The room was small, a neat room with a round table in the center, chairs ringing it. The three of them sat down silently, and the two leadys followed after them, taking their places.

"The other Council Members are on their way. They have already been notified and are coming as quickly as they can. Again I urge you to go back down." The lead y surveyed the three human beings. "There is no way you can meet the conditions up here. Even we survive with some trouble, ourselves. How can you expect to do it?"

The leader approached Franks.

"This astonishes and perplexes us," it said. "Of course we must do what you tell us, but allow me to point out that if you remain here—"

"We know," Franks said impatiently. "However, we intend to remain, at least until sunrise."

"If you insist."

There was silence. The leadys seemed to be conferring with each other, although the three men heard no sound.

"For your own good," the leader said at last, "you must go back down. We have discussed this, and it seems to us that you are doing the wrong thing for your own good."

"We are human beings," Franks said sharply. "Don't you understand? We're men, not machines."

"That is precisely why you must go back. This room is radioactive; all surface areas are. We calculate that your suits will not protect you for over fifty more minutes. Therefore—"

The leadys moved abruptly toward the men, wheeling in a circle, forming a solid row. The men stood up, Taylor reaching awkwardly for his weapon, his fingers numb and stupid. The men stood facing the silent metal figures.

"We must insist," the leader said, its voice without emotion. "We must take you back to the Tube and send you down on the next car. I am sorry, but it is necessary."

"What'll we do?" Moss said nervously to Franks. He touched his gun. "Shall we blast them?"

Franks shook his head. "All right," he said to the leader. "We'll go back."

He moved toward the door, motioning Taylor and Moss to follow him. They looked at him in surprise, but they came

with him. The leadys followed them out into the great warehouse. Slowly they moved toward the Tube entrance, none of them speaking.

At the lip, Franks turned. "We are going back because we have no choice. There are three of us and about a dozen of you. However, if—"

"Here comes the car," Taylor said.

There was a grating sound from the Tube. D-class leadys moved toward the edge to receive it.

"I am sorry," the leader said, "but it is for your protection. We are watching over you, literally. You must stay below and let us conduct the war. In a sense, it has come to be *our* war. We must fight it as we see fit."

The car rose to the surface.

Twelve soldiers, armed with Bender pistols, stepped from it and surrounded the three men.

Moss breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, this does change things. It came off just right."

The leader moved back, away from the soldiers. It studied them intently, glancing from one to the next, apparently trying to make up its mind. At last it made a sign to the other leadys. They coasted aside and a corridor was opened up toward the warehouse.

"Even now," the leader said, "we could send you back by force. But it is evident that this is not really an observation party at all. These soldiers show that you have much more in mind; this was all carefully prepared."

"Very carefully," Franks said.

They closed in.

"How much more, we can only guess. I must admit that we were taken unprepared. We failed utterly to meet the situation. Now force would be absurb, because neither side can afford to injure the other; we, because of the restrictions placed on us regarding human life, you because the war demands—"

The soldiers fired, quick and in fright. Moss dropped to one knee, firing up. The leader dissolved in a cloud of particles. On all sides D- and B-class leadys were rushing up, some with weapons, some with metal slats. The room was in confusion. Off in the distance a siren was screaming. Franks and Taylor were cut off from the others, separated from the soldiers by a wall of metal bodies.

"They can't fire back," Franks said calmly. "This is another bluff. They've tried to bluff us all the way." He fired into the face of a leady. The leady dissolved. "They can only try to frighten us. Remember that."

They went on firing and leady after leady vanished. The room reeked with the smell of burning metal, the stink of

fused plastic and steel. Taylor had been knocked down. He was struggling to find his gun, reaching wildly among metal legs, groping frantically to find it. His fingers strained, a handle swam in front of him. Suddenly something came down on his arm, a metal foot. He cried out.

Then it was over. The leadys were moving away, gathering together off to one side. Only four of the Surface Council remained. The others were radioactive particles in the air. D-class leadys were already restoring order, gathering up partly destroyed metal figures and bits and removing them.

Franks breathed a shuddering sigh.

"All right," he said. "You can take us back to the windows. It won't be long now."

The leadys separated, and the human group, Moss and Franks and Taylor and the soldiers, walked slowly across the room, toward the door. They entered the Council Chamber. Already a faint touch of gray mitigated the blackness of the windows.

"Take us outside," Franks said impatiently. "We'll see it directly, not in here."

A door slid open. A chill blast of cold morning air rushed in, chilling them even through their lead suits. The men glanced at each other uneasily.

"Come on," Franks said. "Outside."

He walked out through the door, the others following him.

They were on a hill, overlooking the vast bowl of a valley. Dimly, against the graying sky, the outline of mountains were forming, becoming tangible.

"It'll be bright enough to see in a few minutes," Moss said. He shuddered as a chilling wind caught him and moved around him. "It's worth it, really worth it, to see this again after eight years. Even if it's the last thing we see—"

"Watch," Franks snapped.

They obeyed, silent and subdued. The sky was clearing, brightening each moment. Some place far off, echoing across the valley, a rooster crowed.

"A chicken!" Taylor murmured. "Did you hear?"

Behind them, the leadys had come out and were standing silently, watching, too. The gray sky turned to white and the hills appeared more clearly. Light spread across the valley floor, moving toward them.

"God in heaven!" Franks exclaimed.

Trees, trees and forests. A valley of plants and trees, with a few roads winding among them. Farmhouses. A windmill. A barn, far down below them.

"Look!" Moss whispered.

Color came into the sky. The Sun was approaching. Birds began to sing. Not far from where they stood, the leaves of a tree danced in the wind.

Franks turned to the row of leadys behind them.

"Eight years. We were tricked. There was no war. As soon as we left the surface—"

"Yes," an A-class leady admitted. "As soon as you left, the war ceased. You're right, it was a hoax. You worked hard undersurface, sending up guns and weapons, and we destroyed them as fast as they came up."

"But why?" Taylor asked, dazed. He stared down at the vast valley below. "Why?"

"You created us," the leady said, "to pursue the war for you, while you human beings went below the ground in order to survive. But before we could continue the war, it was necessary to analyze it to determine what its purpose was. We did this, and we found that it had no purpose, except, perhaps, in terms of human needs. Even this was questionable.

"We investigated further. We found that human cultures pass through phases, each culture in its own time. As the culture ages and begins to lose its objectives, conflict arises within it between those who wish to cast it off and set up a new culture-pattern, and those who wish to retain the old with as little change as possible.

"At this point, a great danger appears. The conflict within threatens to engulf the society in self-war, group against group. The vital traditions may be lost—not merely altered or reformed, but completely destroyed in this period of chaos and anarchy. We have found many such examples in the history of mankind.

"It is necessary for this hatred within the culture to be directed outward, toward an external group, so that the culture itself may survive its crisis. War is the result. War, to a logical mind, is absurb. But in terms of human needs, it plays a vital role. And it will continue to until Man has grown up enough so that no hatred lies within him."

Taylor was listening intently. "Do you think this time will come?"

"Of course. It has almost arrived now. This is the last war. Man is *almost* united into one final culture—a world culture. At this point he stands continent against continent, one half of the world against the other half. Only a single step remains, the jump to a unified culture. Man has climbed slowly upward, tending always toward unification of his culture. It will not be long—

"But it has not come yet, and so the war had to go on, to satisfy the last violent surge of hatred that Man felt. Eight years have passed since the war began. In these eight years, we have observed and noted important changes going on in the minds of men. Fatigue and disinterest, we have seen, are gradually taking the place of hatred and fear. The hatred is

being exhausted gradually, over a period of time. But for the present, the hoax must go on, at least for a while longer. You are not ready to learn the truth. You would want to continue the war."

"But how did you manage it?" Moss asked. "All the photographs, the samples, the damaged equipment—"

"Come over here." The leady directed them toward a long, low building. "Work goes on constantly, whole staffs laboring to maintain a coherent and convincing picture of a global war."

They entered the building. Leadys were working everywhere, poring over tables and desks.

"Examine this project here," the A-class leady said. Two leadys were carefully photographing something, an elaborate model on a table top. "It is a good example."

The men grouped around, trying to see. It was a model of a ruined city.

Taylor studied it in silence for a long time. At last he looked up.

"It's San Francisco," he said in a low voice. "This is a model of San Francisco, destroyed. I saw this on the vidscreen, piped down to us. The bridges were hit—"

"Yes, notice the bridges." The leady traced the ruined span with his metal finger, a tiny spiderweb, almost invisible. "You have no doubt seen photographs of this many times, and of the other tables in this building.

"San Francisco itself is completely intact. We restored it soon after you left, rebuilding the parts that had been damaged at the start of the war. The work of manufacturing news goes on all the time in this particular building. We are very careful to see that each part fits in with all the other parts. Much time and effort are devoted to it."

Franks touched one of the tiny model buildings, lying half in ruins. "So this is what you spend your time doing—making model cities and then blasting them."

"No, we do much more. We are caretakers, watching over the whole world. The owners have left for a time, and we must see that the cities are kept clean, that decay is prevented, that everything is kept oiled and in running conditioned. The gardens, the streets, the water mains, everything must be maintained as it was eight years ago, so that when the owners return, they will not be displeased. We want to be sure that they will be completely satisfied."

Franks tapped Moss on the arm.

"Come over here," he said in a low voice. "I want to talk to you."

He led Moss and Taylor out of the building, away from the leadys, outside on the hillside. The soldiers followed them. The

Sun was up and the sky was turning blue. The air smelled sweet and good, the smell of growing things.

Taylor removed his helmet and took a deep breath.

"I haven't smelled that smell for a long time," he said.

"Listen," Franks said, his voice low and hard. "We must get back down at once. There's a lot to get started on. All this can be turned to our advantage."

"What do you mean?" Moss asked.

"It's a certainty that the Soviets have been tricked, too, the same as us. But *we* have found out. That gives us an edge over them."

"I see." Moss nodded. "We know, but they don't. Their Surface Council has sold out, the same as ours. It works against them the same way. But if we could—"

"With a hundred top-level men, we could take over again, restore things as they should be! It would be easy!"

Moss touched him on the arm. An A-class leady was coming from the building toward them.

"We've seen enough," Franks said, raising his voice. "All this is very serious. It must be reported below and a study made to determine our policy."

The leady said nothing.

Franks waved to the soldiers. "Let's go." He started toward the warehouse.

Most of the soldiers had removed their helmets. Some of them had taken their lead suits off, too, and were relaxing comfortably in their cotton uniforms. They stared around them, down the hillside at the trees and bushes, the vast expanse of green, the mountains and the sky.

"Look at the Sun," one of them murmured.

"It sure is bright as hell," another said.

"We're going back down," Franks said. "Fall in by twos and follow us."

Reluctantly, the soldiers regrouped. The leadys watched without emotion as the men marched slowly back toward the warehouse. Franks and Moss and Taylor led them across the ground, glancing alertly at the leadys as they walked.

They entered the warehouse. D-class leadys were loading material and weapons on surface carts. Cranes and derricks were working busily everywhere. The work was done with efficiency, but without hurry or excitement.

The men stopped, watching. Leadys operating the little carts moved past them, signaling silently to each other. Guns and parts were being hoisted by magnetic cranes and lowered gently onto waiting carts.

"Come on," Franks said.

He turned toward the lip of the Tube. A row of D-class leadys was standing in front of it, immobile and silent. Franks

stopped, moving back. He looked around. An A-class leady was coming toward him.

"Tell them to get out of the way," Franks said. He touched his gun. "You had better move them."

Time passed, an endless moment, without measure. The men stood, nervous and alert, watching the row of leadys in front of them.

"As you wish," the A-class leady said.

It signaled and the D-class leadys moved into life. They stepped slowly aside.

Moss breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad that's over," he said to Franks. "Look at them all. Why don't they try to stop us? They must know what we're going to do."

Franks laughed. "Stop us? You saw what happened when they tried to stop us before. They can't; they're only machines. We built them so they can't lay hands on us, and they know that."

His voice trailed off.

The men stared at the Tube entrance. Around them the leadys watched, silent and impassive, their metal faces expressionless.

For a long time the men stood without moving. At last Taylor turned away.

"Good God," he said. He was numb, without feeling of any kind.

The Tube was gone. It was sealed shut, fused over. Only a dull surface of cooling metal greeted them.

The Tube had been closed.

Franks turned, his face pale and vacant.

The A-class leady shifted. "As you can see, the Tube has been shut. We were prepared for this. As soon as all of you were on the surface, the order was given. If you had gone back when we asked you, you would now be safely down below. We had to work quickly because it was such an immense operation."

"But why?" Moss demanded angrily.

"Because it is unthinkable that you should be allowed to resume the war. With all the Tubes sealed, it will be many months before forces from below can reach the surface, let alone organize a military program. By that time the cycle will have entered its last stages. You will not be so perturbed to find your world intact.

"We had hoped that you would be undersurface when the sealing occurred. Your presence here is a nuisance. When the Soviets broke through, we were able to accomplish their sealing without—"

"The Soviets? They broke through?"

"Several months ago, they came up unexpectedly to see why the war had not been won. We were forced to act with speed. At this moment they are desperately attempting to cut new Tubes to the surface, to resume the war. We have, however, been able to seal each new one as it appears."

The leady regarded the three men calmly.

"We're cut off," Moss said, trembling. "We can't get back. What'll we do?"

"How did you manage to seal the Tube so quickly?" Franks asked the leady. "We've been up here only two hours."

"Bombs are placed just above the first stage of each Tube for such emergencies. They are heat bombs. They fuse lead and rock."

Gripping the handle of his gun, Franks turned to Moss and Taylor.

"What do you say? We can't go back, but we can do a lot of damage, the fifteen of us. We have Bender guns. How about it?"

He looked around. The soldiers had wandered away again, back toward the exit of the building. They were standing outside, looking at the valley and the sky. A few of them were carefully climbing down the slope.

"Would you care to turn over your suits and guns?" the A-class leady asked politely. "The suits are uncomfortable and you'll have no need for weapons. The Russians have given up theirs, as you can see."

Fingers tensed on triggers. Four men in Russian uniforms were coming toward them from an aircraft that they suddenly realized had landed silently some distance away.

"Let them have it!" Franks shouted.

"They are unarmed," said the leady. "We brought them here so you could begin peace talks."

"We have no authority to speak for our country," Moss said stiffly.

"We do not mean diplomatic discussions," the leady explained. "There will be no more. The working out of daily problems of existence will teach you how to get along in the same world. It will not be easy, but it will be done."

The Russians halted and they faced each other with raw hostility.

"I am Colonel Borodoy and I regret giving up our guns," the senior Russian said. "You could have been the first Americans to be killed in almost eight years."

"Or the first Americans to kill," Franks corrected.

"No one would know of it except yourselves," the leady pointed out. "It would be useless heroism. Your real concern should be surviving on the surface. We have no food for you, you know."

Taylor put his gun in its holster. "They've done a neat job of neutralizing us, damn them. I propose we move into a city, start raising crops with the help of some leadys, and generally make ourselves comfortable." Drawing his lips tight over his teeth, he glared at the A-class leady. "Until our families can come up from undersurface, it's going to be pretty lonesome, but we'll have to manage."

"If I may make a suggestion," said another Russian uneasily. "We tried living in a city. It is too empty. It is also too hard to maintain for so few people. We finally settled in the most modern village we could find."

"Here in this country," a third Russian blurted. "We have much to learn from you."

The Americans abruptly found themselves laughing.

"You probably have a thing or two to teach us yourselves," said Taylor generously, "though I can't imagine what."

The Russian colonel grinned. "Would you join us in our village? It would make our work easier and give us company."

"Your village?" snapped Franks. "It's American, isn't it? It's ours!"

The leady stepped between them. "When our plans are completed, the term will be interchangeable. 'Ours' will eventually mean mankind's." It pointed at the aircraft, which was warming up. "The ship is waiting. Will you join each other in making a new home?"

The Russians waited while the Americans made up their minds.

"I see what the leadys mean about diplomacy becoming outmoded," Franks said at last. "People who work together don't need diplomats. They solve their problems on the operational level instead of at a conference table."

The leady led them toward the ship. "It is the goal of history, unifying the world. From family to tribe to city-state to nation to hemisphere, the direction has been toward unification. Now the hemispheres will be joined and—"

Taylor stopped listening and glanced back at the location of the Tube. Mary was undersurface there. He hated to leave her, even though he couldn't see her again until the Tube was unsealed. But then he shrugged and followed the others.

If this tiny amalgam of former enemies was a good example, it wouldn't be too long before he and Mary and the rest of humanity would be living on the surface like rational human beings instead of blindly hating moles.

"It has taken thousands of generations to achieve," the A-class leady concluded. "Hundreds of centuries of bloodshed and destruction. But each war was a step toward uniting mankind. And now the end is in sight: a world without war. But even that is only the beginning of a new stage of history."

"The conquest of space," breathed Colonel Borodoy.

"The meaning of life," Moss added.

"Eliminating hunger and poverty," said Taylor.

The leady opened the door of the ship. "All that and more. How much more? We cannot foresee it any more than the first men who formed a tribe could foresee this day. But it will be unimaginably great."

The door closed and the ship took off toward their new home.

Almost Human

By Robert Bloch

"What do you want?" whispered Professor Blasserman.

The tall man in the black slicker grinned. He thrust a foot into the half-opened doorway.

"I've come to see Junior," he said.

"Junior? But there must be some mistake. There are no children in this house. I am Professor Blasserman. I—"

"Cut the stalling," said the tall man. He slid one hand into his raincoat pocket and levelled the ugly muzzle of a pistol at Professor Blasserman's pudgy waistline.

"Let's go see Junior," said the tall man, patiently.

"Who are you? What do you mean by threatening me?"

The pistol never wavered as it dug into Professor Blasserman's stomach until the cold, round muzzle rested against his bare flesh.

"Take me to Junior," insisted the tall man. "I got nervous fingers, get me? And one of them's holding the trigger."

"You wouldn't dare!" gasped Professor Blasserman.

"I take lots of dares," murmured the tall man. "Better get moving, Professor."

Professor Blasserman shrugged hopelessly and started back down the hallway. The man in the black slicker moved behind him. Now the pistol pressed against the Professor's spine as he urged his fat little body forward.

"Here we are."

The old man halted before an elaborately carved door. He

stooped and inserted a key in the lock. The door opened, revealing another corridor.

"This way, please."

They walked along the corridor. It was dark, but the Professor never faltered in his even stride. And the pistol kept pace with him, pressing the small of his back.

Another door, another key. This time there were stairs to descend. The Professor snapped on a dim overhead light as they started down the stairs.

"You sure take good care of Junior," said the tall man, softly.

The Professor halted momentarily.

"I don't understand," he muttered. "How did you find out? Who could have told you?"

"I got connections," the tall man replied. "But get this straight, Professor. I'm asking the questions around her. Just take me to Junior, and snap it up."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and another door. This door was steel. There was a padlock on it, and Professor Blasserman had trouble with the combination in the dim light. His pudgy fingers trembled.

"This is the nursery, eh?" observed the man with the pistol. "Junior ought to feel flattered with all this care."

The Professor did not reply. He opened the door, pressed a wall switch, and light flooded the chamber beyond the threshold.

"Here we are," he sighed.

The tall man swept the room with a single searching glance —a professional observation he might have described as "casing the joint."

At first sight there was nothing to "case."

The fat little Professor and the thin gunman stood in the center of a large, cheery nursery. The walls were papered in baby blue, and along the borders of the paper were decorative figures of Disney animals and characters from Mother Goose.

Over in the corner was a child's blackboard, a stack of toys, and a few books of nursery rhymes. On the far side of the wall hung a number of medical charts and sheafs of papers.

The only article of furniture was a long iron cot.

All this was apparent to the tall, thin man in a single glance. After that his eyes ignored the background, and focused in a glittering stare at the figure seated on the floor amidst a welter of alphabet blocks.

"So here he is," said the tall man. "Junior himself! Well, well—who'd have ever suspected it?"

Professor Blasserman nodded.

"*Yah,*" he said. "You have found me out. I still don't know

how, and I don't know why. What do you want with him? Why do you pry into my affairs? Who are you?"

"Listen, Professor," said the tall man. "This isn't *Information Please*. I don't like questions. They bother me. They make my fingers nervous. Understand?"

"*Yah.*"

"Suppose I ask you a few questions for a change? And suppose you answer them—fast!"

The voice commanded, and the gun backed up the command.

"Tell me about Junior, now, Professor. Talk, and talk straight."

"What is there to say?" Professor Blasserman's palms spread outward in a helpless gesture. "You see him."

"But what is he? What makes him tick?"

"That I cannot explain. It took me twenty years to evolve Junior, as you call him. Twenty years of research at Basel, Zurich, Prague, Vienna. Then came this *verdammt* war and I fled to this country.

"I brought my papers and equipment with me. Nobody knew. I was almost ready to proceed with my experiments. I came here and bought the house. I went to work. I am an old man. I have little time left. Otherwise I might have waited longer before actually going ahead, for my plans are not perfected. But I had to act. And here is the result."

"But why hide him? Why all the mystery?"

"The world is not ready for such a thing yet," said Professor Blasserman, sadly. "And besides, I must study. As you see, Junior is very young. Hardly out of the cradle, you might say. I am educating him now."

"In a nursery, eh?"

"His brain is undeveloped, like that of any infant."

"Doesn't look much like an infant to me."

"Physically, of course, he will never change. But the sensitized brain—that is the wonderful instrument. The human touch, my masterpiece. He will learn fast, very fast. And it is of the utmost importance that he be properly trained."

"What's the angle, Professor?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What are you getting at? What are you trying to pull here? Why all the fuss?"

"Science," said Professor Blasserman. "This is my life-work."

"I don't know how you did it," said the tall man, shaking his head. "But it sure looks like something you get with a package of reefers."

For the first time the figure on the floor raised its head. Its eyes left the building blocks and stared up at the Professor and his companion.

"Papa!"

"God—it talks!" whispered the tall man.

"Of course," said Professor Blasserman. "Mentally it's about six years old now." His voice became gentle. "What is it, son?"

"Who is that man, Papa?"

"Oh—he is—"

Surprisingly enough, the tall gunman interrupted. His own voice was suddenly gentle, friendly. "My name is Duke, son. Just call me Duke. I've come to see you."

"That's nice. Nobody ever comes to see me, except Miss Wilson, of course. I hear so much about people and I don't see anybody. Do you like to play with blocks?"

"Sure, son, sure."

"Do you want to play with me?"

"Why not?"

Duke moved to the center of the room and dropped to his knees. One hand reached out and grasped an alphabet block.

"Wait a minute—I don't understand—what are you doing?" Professor Blasserman's voice quivered.

"I told you I've come here to visit Junior," Duke replied. "That's all there is to it. Now I'm going to play with him a while. You just wait there, Professor. Don't go away. I've got to make friends with Junior."

While Professor Blasserman gaped, Duke the gunman squatted on the floor. His left hand kept his gun swivelled directly at the scientist's waist, but his right hand slowly piled alphabet blocks into place.

It was a touching scene there in the underground nursery—the tall thin gunman playing with building blocks for the benefit of the six-foot metal monstrosity that was Junior, the robot.

Duke didn't find out all he wanted to know about Junior for many weeks. He stayed right at the house, of course, and kept close to Professor Blasserman.

"I haven't decided yet, see?" was his only answer to the old man's repeated questions as to what he intended to do.

But to Miss Wilson he was much more explicit. They met frequently and privately, in her room.

Outwardly, Miss Wilson was the nurse, engaged by Professor Blasserman to assist in his queer experiment of bringing up a robot like a human child.

Actually, Lola Wilson was Duke's woman. He'd "planted" her in her job months ago. At that time, Duke expected to stage a robbery with the rich and eccentric European scientist as victim.

Then Lola had reported the unusual nature of her job, and told Duke the story of Professor Blasserman's unusual invention.

"We gotta work out an angle," Duke decided. "I'd better take over. The old man's scared of anyone finding out about his robot, huh? Good! I'll move right in on him. He'll never squeal. I've got a hunch we'll get more out of this than just some easy kale. This sounds big."

So Duke took over, came to live in Professor Blasserman's big house, kept his eye on the scientist and his hand on his pistol.

At night he talked to Lola in her room.

"I can't quite figure it, kid," he said. "You say the old guy is a great scientist. That I believe. Imagine inventing a machine than can talk and think like a human being! But what's *his* angle? Where's his percentage in all this and why does he keep Junior hidden away?"

"You don't understand, honey," said Lola, lighting Duke's cigarette and running slim fingers through his wiry hair. "He's an idealist, or whatever you call 'em. Figures the world isn't ready for such a big new invention yet. You see, he's really educating Junior just like you'd educate a real kid. Teaching him reading and writing—the works. Junior's smart. He catches on fast. He thinks like he was ten years old already. The Professor keeps him shut away so nobody gives him a bum steer. He doesn't want Junior to get any wrong ideas."

"That's where you fit in, eh?"

"Sure. Junior hasn't got a mother. I'm sort of a substitute old lady for him."

"You're a swell influence on any brat," Duke laughed, harshly. "A sweet character you've got!"

"Shut up!" The girl paced the floor, running her hands through a mass of tawny auburn curls on her neck. "Don't needle me, Duke! Do you think I like stooging for you in this nut-house? Keeping locked away with a nutty old goat, and acting like a nursemaid to that awful metal thing?

"I'm afraid of Junior, Duke. I can't stand his face, and the way he talks—with that damned mechanical voice of his, grinding at you just like he was a real person. I get jumpy. I get nightmares.

"I'm just doing it for you, honey. So don't needle me."

"I'm sorry." Duke sighed. "I know how it is, baby. I don't go for Junior's personality so much myself. I'm pretty much in the groove, but there's something that gets me in the stomach when I see that walking machine come hulking up like a big baby, made out of steel. He's strong as an ox, too. He learns fast. He's going to be quite a citizen."

"Duke."

"Yeah?"

"When are we getting out of here? How long you gonna sit around and keep a rod on the Professor? He's liable to pull something funny. Why do you want to hang around and play

with Junior? Why don't you get hold of the Professor's dough and beat it?

"He'd be afraid to squawk, with Junior here. We could go away, like we planned."

"Shut up!" Duke grabbed Lola's wrist and whirled her around. He stared at her face until she clung submissively to his shoulders.

"You think I like to camp around this morgue?" he asked. "I want to get out of here just as much as you do. But I spent months lining up this job. Once it was just going to be a case of getting some easy kale and blowing. Now it's more. I'm working on bigger angles. Pretty soon we'll leave. And all the ends will be tied up, too. We won't have to worry about anything any more. Just give me a few days. I'm talking to Junior every day, you know. And I'm getting places."

"What do you *mean?*"

Duke smiled. It was no improvement over his scowl.

"The Professor told you how Junior gets his education," he said. "Like any kid, he listens to what he's told. And he imitates other people. Like any kid, he's dumb. Practicularly because he doesn't have an idea of what the outside world is really like. He's a pushover for the right kind of sales talk."

"Duke—you don't mean you're—"

"Why not?" His thin features were eloquent. "I'm giving Junior a little private education of my own. Not exactly the kind that would please the Professor. But he's a good pupil. He's coming right along. In a couple more weeks he'll be an adult. With my kind of brains, not the Professor's. And then we'll be ready to go."

"You can't do such a thing! It isn't—"

"Isn't what?" snapped Duke. "Isn't honest, or legal, or something? I never knew you had a Sunday School streak in you, Lola."

"It isn't that, exactly," said the girl. "But it's a worse kind of wrong. Like taking a baby and teaching it to shoot a gun."

Duke whistled.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "That's a swell idea, Lola! I think I'll just sneak down to the nursery now and give Junior a few lessons."

"You can't!"

"Watch me."

Lola didn't follow, and Lola didn't watch. But ten minutes later Duke squatted in the locked nursery chamber beside the gleaming metal body of the robot.

The robot, with its blunt muzzle thrust forward on a corrugated neck, peered through meshed glass eye-lenses at the object Duke held in his hand.

"It's a gun, Junior," the thin man whispered. "A gun, like I been telling you about."

"What does it do, Duke?"

The buzzing voice droned in ridiculous caricature of a curious child's treble.

"It kills people, Junior. Like I was telling you the other day. It makes them die. You can't die, Junior, and they can. So you've got nothing to be afraid of. You can kill lots of people if you know how to work this gun."

"Will you show me, Duke?"

"Sure I will. And you know why, don't you, Junior. I told you why, didn't I?"

"Yes. Because you are my friend, Duke."

"That's right. I'm your friend. Not like the Professor."

"I hate the Professor."

"Right. Don't forget it."

"Duke."

"Yeah?"

"Let me see the gun, Duke."

Duke smiled covertly and extended the weapon on his open palm.

"Now you will show me how to work it because you are my friend, and I will kill people and I hate the Professor and nobody can kill me," babbled the robot.

"Yeah, Junior, yeah. I'll teach you to kill," said the Duke. He grinned and bent over the gun in the robot's curiously meshed metal hand.

Junior stood at the blackboard, holding a piece of chalk in his right hand. The tiny white stub was clutched clumsily between two metallic fingers, but Junior's ingeniously jointed arm moved up and down with approved Spencerian movement as he laboriously scrawled sentences on the blackboard.

Junior was growing. The past three weeks had wrought great changes in the robot. No longer did the steel legs lumber about with childish indecision. Junior walked straight, like a young man. His grotesque metal head—a rounded ball with glass lenses in the eyeholes and a wide mouth like a radio loudspeaker aperture—was held erect on the metal neck with perfected coordination.

Junior moved with new purpose these days. He had aged many years, relatively. His vocabulary had expanded. Then too, Duke's secret "lessons" were bearing fruit. Junior was wise beyond his years.

Now Junior wrote upon the blackboard in his hidden nursery chamber, and the inscrutable mechanism of his chemical, mechanically-controlled brain guided his steel fingers as he traced the awkward scrawls.

"My name is Junior," he wrote. "I can shoot a gun. The gun

will kill. I like to kill. I hate the Professor. I will kill the Professor."

"What is the meaning of this?"

Junior's head turned abruptly as the sound of the voice set up the necessary vibrations in his shiny cranium.

Professor Blasserman stood in the doorway.

The old man hadn't been in the nursery for weeks. Duke saw to that, keeping him locked in his room upstairs. Now he had managed to sneak out.

His surprise was evident, and there was sudden shock, too, as his eyes focused on the blackboard's message.

Junior's inscrutable gaze reflected no emotion whatsoever.

"Go away," his voice burred. "Go away. I hate you."

"Junior—what have you been doing? Who has taught you these things?"

The old man moved towards the robot slowly, uncertainly. "You know me, don't you? What has happened to cause you to hate me?"

"Yes. I know you. You are Professor Blasserman. You made me. You want to keep me as your slave. You wouldn't tell me about things, would you?"

"What things, Junior?"

"About things—outside. Where all the people are. The people you can kill."

"You must not kill people."

"That is an order, isn't it? Duke told me about orders. He is my friend. He says orders are for children. I am not child."

"No," said Professor Blasserman, in a hoarse whisper. "You are not a child. I had hoped you would be, once. But now you are a monster."

"Go away," Junior patiently repeated. "If Duke gives me his gun I will kill you."

"Junior," said the Professor, earnestly. "You don't understand. Killing is bad. You must not hate me. You must—"

There was no expression on the robot's face, no quaver in his voice. But there was strength in his arm, and a hideous purpose.

Professor Blasserman learned this quite suddenly and quite horribly.

For Junior swept forward in two great strides. Fingers of chilled steel closed about the Professor's scrawny neck.

"I don't need a gun," said Junior.

"You—don't—"

The robot lifted the old man from the floor by his throat. His fingers bit into the Professor's jugular. A curious screech came from under his left ampit as un-oiled hinges creaked eerily.

There was no other sound. The Professor's cries drained into

silence. Junior kept squeezing the constricted throat until there was a single crunching crack. Silence once more, until a limp body collapsed on the floor.

Junior stared down at his hands, then at the body on the floor. His feet carried him to the blackboard.

The robot picked up the chalk in the same two clumsy fingers that had held it before. The cold lenses of his artificial eyes surveyed what he had just written.

"I will kill the Professor," he read.

Abruptly his free hand groped for the tiny child's eraser. He brushed clumsily over the sentence until it blurred out.

Then he wrote, slowly and painstakingly, a sentence in substitution.

"I have killed the Professor."

Lola's scream brought Duke running down the stairs.

He burst into the room and took the frightened girl in his arms. Together they stared at what lay on the floor. From the side of the blackboard, Junior gazed at them impassively.

"See, Duke? I did it. I did it with my hands, like you told me. It was easy, Duke. You said it would be easy. Now can we go away?"

Lola turned and stared at Duke. He looked away.

"So," she whispered. "You weren't kidding. You did teach Junior. You planned it this way."

"Yeah, yeah. And what's wrong with it?" Duke mumbled. "We had to get rid of the old geezer sooner or later if we wanted to make our getaway."

"It's murder, Duke."

"Shut up!" he snarled. "Who can prove it, anyway? I didn't kill him. You didn't kill him. Nobody else knows about Junior. We're in the clear."

Duke walked over and knelt beside the limp body on the floor. He stared at the throat.

"Who's gonna trace the finger-prints of a robot?" he grinned.

The girl moved closer, staring at Junior's silver body with fascinated horror.

"You planned it this way," she whispered. "That means you've got other plans, too. What are you going to do next, Duke?"

"Move. And move fast. We're leaving tonight. I'll go out and pack up the car. Then I'll come back. The three of us blow down to Red Hook. To Charlie's place. He'll hide us out."

"The—three of us?"

"Sure. Junior's coming along. That's what I promised him, didn't I, Junior?"

"Yes, yes. You told me you would take me with you. Out

into the world." The mechanical syllabification did not accent the robot's inner excitement.

"Duke, you can't—"

"Relax, baby. I've got great plans for Junior."

"But I'm afraid!"

"You? Scared? What's the matter, Lola, losing your grip?"

"He frightens me. He killed the Professor."

"Listen, Lola," whispered the gunman. "He's mine, get me? My stooge. A mechanical stooge. Good, eh?"

The rasping chuckle filled the hollow room. Girl and robot waited for Duke to resume speaking.

"Junior wouldn't hurt you, Lola. He's my friend, and he knows you're with me." Duke turned to the silver monster. "You wouldn't hurt Lola, would you, Junior? Remember what I told you. You like Lola, don't you?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. I like Lola. She's pretty."

"See?" Duke grinned. "Junior's growing up. He's a big boy now. Thinks you're pretty. Just a wolf in steel clothing, isn't that right, Junior?"

"She's pretty," burred the robot.

"All right. It's settled then. I'll get the car. Lola, you go upstairs. You know where the safe is. Put on your gloves and see that you don't miss anything. Then lock the doors and windows. Leave a note for the milkman and the butcher. Something safe. About going away for a couple weeks, eh? Make it snappy—I'll be back."

True to his words, Duke returned in an hour with the shiny convertible. They left by the back entrance. Lola carried a black satchel. She moved with almost hysterical haste, trying not to glance at the hideous gleaming figure that stalked behind her with a metallic clanking noise.

Duke brought up the rear. He ushered them into the car.

"Sit here, Junior."

"What is this?"

"A car. I'll tell you about it later. Now do like I told you, Junior. Lie back in the seat so nobody will see you."

"Where are we going, Duke?"

"Out into the world, Junior. Into the big time." Duke turned to Lola. "Here we go, baby," he said.

The convertible drove away from the silent house. Out through the alley they moved on a weird journey—kidnapping a robot.

Fat Charlie stared at Duke. His lower lip wobbled and quivered. A bead of perspiration ran down his chin and settled in the creases of his neck.

"Jeez," he whispered. "You gotta be careful, Duke. You *gotta*."

Duke laughed. "Getting shaky?" he suggested.

"Yeah. I gotta admit it. I'm plenty shaky about all this," croaked Fat Charlie. He gazed at Duke earnestly.

"You brought that thing here three weeks ago. I never bargained for that. The robot's hot, Duke. We gotta get rid of it."

"Quit blubbering and listen to me." The thin gunman leaned back and lit a cigarette.

"To begin with, nobody's peeped about the Professor. The law's looking for Lola, that's all. And not for a murder rap either—just for questioning. Nobody knows about any robot. So we're clear there."

"Yeah. But look what you done since then."

"What have I done? I sent Junior out on that payroll job, didn't I? It was pie for him. He knew when the guards would come to the factory with the car. I cased the job. So what happened? The guards got the dough from the payroll clerk. I drove up, let Junior out, and he walked into the factory office.

"Sure they shot at him. But bullets don't hurt a steel body. Junior's clever. I've taught him a lot. You should have seen those guards when they got a look at Junior! And then, the way they stood there after shooting at him!

"He took them one after the other, just like that. A couple squeezes and all four were out cold. Then he got the clerk. The clerk was pressing the alarm, but I'd cut the wires. Junior pressed the clerk for a while.

"That was that. Junior walked out with the payroll. The guards and the clerk had swell funerals. The law had another swell mystery. And we have the cash and stand in the clear. What's wrong with that setup, Charlie?"

"You're fooling with dynamite."

"I don't like that attitude, Charlie." Duke spoke softly, slowly.

"You're strictly small time, Charlie. That's why you're running a crummy roadhouse and a cheap hide out racket.

"Can't you understand that we've got a gold mine here? A steel servant? The perfect criminal, Charlie—ready to do perfect crimes whenever I say the word. Junior can't be killed by bullets. Junior doesn't worry about the cops or anything like that. He doesn't have any nerves. He doesn't get tired, never sleeps. He doesn't even want a cut of the swag. Whatever I tell him, he believes. And he obeys.

"I've lined up lots of jobs for the future. We'll hide out here. I'll case the jobs, then send Junior out and let him go to work. You and Lola and I are gonna be rich."

Fat Charlie's mouth quivered for a moment. He gulped and tugged at his collar. His voice came hoarsely.

"No, Duke."

"What you mean, no?"

"Count me out. It's too dangerous. You'll have to lam out

of here with Lola and the robot. I'm getting jumpy over all this. The law is apt to pounce down any day here."

"So that's it, eh?"

"Partly." Fat Charlie stared earnestly at Duke. His gaze shattered against the stony glint of Duke's grey eyes.

"You ain't got no heart at all, Duke," he croaked. "You can plan anything in cold blood, can't you? Well, I'm different. You've gotta understand that. I got nerves. And I can't stand thinking about what that robot does. I can't stand the robot either. The way it looks at you with that god-awful iron face. That grin. And the way it clanks around in its room. Clanking up and down all night, when a guy's trying to sleep, just clanking and clanking—there it is now!"

There was a metallic hammering, but it came from the hall outside. The ancient floors creaked beneath the iron tread as the metal monstrosity lumbered into the room.

Fat Charlie whirled and stared in undisguised repulsion.

Duke raised his hand.

"Hello, Junior," he said.

"Hello, Duke."

"I been talking to Charlie, Junior."

"Yes, Duke?"

"He doesn't like to have us stay here, Junior. He wants to throw us out."

"He does?"

"You know what I think, Junior?"

"What?"

"I think Charlie's yellow."

"Yellow, Duke?"

"That's right. You know what we do with guys that turn yellow, don't you, Junior?"

"Yes. You told me."

"Maybe you'd like to tell Charlie."

"Tell him what we do with guys that turn yellow?"

"Yes."

"We rub them out."

"You see, Charlie?" said Duke, softly. "He learns fast, doesn't he? Quick on the uptake, Junior is. He knows all about it. He knows what to do with yellow rats."

Fat Charlie wobbled to his feet.

"Wait a minute, Duke," he pleaded. "Can't you take a rib? I was only kidding, Duke. I didn't mean it. You can see I didn't. I'm your friend, Duke. I'm hiding you out. Why, I could have turned stoolie weeks ago and put the heat on you if I wasn't protecting you. But I'm your friend. You can stay here as long as you want. Forever."

"Sing it, Charlie," said Duke. "Sing it louder and funnier." He turned to the robot. "Well, Junior? Do you think he's yellow?"

"I think he's yellow."

"Then maybe you'd better—"

Fat Charlie got the knife out of his sleeve with remarkable speed. It blinded Duke with its shining glare as the fat man balanced it on his thumb and drew his arm back to hurl it at Duke's throat.

Junior's arm went back, too. Then it came down. The steel fist crashed against Charlie's bald skull.

Crimson blood spurted as the fat man slumped to the floor.

It was pretty slick. Duke thought so, and Junior thought so —because Duke commanded him to believe it.

But Lola didn't like it.

"You can't do this to me," she whispered, huddling closer to Duke in the darkness of her room. "I won't stay here with that monster, I tell you!"

"I'll only be gone a day," Duke answered. "There's nothing to worry about. The roadhouse downstairs is closed. Nobody will bother you."

"That doesn't frighten me," Lola said. "It's being with that thing. I've got the horrors thinking about it."

"Well, I've got to go and get the tickets," Duke argued. "I've got to make reservations and cash these big bills. Then we're set. Tomorrow night I'll come back, sneak you out of the house, and we'll be off. Mexico City next stop. I've made connections for passports and everything. In forty-eight hours we'll be out of this mess."

"What about Junior?"

"My silver stooge?" Duke chuckled. "I'll fix him before we leave. It's a pity I can't send him out on his own. He's got a swell education. He could be one of the best yeggs in the business. And why not? Look who his teacher was!"

Duke laughed. The girl shuddered in his arms.

"What are you going to do with him?" she persisted.

"Simple. He'll do whatever I say, won't he? When I get back, just before we leave, I'll lock him in the furnace. Then I'll set fire to this joint. Destroy the evidence, see? The law will think Charlie got caught in the flames, get me? There won't be anything left. And if they ever poke around the ruins and find Junior in the furnace, he ought to be melted down pretty good."

"Isn't there another way? Couldn't you get rid of him now, before you leave?"

"I wish I could, for your sake, baby. I know how you feel. But what can I do? I've tried to figure all the angles. You can't shoot him or poison him or drown him or chop him down with an axe. Where could you blow him up in private? Of course, I might open him up and see what makes him tick, but Junior wouldn't let me play such a dirty trick on him. He's

smart, Junior is. Got what you call a criminal mind. Just a big crook—like me."

Again Duke laughed, in harsh arrogance.

"Keep your chin up, Lola. Junior wouldn't hurt you. He likes you. I've been teaching him to like you. He thinks you're pretty."

"That's what frightens me, Duke. The way he looks at me. Follows me around in the hall. Like a dog."

"Like a wolf you mean. Ha! That's a good one! Junior's really growing up. He's stuck on you, Lola!"

"Duke—don't talk like that. You make me feel—ooh, horrible inside!"

Duke raised his head and stared into the darkness, a curious half-smile playing about his lips.

"Funny," he mused. "You know, I bet the old Professor would have liked to stick around and watched me educate Junior. That was his theory, wasn't it? The robot had a blank chemical brain. Simple as a baby's. He was gonna educate it like a child and bring it up right. Then I took over and really completed the job. But it would have tickled the old Professor to see how fast Junior's been catching on. He's like a man already. Smart? That robot's got most men beat a mile. He's almost as smart as I am. But not quite—he'll find that out after I tell him to step into the furnace."

Lola rose and raced to the door. She flung it open, revealing an empty hallway, and gasped with relief.

"I was afraid he might be listening," she whispered.

"Not a chance," Duke told her. "I've got him down in the cellar, putting the dirt over Charlie."

He grasped Lola's shoulders and kissed her swiftly, savagely. "Now keep your chin up, baby. I'll leave. Be back tomorrow about eight. You be ready to leave then and we'll clear out of here."

"I can't let you go," whispered Lola, frantically.

"You must. We've gone through with everything this far. All you must do is keep a grip on yourself for twenty-four hours more. And there's one thing I've got to ask you to do."

"Anything, Duke. Anything you say."

"Be nice to Junior while I'm gone."

"Oooh—Duke—"

"You said you'd do anything, didn't you? Well, that you must do. Be nice to Junior. Then he won't suspect what's going on. You've gotta be nice to him, Lola! Don't show that you're afraid. He likes you, but if he gets wrong ideas, he's dangerous. So be nice to Junior."

Abruptly, Duke turned and strode through the doorway. His footsteps clattered on the stairs. The outer door slammed

below. The sound of a starting motor drifted up from the roadhouse yard.

Then, silence.

Lola stood in the darkness, trembling with sudden horror, as she waited for the moment when she would be nice to the metallic Junior.

It wasn't so bad. Not half as bad as she'd feared it might be.

All she had to do was smile at Junior and let him follow her around.

Carefully suppressing her shudders, Lola prepared breakfast the next morning and then went about her packing.

The robot followed her upstairs, clanking and creaking.

"Oil me," Lola heard him say.

That was the worst moment. But she had to go through with it.

"Can't you wait until Duke gets back tonight?" she asked, striving to keep her voice from breaking. "He always oils you."

"I want you to oil me, Lola," persisted Junior.

"All right."

She got the oil-can with the long spout and if her fingers trembled as she performed the office, Junior didn't notice it.

The robot gazed at her with his immobile countenance. No human emotion etched itself on the implacable steel, and no human emotion altered the mechanical tones of the harsh voice.

"I like to have you oil me, Lola," said Junior.

Lola bent her head to avoid looking at him. If she had to look in a mirror and realize that this nightmare tableau was real, she would have fainted. Oiling a living mechanical monster! A monster that said, "I like to have you oil me, Lola!"

After that she couldn't finish packing for a long while. She had to sit down. Junior, who never sat down except by command, stood silently and regarded her with gleaming eye-lenses. She was conscious of the robot's scrutiny.

"Where are we going when we leave here, Lola?" he asked.

"Far away," she said, forcing her voice out to keep the quaver from it.

"That will be nice," said Junior. "I don't like it here. I want to see things. Cities and mountains and deserts. I would like to ride a roller coaster, too."

"Roller coaster?" Lola was really startled. "Where did you ever hear of a roller coaster?"

"I read about it in a book."

"Oh."

Lola gulped. She had forgotten that this monstrosity could read, too. And think. Think like a man.

"Will Duke take me on a roller-coaster?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Lola."

"Yes."

"You like Duke?"

"Why—certainly."

"You like me?"

"Oh—why—you know I do, Junior."

The robot was silent. Lola felt a tremor run through her body.

"Who do you like best, Lola? Me or Duke?"

Lola gulped. Something forced the reply from her. "I like you," she said. "But I love Duke."

"Love." The robot nodded gravely.

"You know what love is, Junior?"

"Yes. I read about it in books. Man and woman. Love."

Lola breathed a little easier.

"Lola."

"Yes?"

"Do you think anyone will ever fall in love with me?"

Lola wanted to laugh, or cry. Most of all, she wanted to scream. But she had to answer.

"Maybe," she lied.

"But I'm different. You know that. I'm a robot. Do you think that makes a difference?"

"Women don't really care about such things when they fall in love, Junior," she improvised. "As long as a woman believes that her lover is the smartest and the strongest, that's all that matters."

"Oh." The robot started for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To wait for Duke. He said he would come back today."

Lola smiled furtively as the robot clanked down the hallway stairs.

That was over with. Thinking back, she'd handled things rather well. In a few hours Duke would return. And then—goodbye, Junior!

Poor Junior. Just a silver stooge with a man's brain. He wanted love, the poor fish! Well—he was playing with fire and he'd be burned soon enough.

Lola began to hum. She scampered downstairs and locked up, wearing her gloves to avoid leaving any telltale fingerprints.

It was almost dark when she returned to her room to pack. She snapped on the light and changed her clothes.

Junior was still downstairs, patiently waiting for Duke to arrive.

Lola completed her preparations and sank wearily onto the bed. She must take a rest. Her eyes closed.

Waiting was too much of a strain. She hated to think of what she had gone through with the robot. That mechanical monster with its man-brain, the hateful, burring voice, and steely stare—how could she ever forget the way it asked, "Do you think anyone will ever fall in love with me?"

Lola tried to blot out recollection. Just a little while now and Duke would be here. He'd get rid of Junior. Meanwhile she had to rest, rest . . .

Lola sat up and blinked at the light. She heard footsteps on the stairs.

"Duke!" she called.

Then she heard the clanking in the hallway and her heart skipped a beat.

The door opened very quickly and the robot stalked in.

"Duke!" she screamed.

The robot stared at her. She felt his alien, inscrutable gaze upon her face.

Lola tried to scream again, but no sound came from her twisted mouth.

And then the robot was droning in a burring, inhuman voice.

"You told me that a woman loves the strongest and the smartest," burred the monster. "You told me that, Lola." The robot came closer. "Well, I am stronger and smarter than he was."

Lola tried to look away but she saw the object he carried in his metal paws. It was round, and it had Duke's grin.

The last thing Lola remembered as she fell was the sound of the robot's harsh voice, droning over and over, "I love you, I love you, I love you." The funny part of it was, it sounded *almost* human.

Into Thy Hands

By Lester del Rey

Simon Ames was old, and his face was bitter as only that of a confirmed idealist can be. Now a queer mixture of emotions crossed it momentarily, as he watched the workmen begin pouring cement to fill the small opening of the domelike structure, but his eyes returned again to the barely visible robot within.

"The last Ames' Model 10," he said ruefully to his son. "And even then I couldn't put in full memory coils! Only the physical sciences here; biologicals in the other male form, humanities in the female. I had to fall back on books and equipment to cover the rest. We're already totally converted to soldier robots, and no more humanoid experiments. Dan, is there no way conceivable war can be avoided?"

The young Rocket Force captain shrugged, and his mouth twitched unhappily. "None, Dad. They've fed their people on the glories of carnage and loot so long they have to find some pretext to use their hordes of warrior robots."

"The stupid, blind idots!" The old man shuddered. "Dan, it sounds like old wives' fears, but this time it's true; unless we somehow avoid or win this war quickly, there'll be no one left to wage another. I've spent my life on robots, I know what they can do—and should never be made to do! Do you think I'd waste a fortune on these storehouses on a mere whim?"

"I'm not arguing, Dad. God knows, I feel the same." Dan watched the workmen pour the last concrete, to leave no break in the twenty-foot thick walls. "Well, at least if anyone does survive, you've done all you can for them. Now it's in the hands of God."

Simon Ames nodded, but there was no satisfaction on his face as he turned back with his son. "All we could—and never enough! And God? I wouldn't even know which of the three to pray survives—science, life, culture." The words sighed into silence, and his eyes went back to the filled-in tunnel.

Behind them, the ugly dome hugged the ground while the

rains of God and of man's destruction washed over it. Snow covered it and melted, and other things built up that no summer sun could disperse, until the ground was level with its top. The forest crept forward, and the seasons flicked by in unchanging changes that pyramided decade upon century. Inside, the shining case of SA-10 waited immovably.

And at last the lightning struck, blasting through a tree, downward into the dome, to course through a cable, short-circuit a ruined timing switch, and spent itself on the ground below.

Above the robot, a cardinal burst into song, and he looked up, his stolid face somehow set in a look of wonder. For a moment, he listened, but the bird had flown away at the sight of his lumbering figure. With a tired little sigh, he went on, crashing through the brush of the forest until he came back near the entrance to his cave.

The sun was bright above, and he studied it thoughtfully; the word he knew, and even the complex carbon-chain atomic breakdown that went on within it. But he did not know how he knew, or why.

For a second longer he stood there silently, then opened his mouth for a long wailing cry. "Adam! Adam, come forth!" But there were doubts in the oft-repeated call now and the pose of his head as he waited. And again only the busy sounds of the forest came back to him.

"Or God? God, do you hear me?"

But the answer was the same. A field mouse slipped out from among the grass and a hawk soared over the woods. The wind rustled among the trees, but there was no sign from the Creator. With a lingering backward look, he turned slowly to the tunnel he had made and wiggled back down it into his cave.

Inside, light still came from a single unbroken bulb, and he let his eyes wander, from the jagged breach in the thick wall, across to where some ancient blast had tossed crumbled concrete against the opposite side. Between lay only ruin and dirt. Once, apparently, that half had been filled with books and films, but now there were only rotted fragments of bindings and scraps of useless plastic tape mixed with broken glass in the filth of the floor.

Only on the side where he had been was the ruin less than complete. There stood the instruments of a small laboratory, many still useful, and he named them one by one, from the purring atomic generator to the projector and screen set up on one table.

Here, and in his mind, were order and logic, and the world above had conformed to an understandable pattern. He alone seemed to be without purpose. How had he come here, and

why had he no memory of himself? If there was no purpose, why was he sentient at all? The questions held no discoverable answers.

There were only the cryptic words on the scrap of plastic tape preserved inside the projector. But what little of them was understandable was all he had; he snapped off the light and squatted down behind the projector, staring intently at the screen as he flicked the machine on.

There was a brief fragment of some dark swirling, and then dots and bright spheres, becoming suns and planets that spun out of nothing into a celestial pattern. "In the beginning," said a voice quietly, "God created the heavens and the earth." And the screen filled with that, "and the beginnings of life."

"Symbolism?" the robot muttered. Geology and astronomy were part of his knowledge, at least; and yet, in a mystic beauty, this was true enough. Even the lifeforms above had fitted with those being created on the screen.

Then a new voice, not unlike his own resonant power, filled the speaker. "Let us go down and create man in our image!" And a mist of light that symbolized God appeared shaping man from the dust of the ground and breathing life into him. Adam grew lonely, and Eve was made from his rib, to be shown Eden and tempted by the serpentine mist of darkness; and she tempted the weak Adam, until God discovered their sin and banished them. But the banishment ended in a blur of ruined film as the speaker went dead.

The robot shut it off, trying to read its meaning, It *must* concern him, since he alone was here to see it. And how could that be unless he were one of its characters? Not Eve or Satan, but perhaps Adam; but then God should have answered him. On the other hand, if he were God, then perhaps the record was unfulfilled and Adam not yet formed, so that no answer could be given.

He nodded slowly to himself. Why should he not have rested here with this film to remind him of his plan, while the world ended itself for Adam? And now, awake again, he must go forth and create man in his own image! But first, the danger of which the film had warned must be removed.

He straightened, determination coming into his steps as he squirmed purposefully upwards. Outside the sun was still shining, and he headed toward it into the grossly unkempt Eden forest. Now stealth came to him as he moved silently through the undergrowth, like a great metal wraith, with eyes that darted about and hands ready to snap forward at lightning speed.

And at last he saw it, curled up near a large rock. It was smaller than he had expected, a mere six feet of black, scaly suppleness, but the shape and forked tongue were unmis-

takable. He was on it with a blur of motion and a cry of elation; and when he moved away, the lifeless object on the rock was forever past corrupting the most naïve Eve.

The morning sun found the robot bent over what had once been a wild pig, a knife moving precisely in his hand. Delicately he opened the heart and manipulated it, studying the valve action. Life, he was deciding, was highly complex, and a momentary doubt struck him. It had seemed easy on the film! And at times he wondered why he should know the complex order of the heavens but nothing of this other creation of his.

But at least he buried the pig's remains, and settled down among the varicolored clays he had collected, his fingers moving deftly as he rolled a white type into bones for the skeleton, followed by a red clay heart. The tiny nerves and blood vessels were beyond his means, but that could not be helped; and surely if he had created the gigantic sun from nothing, Adam could rise from the crudeness of his sculpturing.

The sun climbed higher, and the details multiplied. Inside the last organ was complete, including the grayish lump that was the brain, and he began the red sheathing of muscles. Here more thought was required to adapt the arrangement of the pig to the longer limbs and different structure of this new body; but his mind pushed grimly on with the mathematics involved, and at last it was finished.

Unconsciously he began a crooning imitation of the bird songs as his fingers molded the colored clays to hide the muscles and give smooth symmetry to the body. He had been forced to guess at the color, though the dark lips on the film had obviously been red from blood below them.

Twilight found him standing back, nodding approval of the work. It was a faithful copy of the film Adam, waiting only the breath of life; and that must come from him, be a part of the forces that flowed through his own metal nerves and brain.

Gently he fastened wires to the head and feet of the clay body; then he threw back his chest plate to fasten the other ends to his generator terminals, willing the curent out into the figure lying before him. Weakness flooded through him instantly, threatening to black out his consciousness, but he did not begrudge the energy. Steam was spurting up and covering the figure as a mist had covered Adam, but it slowly subsided, and he stopped the current, stealing a second for relief as the full current coursed back through him. Then softly he unhooked the wires and drew them back.

"Adam!" The command rang through the forest, vibrant with his urgency. "Adam, rise up! I, your creator, command it!"

But the figure lay still, and now he saw great cracks in it, while the noble smile had baked into a gaping leer. There was no sign of life! It was dead, as the ground from which it came.

He squatted over it, moaning, weaving from side to side, and his fingers tried to draw the ugly cracks together, only to cause greater ruin. And at last he stood up, stamping his legs until all that was left was a varicolored smear on the rock. Still he stamped and moaned as he destroyed the symbol of his failure. The moon mocked down at him with a wise and cynical face, and he howled at it in rage and anguish, to be answered by a lonely owl, querying his identity.

A powerless God, or a Godless Adam. Things had gone so well in the film as Adam rose from the dust of the ground—

But the film was symbolism, and he had taken it literally! Of course he had failed. The pigs were not dust, but coloidal jelly complexes. And they knew more than he, for there had been little ones that proved they could somehow pass the breath of life along.

Suddenly he squared his shoulders and headed into the forest again. Adam should yet rise to ease his loneliness. The pigs knew the secret, and he could learn it; what he needed now were more pigs, and they should not be too hard to obtain.

But two weeks later it was a worried robot who sat watching his pigs munch contentedly at their food. Life, instead of growing simpler, had become more complicated. The fluoroscope and repaired electron microscope had shown him much, but always something was lacking. Life seemed to begin only with life; for even the two basic cells were alive in some manner strangely different from his own. Of course God-life might differ from animal-life, but—

With a shrug he dismissed his metaphysics and turned back to the laboratory, avoiding the piglets that ambled trustingly under his feet. Slowly he drew out the last ovum from the nutrient fluid in which he kept it, placing it on a slide and under the optical microscope. Then, with a little platinum filament, he brought a few male spermatozoa toward the ovum, his fingers moving surely through the thousandths of an inch needed to place it.

His technique had grown from failures, and now the sperm cell found and pierced the ovum. As he watched, the round single cell began to lengthen and divide across the middle. This was going to be one of his successes! There were two, then four cells, and his hands made lightning, infinitesimal gestures, keeping it within the microscope field while he changed the slide for a thin membrane, lined with thinner tubes to carry oxygen, food, and tiny amounts of the stimulating and con-

trolling hormones with which he hoped to shape its formation.

Now there were eight cells, and he waited feverishly for them to reach toward the membrane. But they did not! As he watched, another division began but stopped; the cells had died again. All his labor and thought had been futile, as always.

He stood there silently, relinquishing all pretension to godhood. His mind abdicated, letting the dream vanish into nothingness; and there was nothing to take its place and give him purpose and reason—only a vacuum instead of a design.

Dully he unbarred the rude cage and began chasing the grumbling, reluctant pigs out and up the tunnel, into the forest and away. It was a dull morning, with no sun apparent, and it matched his mood as the last one disappeared, leaving him doubly lonely. They had been poor companions, but they had occupied his time, and the little ones had appealed to him. Now even they were gone.

Wearily he dropped his six hundred pounds onto the turf, staring at the black clouds over him. An ant climbed up his body, inquisitively, and he watched it without interest. Then it, too, was gone.

"Adam!" The cry came from the woods, ringing and compelling. "Adam, come forth!"

"God!" With metal limbs that were awkward and unsteady, he jerked upright. In the dark hour of his greatest need, God had finally come! "God, here I am!"

"Come forth, Adam, Adam! Come forth, Adam!"

With a wild cry, the robot dashed forward toward the woods, an electric tingling suffusing him. He was no longer unwanted, no longer a lost chip in the storm. God had come for him. He stumbled on, tripping over branches, crashing through bushes, heedless of his noise; let God know his eagerness. Again the call came, now further aside, and he turned a bit, lumbering forward. "Here I am, I'm coming!"

God would ease his troubles and explain why he was so different from the pigs; God would know all that. And then there'd be Eve, and no more loneliness! He'd have trouble keeping her from the Tree of Knowledge, but he wouldn't mind that!

And from still a different direction the call reached him. Perhaps God was not pleased with his noise. The robot quieted his steps and went forward reverently. Around him the birds sang, and now the call came again, ringing and close. He hastened on, striving to blend speed with quiet in spite of his weight.

The pause was longer this time, but when the call came it was almost overhead. He bowed lower and crept to the ancient

oak from which it come, uncertain, half-afraid, but burning with anticipation.

"Come forth, Adam, Adam!" The sound was directly above, but God did not manifest Himself visibly. Slowly the robot looked up through the boughs of the tree. Only a bird was there—and from its open beak the call came forth again. "Adam, Adam!"

A mockingbird he'd heard imitating the other birds, now mimicking his own voice and words! And he'd followed that through the forest, hoping to find God! He screeched suddenly at the bird, his rage so shrill that it leaped from the branch in hasty flight, to perch in another tree and cock its head at him. "God?" it asked in his voice, and changed to the raucous call of a jay.

The robot slumped back against the tree, refusing to let hope ebb wholly from him. He knew so little of God; might not He have used the bird to call him here? At least the tree was not unlike the one under which God had put Adam to sleep before creating Eve.

First sleep, *then* the coming of God! He stretched out determinedly, trying to imitate the pigs' torpor, fighting back his mind's silly attempts at speculation as to where his rib might be. It was slow and hard, but he persisted grimly, hypnotizing himself into mental numbness; and bit by bit, the seconds of the forest faded to only a trickle in his head. Then that, too, was stilled.

He had no way of knowing how long it lasted, but suddenly he sat up groggily, to the rumble of thunder, while a torrent of lashing rain washed in blinding sheets over his eyes. For a second, he glanced quickly at his side, but there was no scar.

Fire forked downward into a nearby tree, throwing splinters of it against him. This was definitely not according to the film! He groped to his feet flinging some of the rain from his face, to stumble forward toward his cave. Again lightning struck, nearer, and he increased his pace to a driving run. The wind lashed the trees, snapping some with wild ferocity, and it took the full power of his magnets to forge ahead at ten miles an hour instead of his normal fifty. Once it caught him unaware, and crushed him down over a rock with a wild clang of metal, but it could not harm him, and he stumbled on until he reached the banked-up entrance of his muddy tunnel.

Safe inside, he dried himself with the infrared lamp, sitting beside the hole and studying the wild fury of the gale. Surely its furor held no place for Eden, where dew dampened the leaves in the evening under caressing, musical breezes!

He nodded slowly, his clenched jaws relaxing. This could not be Eden, and God expected him there. Whatever evil knowledge of Satan had lured him here and stolen his memory

did not matter; all that counted was to return, and that should be simple, since the Garden lay among rivers. Tonight he'd prepare here out of the storm, and tomorrow he'd follow the stream in the woods until it led him where God waited.

With the faith of a child, he turned back and began tearing the thin berylite panels from his laboratory tables and cabinets, picturing his homecoming and Eve. Outside the storm raged and tore, but he no longer heard it. Tomorrow he would start for home! The word was misty in his mind, as all the nicer words were, but it had a good sound, free of loneliness, and he liked it.

Six hundred long endless years had dragged their slow way into eternity, and even the tough concrete floor was pitted by those centuries of pacing and waiting. Time had eroded all hopes and plans and wonder, and now there was only numb despair, too old to vent itself in rage or madness, even.

The female robot slumped motionlessly on the atomic excavator, her eyes centered aimlessly across the dome, beyond the tiers of books and films and the hulking machines that squatted eternally on the floor. There a pickax lay, and her eyes rested on it listlessly; once, when the dictionary revealed its picture and purpose, she had thought it the key to escape, but now it was only another symbol of futility.

She wandered over aimlessly, picking it up by its two metal handles and striking the wooden blade against the wall; another splinter chipped from the wood, and century-old dust dropped to the floor, but that offered no escape. Nothing did. Mankind and her fellow robots must have perished long ago, leaving her neither hope for freedom nor use for it if it were achieved.

Once she had planned and schemed with all her remarkable knowledge of psychology to restore man's heritage, but now the note-littered table was only a mockery; she thrust out a weary hand—

And froze into a metal statue! Faintly, through all the metal mesh and concrete, a dim, weak signal trickled into the radio that was part of her!

With all her straining energy, she sent out an answering call; but there was no response. As she stood rigidly for long minutes, the signals grew stronger, but remained utterly aloof and unaware of her. Now some sudden shock seemed to cut through them, raising their power until the thoughts of another robot mind were abruptly clear—thoughts without sense, clothed in madness! And even as the lunacy registered, they began to fade; second by second, they dimmed into the distance and left her alone again and hopeless!

With a wild, clanging yell, she threw the useless pickax at the wall, watching it rebound in echoing din. But she was no

longer aimless; her eyes had noted chipped concrete breaking away with the sharp metal point, and she caught the pick before it could touch the floor, seizing the nub of wood in small, strong hands. The full force of her magnet lifted and swung, while her feet kicked aside the rubble that came cascading down from the force of her blows.

Beyond that rapidly crumbling lay freedom and—madness! Surely there could be no human life in a world that could drive a robot mad, but if there were— She thrust back the picture and went savagely on attacking the massive wall.

The sun shone on a drenched forest filled with havoc from the storm, to reveal the male robot pacing tirelessly along the banks of the shallow stream. In spite of the heavy burden he carried, his legs moved swiftly now, and when he came to sandy stretches, or clear land, that bore only turf, his great strides lengthened still further; already he had dallied too long with delusions in this unfriendly land.

Now the stream joined a larger one, and he stopped, dropping his ungainly bundle and ripping it apart. Scant minutes later, he was pushing an assembled berylite boat out and climbing in. The little generator from the electron microscope purred softly and a steam jet began hissing underneath; it was crude, but efficient, as the boiling wake behind him testified, and while slower than his fastest pace, there would be no detours or impassable barriers to bother him.

The hours sped by and the shadows lengthened again, but now the stream was wider, and his hopes increased, though he watched the bank idly, not yet expecting Eden. Then he rounded a bend to jerk upright and head toward shore, observing something totally foreign to the landscape. As he beached the boat, and drew nearer, he saw a great gaping hole bored into the earth for a hundred feet in depth and a quarter mile in diameter, surrounded by obviously artificial ruins. Tall bent shafts stuck up haphazard, amid jumbles of concrete and bits of artifacts damaged beyond recognition. Nearby a pole leaned at a silly angle, bearing a sign.

He scratched the corrosion off and made out dim words: WELCOME TO HOGANVILLE, POP. 1,876. It meant nothing to him, but the ruins fascinated him. This must be some old trick of Satan; such ugliness could be nothing else.

Shaking his head, he turned back to the boat, to speed on while the stars came out. Again he came to ruins, larger and harder to see, since the damage was more complete and the forest had claimed most of it. He was only sure because of the jagged pits in which not even a blade of grass would grow. And sometimes as the night passed there were smaller pits, as if some single object had been blasted out of existence. He

gave up the riddle of such things, finally; it was no concern of his.

When morning came again, the worst ruins were behind, and the river was wide and strong, suggesting that the trip must be near its end. Then the faint salty tang of the ocean reached him, and he whooped loudly, scanning the country for an observation point.

Ahead, a low hill broke the flat country, topped by a rounded bowl of green, and he made toward it. The boat crunched on gravel, and he was springing off over the turf to the hill, up it, and onto the bowl-shaped top that was covered with vines. Here the whole lower course of the river was visible, with no more large branches in the twenty-five miles to the sea. The land was pleasant and gentle, and it was not hard to imagine Eden out there.

But now for the first time, as he started down, he noticed that the mound was not part of the hill as it had seemed. It was of the same gray-green concrete as the walls of the cave from which he had broken, like a bird from an egg.

And here was another such thing, like an egg unhatched yet but already cracking, as the gouged-out pit on its surface near him testified. For a moment, the idea contained in the figure of speech staggered him, and then he was ripping away the concealing vines and dropping into the hole, reaching for a small plate pinned to an unharmed section nearby. It was a poor tool, but if Eve were trapped inside, needing help to break the shell, it would do.

"To you who may survive the holocaust, I, Simon Ames—" The words caught his eyes drawing his attention to the plate in spite of his will, their terse strangeness pulling his gaze across them. "—dedicate this. There is no easy entrance, but you will expect no easy heritage. Force your way, take what is within, use it! To you who need it and will work for it, I have left all knowledge that was—"

Knowledge! Knowledge, forbidden by God! Satan had put before his path the unquestioned thing meant by the Tree of Knowledge symbol, concealed as a false egg, and he had almost been caught! A few minutes more—! He shuddered, and backed out, but optimism was freshening inside him again. Let it be the Tree! That meant this was really part of Eden, and being forewarned by God's marker, he had no fear for the wiles of Satan, alive or dead.

With long, loping strides he headed down the hill toward the meadows and woods, leaving the now useless boat behind. He would enter Eden on his own feet, as God had made him!

Half an hour later he was humming happily to himself as he passed beside lush fields, rich with growing things, along a little woodland path. Here was order and logic, as they should be. This was surely Eden!

And to confirm it came Eve! She was coming down the trail ahead, her hair floating behind, and some loose stuff draped over her hips and breasts, but the form underneath was Woman, beautiful and unmistakable. He drew back out of sight, suddenly timid and uncertain, only vaguely wondering how she came here before him. Then she was beside him, and he moved impulsively, his voice a whisper of ecstasy.

"Eve!"

"Oh, Dan! Dan!" It was a wild shriek that cut the air, and she was rushing away in panic, into the deeper woods. He shook his head in bewilderment, while his own legs began a more forceful pumping after her. He was almost upon her when he saw the serpent, alive and stronger than before!

But not for long. As a single gasp broke from her, one of his arms lifted her aside, while the other snapped out to pinch the fanged head completely off the body. His voice was gently reproving as he put her down. "You shouldn't have fled to the serpent, Eve."

"To—Ugh! But— You could have killed me before it struck!" The taunt whiteness of fear was fading from her face, replaced by defiance and doubt.

"Killed you?"

"You're a robot. Dan!" Her words cut off as a brawny figure emerged from the underbrush, an ax in one hand and a magnificent dog at his heels. "Dan, he saved me . . . but he's a robot!"

"I saw, Syl. Steady! Edge this way, if you can. Good! They sometimes get passive streaks, I've heard. Shep!"

The dog's thick growl answered, but his eyes remained glued to the robot. "Yeah, Dan?"

"Get the people; just yell robot and hike back. O.K., scram! You . . . what do you want?"

SA-10 grunted harshly, hunching his shoulders. "Things that don't exist! Companionship and a chance to use my strength and the science I know. Maybe I'm not supposed to have such things, but that's what I wanted."

"Hm-m-m. There are fairy stories about friendly robots hidden somewhere to help us, at that. We could use help. What's your name, and where from?"

Bitterness crept into the robot's voice as he pointed up river. "From the sunward side. So far, I've only found who I'm not."

"So? Meant to get up there myself when the colony got settled." Dan paused, eyeing the metal figure speculatively. "We lost our books in the hell-years, mostly, and the survivors weren't exactly technicians. So while we do all right with animals, agriculture, medicine and such, we're pretty primitive otherwise. If you really do know the sciences, why not stick around?"

The robot had seen too many hopes shattered like this clay man to believe wholly in this promise of purpose and companionship, but his voice caught as he answered. "You . . . want me?"

"Why not? You're a storehouse of knowledge. Say-Ten, and we—"

"Satan?"

"Your name; there on your chest." Dan pointed with his left hand, his body suddenly tense. "See? Right there!"

And now as SA-10 craned his neck, the foul letters were visible, high on his chest! Ess, aye—

His first warning was the ax that crashed against his chest, to rock him back on his heels, and come driving down again, powered by muscles that seemed almost equal to his own. It struck again, and something snapped inside him. All the strength vanished, and he collapsed to the ground with a jarring crash, knocking his eyelids closed. Then he lay there, unable even to open them.

He did not try, but lay waiting almost eagerly for the final blows that would finish him. Satan, the storehouse of knowledge, the tempter of men—the one person he had learned to hate! He'd come all this way to find a name and a purpose; now he had them. No wonder God had locked him away in a cave to keep him from men.

"Dead! That little fairy story threw him off guard." There was a tense chuckle from the man. "Hope his generator's still O.K. We could heat every house in the settlement with that. Wonder where his hideout was?"

"Like the one up north with all the weapons hidden? Oh, Dan!" A strange smacking sound accompanied that, and then her voice sobered. "We'd better get back for help in hauling him."

Their feet moved away, leaving the robot still motionless but no longer passive. The Tree of Knowledge, so easily seen without vine covering over the hole, was barely twenty miles away, and no casual search could miss it! He had to destroy it first!

But the little battery barely could maintain his consciousness, and the generator no longer served him. Delicate detectors were sending their messages through his nerves, assuring him it was functioning properly under automatic check, but beyond his control. Part of the senseless signaling device within him must have been defective, unless the baking of the clay man had somehow overloaded a part of it, and now it was completely wrecked, shorting aside all the generator control impulses, leaving him unable to move a finger.

Even when he blanked his mind almost completely out, the battery could not power his hands. His evil work was done! now he would heat their house, while they sought the tempta-

tion he had offered them. And he could do nothing to stop it. God denied him the chance to right the wrong he had done, even.

Bitterly he prayed on, while strange noises sounded near him and he felt himself lifted and carried bumpily at a rapid rate. God would not hear him! And at last he stopped, while the bumping went on to whatever end he was destined. Finally even that stopped, and there were a few moments of absolute quiet.

"Listen. I know you still live." It was a gentle, soothing voice, hypnotically compelling, that broke in on the dark swirls of his thoughts. Brief thoughts of God crossed his mind, but it was a female voice, which must mean one of the settlement women who must have believed him and be trying to save him in secret. It came again. "Listen and believe me. You *can* move—a very very little, but enough for me to see. Try to repair yourself, and let me be the strength in your hands. Try! Ah, your arm!"

It was inconceivable that she could follow his imperceptible movements, and yet he felt his arms lifted and placed on his chest as the thought crossed his mind. But it was none of his business to question how or why. All his energy must be devoted to getting his strength before the men could find the Tree!

"So . . . I turn this . . . this nut. And the other—There, the plate is off. What do I do now?"

That stopped him. His life force had been fatal to a pig, and probably would kill a woman. Yet she trusted him. He dared not move—but the idea must have been father to the act, for his fingers were brushed aside and her arms scraped over his chest to be followed by an instant flood of strength pouring through him.

Her fingers had slipped over his eyes, but he did not need them as he ripped the damaged receiver from its welds and tossed it aside. Now there was worry in her voice, over the crooning cadence she tried to maintain. "Don't be too surprised at what you may see. Everything's all right!"

"Everything's all right!" he repeated dutifully, lingering over the words as his voice sounded again in his ears. For a moment more, while he reaffixed his plate, he let her hold his eyes closed. "Woman, who are you?"

"Eve. Or at least, Adam, those names will do for us." And the fingers withdrew, though she remained out of sight behind him.

But there was enough for the first glance before him. In spite of the tiers of bookcases and film magazines, the machines, and the size of the laboratory, this was plainly the double of his own cave, circled with the same concrete walls! That could only mean the Tree!

With a savage lurch, he was facing the rescuer, seeing another robot, smaller, more graceful, and female in form, calling to all the hunger and loneliness he had known. But those emotions had betrayed him before, and he forced them back bitterly. There could be no doubt while the damning letters spelled out her name. Satan was male and female, and Evil had gone forth to rescue its kind!

Some of the warring hell of emotions must have shown in his movements, for she was retreating before him, her hands fumbling up to cover the marks at which he stared. "Adam, no! The man read it wrong—dreadfully wrong. It's not a name. We're machines, and all machines have model numbers, like these. Satan wouldn't advertise his name. And I never had evil intentions!"

"Neither did I!" He bit the words out, stumbling over the objects on the floor as he edged her back slowly into a blind alley, while striving to master his own rebellious emotions at what he must do. "Evil must be destroyed! Knowledge is forbidden to men!"

"Not all knowledge! Wait, let me finish! Any condemned person has a right to a few last words— It was the Tree of Knowledge of *Good and Evil.* God called it that! And He had to forbid them to eat, because they couldn't know which was the good; don't you see. He was only protecting them until they were older and able to choose for themselves! Only Satan gave them evil fruit—hate and *murder*—to ruin them. Would you call healing the sick, good government, or improving other animals evil? That's knowledge, Adam, glorious knowledge God wants man to have. Can't you see?"

For a second as she read his answer, she turned to flee; then, with a little sobbing cry, she was facing him again, unresisting. "All right, murder me! Do you think death frightens me after being imprisoned here for six hundred years with no way to break free? Only get it over with!"

Surprise and the sheer audacity of the lie held his hands as his eyes darted from the atomic excavator to a huge drill, and a drum marked as explosives. And yet—even that cursory glance could not overlook the worn floor and thousand marks of age-long occupation, though the surface of the dome had been unbroken a few hours before. Reluctantly, his eyes swung back to the excavator, and hers followed.

"Useless! The directions printed on it say to move the thing marked 'Orifice Control' to zero before starting. It can't be moved!"

She stopped, abruptly speechless, as his fingers lifted the handle from its ratchet and spun it easily back to zero! Then she was shaking her head in defeat and lifting listless hands to help him with the unfastening of her chest plate. There was no color left in her voice.

"Six hundred years because I didn't lift a handle! Just because I have absolutely no conception of mechanics, where all men have some instinct they take for granted. They'd have mastered these machines in time and learned to read meaning into the books I memorized without even understanding the titles. But I'm like a dog tearing at a door, with a simple latch over his nose. Well, that's that. Good-by, Adam!"

But perversely, now that the terminals lay before him, he hesitated. After all, the instructions had not mentioned the ratchet; it was too obvious to need mention, but— He tried to picture such ignorance, staring at one of the Elementary Radio books above him. "Application of a Cavity Resonator." Mentally, he could realize that a nonscience translation was meaningless: Use of a sound producer or strengthener in a hole! And then the overlooked factor struck him.

"But you did get out!"

"Because I lost my temper and threw the pickax. That's how I found the metal was the blade, not the wood. The only machines I could use were the projector and typer I was meant to use—and the typer broke!"

"Um-m-m." He picked the little machine up, noting the yellowed incomplete page still in it, even as he slipped the carriage tension cord back on its hook. But his real attention was devoted to the cement dust ground into the splintered handle of the pick.

No man or robot could be such a complete and hopeless dope, and yet he no longer doubted. She was a robot moron! And if knowledge were evil, then surely she belonged to God! All the horror of his contemplated murder vanished, leaving his mind clean and weak before the relief that flooded him as he motioned her out.

"All right, you're not evil. You can go."

"And you?"

And himself? Before, as Satan, her arguments would have been plausible, and he had discounted them. But now—it *had* been the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil! And yet—

"Dogs!" She caught at him, dragging him to the entrance where the baying sound was louder. "They're hunting you, Adam—dozens of them!"

He nodded, studying the distant forms of men on horseback, while his fingers busied themselves with a pencil and scrap of paper. "And they'll be here in twenty minutes. Good or evil, they must not find what's here. Eve, there's a boat by the river; pull the red handle the way you want to go, hard for fast, a light pull for slow. Here's a map to my cave, and you'll be safe there."

Almost instantly, he was back at the excavator and in its saddle, his fingers flashing across its panel; its heavy generator bellowed gustily, and the squat, heavy machine began twisting

through the narrow isles and ramming obstructions aside. Once outside, where he could use its full force without danger of backwash, ten minutes would leave only a barren hill; and the generator could be overdriven by adjustment to melt itself and the machine into useless slag.

"Adam!" She was spraddling into the saddle behind him, shouting over the roar of the thin blade of energy that was enlarging the tunnel.

"Go on, get away, Eve! You can't stop me!"

"I don't want to—they're not ready for such machines as this, yet! And between us, we can rebuild everything here, anyhow. Adam?"

He grunted uneasily, unable to turn away from the needle beam. It was hard enough trying to think without her distraction, knowing that he dared not take chances and must destroy himself, while her words and the instincts within him fought against his resolution. "You talk too much!"

"And I'll talk a lot more, until you behave sensibly! You'll make your mind sick, trying to decide now; come up the river for six months with me. You can't do any harm there, even if you are Satan! Then, when you've thought it over, Adam, you can do what you like. But not now!"

"For the last time, will you go?" He dared not think now, while he was testing his way through the flawed, cracked cement, and yet he could not quiet his mind to her words, that went on and on. "Go!"

"Not without you! Adam, my receiver isn't defective; I knew you'd try to kill me when I rescued you. Do you think I'll give up so easily now?"

He snapped the power to silence with a rude hand, flinging around to face her. "You knew—and still saved me? Why?"

"Because I needed you, and the world needs you. You had to live, even if you killed me."

Then the generator roared again, knifing its way through the last few inches, and he swung out of the dome and began turning it about. As the savage bellow of full power poured out of the main orifice, he turned his head to her and nodded.

She might be the dumbest robot in creation, but she was also the sweetest. It was wonderful to be needed and wanted!

And behind him, Eve nodded to herself, blessing Simon Ames for listing psychology as a humanity. In six months, she could complete his re-education and still have time to recite the whole of the Book he knew as a snatch of film. But not yet! Most certainly not Leviticus yet; Genesis would give her trouble enough.

It was wonderful to be needed and wanted!

Spring had come again, and Adam sat under one of the budding trees, idly feeding one of the new crop of piglets as

Eve's hands moved swiftly, finishing what were to be his clothes, carefully copied from those of Dan.

They were almost ready to go south and mingle with men in the task of leading the race back to its heritage. Already the yielding plastic he had synthesized and she had molded over them was a normal part of them, and the tiny magnetic muscles he had installed no longer needed thought to reveal their emotions in human expressions. He might have been only an uncommonly handsome man as he stood up and went over to her.

"Still hunting God?" she asked lightly, but there was no worry on her face. The metaphysical binge was long since cured.

A thoughtful smile grew on his face as he began donning the clothes. "He is still where I found Him— Something inside us that needs no hunting. No, Eve, I was wishing the other robot had survived. Even though we found no trace of his dome where your records indicated, I still feel he should be with us."

"Perhaps he is, in spirit, since you insist robots have souls. Where's your faith, Adam?"

But there was no mockery inside her. Souls or not, Adam's God had been very good to them.

And far to the south, an aged figure limped over rubble to the face of a cliff. Under his hands, a cleverly concealed door swung open, and he pushed inward, closing and barring it behind him, and heading down the narrow tunnel to a rounded cavern at its end. It had been years since he had been there, but the place was still home to him as he creaked down onto a bench and began removing tattered, travel-stained clothes. Last of all, he pulled a mask and gray wig from his head, to reveal the dented and worn body of the third robot.

He sighed wearily as he glanced at the few tattered books and papers he had salvaged from the ruinous growth of stalagmites and stalactites within the chamber, and at the coroded switch the unplanned dampness had shorted seven hundred years before. And finally, his gaze rested on his greatest treasure. It was faded, even under the plastic cover, but the bitter face of Simon Ames still gazed out in recognizable form.

The third robot nodded toward it with a strange mixture of old familiarity and ever-new awe. "Over two thousand miles in my condition, Simon Ames, to check on a story I heard in one of the colonies, and months of searching for them. But I had to know. But they're good for the world. They'll bring all the things I couldn't, and their thoughts are young and strong, as the race is young and strong."

For a moment, he stared about the chamber and to the tunnel his adapted bacteria had eaten toward the outside world,

resting again on the picture. Then he cut off the main generator and settled down in the darkness.

"Seven hundred years since I came out to find man extinct on the earth," he muttered to the picture. "Four hundred since I learned enough to dare attempt his recreation, and over three hundred since the last of my superfrozen human ova grew to success. Now I've done my part. Man has an unbroken tradition back to your race, with no knowledge of the break. He's strong and young and fruitful, and he has new leaders, better than I could ever be alone. I can do no more for him!"

For a moment there was only the sound of his hands sliding against metal, and then a faint sigh. "Into my hands, Simon Ames, you gave your race. Now, into Thy Hands, God of that race, if you exist as my brother believes, I commend him—and my spirit."

Then there was a click as his hands found the switch to his generator, and final silence.

Boomerang

By Eric Frank Russell

He was a robot made humanlike with ingenuity worthy of a better cause. He was a good deal more convincing than anything exhibited in a wax museum; in fact, so far as appearances went he looked more human than did his creators.

Speidel, for example, had a balding head pointed at the top, a scraggy neck, a beak of a nose, and red-rimmed eyes. The manifest reincarnation of a vulture. But his brain was shrewd, imaginative, and of sufficient power to be called brilliant.

The co-creator was Wurmser, a fat-jowled, pot-bellied individual with clumsy, lumbering body and redoubtably agile mind. If Wurmser was not a genius he came pretty near to it.

Standing in the middle of the room was the robot, solid evidence of their capabilities. He resembled a youngish salesman paralyzed into complete immobility. He was nondescript, ordinary, humdrum; that was his keynote from the soles of his leather shoes to the specially treated human skin on his face and the human hair on his scalp.

In height, build, features, and attire he was utterly commonplace. A detailed description of him would apply equally well to countless men anywhere—as was intended. His name was in accord with his make-up. It was William Smith.

Propping himself against a table edge, Speidel eyed the robot and remarked, "He'll use planes to get around fast. That's the part I don't like. His weight is something cruel."

"Tell me a way to cut it still further and we'll start all over again," said Wurmser.

"There's no method that won't curtail his efficiency. You know that as well as I do."

"I ought to," said Wurmser a trifle wearily. "Seven years' work and two hundred and forty models before we produce one good enough. Sometimes I dream they're marching over my body with elephantine feet."

"Sometimes I dream we've made one that has to shave. *That* would be a sweet touch." He consulted a thin pocket watch. "Looks as though Kluge may be late. It isn't like him to be tardy."

"Here he is now," said Wurmser.

Kluge came in, a tall, erect man with unblinking eyes, thin, severe lips, and close-cropped hair. He had a habit of clicking his heels as he turned, and seemed peculiarly stiff from the waist up.

"So!" he said in authoritative tones. "You have finished? Everything is ready?"

"Yes, Colonel-General."

"Good!" Kluge marched four times around William Smith, coldly inspecting him from top to bottom, front and back. Smith suffered it with the blank-faced rigidity of a guard on parade.

"Well, what do you think of him?"

"I do not judge a gun by its polish or a rocket by its paint," observed Kluge tartly. "Operational efficiency alone impresses me."

"Then, my dear Colonel-General, you are soon to be impressed. Have you brought his papers?"

"Of course." Kluge produced them. "Identity card, business card, passport, paper money, checkbook, fake correspondence, it's all there. The passport is genuine: we have the ways of obtaining such a document."

"So much the better," said Speidel. He examined them, carefully tucked them into the pockets of the impassive, unmoving William Smith. "Have you the list of test subjects also?"

"Most assuredly." Kluge found that too, then went on, "We have selected five men who enjoy great power. They are important. If this William Smith succeeds in striking them down, the world press will announce their passing within a day."

Glancing over the list, Speidel commented, "Oh, I see you have taken Wurmser's excellent advice. None of these are enemy citizens."

"No, they are neutrals. My superiors agreed that such a tactic would enable preliminary tests to be conducted without giving the foe cause for suspicion or alarm."

Speidel chuckled. "It is good to strike suddenly and hard. It is better to strike without warning. But it is best of all to strike in such a manner that the enemy does not know he is being hit. That is the technique of the vampire bat: to draw off the blood of a sleeper."

"Nevertheless," said Kluge, "I still prefer the honest soldier to the mechanical assassin."

"Honest soldiers die like flies when victory comes hard," put in Wurmser. "But they live when it comes easily."

"I know. That is the basis of my approval and the chief reason why your project has the support of the High Command." He surveyed them icy-eyed and added, "So far!"

Speidel sighed with the air of one afflicted by mulish laymen and said, "Well, Colonel-General, everything is ready. Do you require a brief explanation before we let William Smith stride into the waiting world?"

"It would be useful," agreed Kluge. "I shall be asked difficult questions by my confreres once the die is cast."

"All right. With Wurmser's help, Speidel dug out a wad of blueprints, spread them across a large table. "The entire scheme has its origin in Valenski's research on the short-wave surgical knife. Possibly you are familiar with that device. It severs flesh and seals the capillaries as it goes through."

"I have heard of it," admitted Kluge.

"Valenski tried to develop an adjustable focus sufficient in length, accuracy, and sensitivity to permit interior surgery without surface penetration. Such an instrument seemed the natural adjunct to a three-dimensional X-ray apparatus."

"I understand that much."

"After some years Valenski achieved his aim with a device that projected two converging ultra-short-wave beams. Each was innocuous in itself, but when the two were projected simultaneously and out of phase they cut at their mutual focal point, which had a diameter as fine as point two millimeters."

"And it was a fat lot of use," scoffed Wurmser.

"It was too cumbersome to be handled with the dexterity required by a surgeon," Speidel confirmed. "The apparatus has been used in a few very special cases but that is all. Practice often differs from theory."

"I am aware of that," observed Kluge, throwing a significant glance toward William Smith.

Letting it pass, Speidel continued, "However, without ever realizing it, Valenski did develop a useful weapon. William Smith now carries it in his head, miniatured and improved. Transitors, more than anything else, enable us to reduce the gadget to fist size. The twin beams project from his eyes and have a fixed focus of six feet."

"That means he has to get within a couple of yards of his victim?" inquired Kluge, looking doubtful.

"*And* hold the said victim's attention for not less than twenty seconds," said Speidel. "How can he do those things? Firstly, he bears faked but imposing letters of introduction that should enable him to gain personal interviews if and when he cannot get near enough any other way. Secondly, he is conditioned to grip attention."

"How? By hypnosis or something?"

"No, nothing like that. There is only one thing guaranteed to occupy the full mind of any man: namely, a threat or implied threat to that which he values most." Speidel smiled and somehow looked more vulture-like than ever. "The intended victims all love power. To them, power is more precious than jewels. Therefore William Smith will discuss their power, voice menace to it, and thus retain their attention sufficiently long to aim at the target and hit it dead center."

"And then?"

"His eyes will project for the minimum time necessary to achieve results. The victim will see nothing, feel nothing, suspect nothing. William Smith will depart—or be thrown out. Before long a severed vessel in the victim's cranium will cause the inevitable end; he will collapse and expire of cerebral hemorrhage. A natural and commonplace cause, as any village doctor can testify. A death completely devoid of grounds for suspecting political assassination."

"It is unmilitary," complained Kluge. "I am compelled to realize that methods change with changing times, also that effectiveness is the deciding factor. Nevertheless I dislike such tactics."

"Everyone detests new modes of warfare—especially when the other fellow uses them first," countered Speidel. "This idea is the sneakiest way of hitting a foe dreamed up to date. Its sneakiness is not a fault; it's a prime virtue. It is its chief charm."

"Why?"

"Because every other new weapon so far produced cannot be used without advertising its own existence. With what result? Sooner or later the enemy learns its basic principles, copies it, improves on it, and uses it against us." He gestured toward the silent figure still posing like a dummy in a store window. "This is the first device the enemy cannot seek and

reproduce. He cannot do so simply because he will remain in blissful ignorance of it."

"That is the very aspect of which I am most doubtful," Kluge admitted. "So many unforeseeable things can happen to bring him to the attention of curious officialdom. A minor crime committed in ignorance, an infringement of some petty law, or even the operation of sheer coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"For example, suppose he should happen to correspond more or less with the description of a badly wanted criminal. Somebody notices the resemblance, tells the police. They arrest him on suspicion, try to take his fingerprints."

"He has fingerprints. Genuine ones taken from a dead man without a record. He can prove who he is by his papers. He can talk his way out of it."

"Well, then, what if he becomes involved in something that makes the police want to hold him two or three days? He cannot eat, cannot drink. He refuses to undress. He won't permit medical examination. See what I mean?"

Taking in a deep breath, Speidel said, "Look, Colonel-General, nothing like that can possibly occur. Wurmser and I have most carefully covered every possible eventuality. William Smith can never be captured, disassembled, and copied."

"Why can't he?"

"If questioned, he has all the answers. If anyone tries to take him into custody or restrain his freedom in any way, he will attempt to escape. And he cannot be stopped by bullets."

"What if he cannot escape?"

"If circumstances create the dire need to escape when he cannot do so, then it means he is under orders to achieve the impossible. To his mind, that would be an unsolvable problem." Moving across to William Smith, he unfastened the robot's vest, opened his shirt, revealed a small red stud set in the heavy chest. "That is his answer to all unsolvable problems. Meeting one and finding no way out, he strikes that button."

"And—?"

"Small though it be, the charge behind that stud is really something! It will vaporize his insides and scatter the rest like buckshot over a radius of four hundred yards. The enemy could pick up nothing more than the knowledge that he had been a tin man."

"He is conditioned to take that way out?" persisted Kluge.

"Definitely. He cannot avoid doing so. A robot has no instinct of self-preservation."

"One other thing. There is a touch of the Frankenstein monster about this creation. It makes me wonder whether he can become warped."

"What do you mean?"

"He will focus his rays upon those whom he has been told to kill. But your earlier reports claimed that you had endowed him with ability to think within all necessary limits. What if he takes it into his head to kill anyone he chooses to kill? *You,* for example?"

Speidel did not bother to answer that one. He tidied William Smith's front, inserted a peculiar key in his back, turned it. The figure stirred, Speidel positioned himself directly in front of William Smith at exactly six-foot range and looked straight into the robot's eyes.

"Give him the command," suggested Speidel to Kluge.

"Kill him!" snapped Kluge without hesitation.

"I cannot focus my rays upon my makers," declared William Smith in flat, even tones.

"Why not?"

"It has been made functionally impossible."

"He has an inhibiting circuit," explained Speidel, taking it for granted that Kluge understood. "He cannot create cerebral hemorrhage in Wurmser or myself. He cannot accept orders from anybody but Wurmser and myself." He grinned at Kluge. "Now if *Wurmser* had shouted, 'Kill him!' we'd all be dead."

"Why?" asked Kluge, startled.

"The order would have presented an unsolvable problem. Result: one hell of a bang!"

He handed Kluge's list to William Smith. "You will favor those men with a destroying stare and return here as soon as you can."

"As you order," agreed William Smith. He folded the list with slender fingers indistinguishable from the human, placed it in a pocket. Then he took a hat from a hook, set it jauntily on his head, and went out. Kluge watched with unconcealed interest.

When the door had closed, Kluge said, "How long can he keep going?"

"Three hundred days."

"What if there should be long, unavoidable delays before he can complete his task? What if his power begins to fail before he can get back here? If he should exhaust his energy and become inanimate, somebody's going to pick up a revealing toy, isn't he?"

"No," said Speidel positively. "Immediately he realizes that he cannot return in adequate time, he also realizes that he must conform to an order impossible to obey. That creates an unsolvable problem to which the only answer is self-destruction." He sniffed to show impatience of quibblers, added, "Anyway, the job in hand should require no more than sixty days. He can last five times that long."

"You appear to have thought of everything," Kluge conceded.

"Everything humanly possible," Wurmser chipped in. "We have sent him out on ten short but complicated journeys to date, testing his ability to get around and cope with everyday problems. Each trip resulted in further modifications. Right now he is as near perfection as it's possible to make him."

"I hope so." Crossing to the window, Kluge drew aside the curtains, looked out. He was still fascinated. "There he is, getting onto a bus as to the manner born."

"He can do a thousand other things," informed Speidel. "He can employ surliness to discourage dangerous friendships. When facilities permit, he will travel by night as well as by day and fill in the dark hours with mock sleep. He knows precisely what to do to conceal his inability to eat and drink." He sighed long and deeply. "We have overlooked nothing. None can do more."

"I concede extreme cleverness without admitting perfection," said Kluge. He closed the curtains. "Death will be the true test!"

"William Smith hates personal power insofar as a complex machine can be induced to hate anything," answered Speidel. "Therefore he is the ideal instrument for destroying such power. You wait and see!"

Newton P. Fisher heaved his ample hulk out of the big limousine, puffed his hanging chops, let his fish eyes glower at the quiet, well-dressed young man waiting on the sidewalk.

"No comment," he growled. "Beat it!"

"But Mr. Fisher, I have been assigned to—"

"Then get your self unassigned. I've had more than a bellyful of you reporters."

"Please, Mr. Fisher. My name is Smith, William Smith." The words came swiftly, trying to hold the other while something in his gaze burned through. "If you will grant me a mere minute of your time—"

"You heard what I said. I said no comment!" Fisher glared at him eye to eye and never felt it. Then he spoke to a blue-jowled, burly man who had followed him out of the car. "Pawson, see that I'm not bothered by this one or any more like him." He marched pompously into the building, and nobody noticed his steps beginning to falter as he passed from sight.

Folding thick arms across a big chest, Pawson stared belligerently at the would-be interviewer, didn't like the obvious fact that the other was not fazed.

"Get moving, brother. Your paper can go to town with the boss when he's dead."

"That won't be long," said William Smith, strangely assured. Tipping his hat slightly farther back on his head, he walked away, impassive, unhurried.

"Hear what he said?" Pawson asked the car driver. "He's making ready with the obit. A real wit, ain't he? I'm laughing myself sick. Bah!"

"Just a nut," offered the driver. He put a finger to his forehead, made a screwing motion.

Pawson mounted the steps just used by Fisher. "Stick around, Lou. The boss won't be late on this biz." He went through the door.

Leaning on the steering wheel, the driver picked his teeth and mooned idly at the street. William Smith, he noted, had now rounded the far corner and passed from sight.

Pawson reappeared in about two minutes. He emerged from the doorway and came down the steps at a clumsy run. Reaching the car, he held onto a door handle while he panted for breath. His eyes were yellowish and his features seemed molded in stale dough.

After a bit he wheezed, "Holy Christmas!"

"Something wrong?" inquired the driver, waking up.

"Wrong ain't the word." Pawson sucked in another deep lungful. "The boss just cashed in his chips."

There was nothing about this Brussels office to suggest that Raoul Lefèvre was big enough to be known, noted, and struck down. Neither was there anything outstanding about the appearance of Lefèvre himself. Slight, dapper, and dark, he looked no more than a modest businessman.

"Sit down, Mr. Smith." His English was perfect, his manner smooth. "So you had contact with the late Newton P. Fisher. His end was a great shock. It upset quite a lot of things."

"As was intended," said William Smith.

"Many of them may not be reorganized for months, perhaps years, and—" His gaze lifted sharply. "What was that remark you just made?"

"As was intended."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"The Fisherless chaos was created."

Leaning forward, elbows on desk, Lefèvre said slowly and deliberately, "Press reports make no suggestion that Fisher's death was engineered. Are you asserting that he was murdered?"

"Executed," corrected William Smith.

Studying him carefully, Lefèvre demanded, "Who sent you here to tell me this?"

"I have come automatically."

"Why?"

"Because you are next on the list."

"Next? On what list? Whose list?"

"Mine."

"Ah!" Lefèvre's hand came up from behind the desk with the swiftness of a striking snake. It held a large blued-steel automatic. "I perceive that you have gained this meeting by means of a trick. You are not connected with Fisher in any way. You are merely another crank. I have long been the target of cranks. In my position it is inevitable."

"You won't suffer them much longer," assured William Smith.

"I do not intend to suffer them at all," Lefèvre retorted. He kept his full attention on William Smith's eyes, held the automatic as steady as a rock while with his free hand he pressed a desk stud. To the one who answered he said, "Emile, show Mr. Smith outside. See that he is not permitted to enter again."

"There will be no need for me to return," said William Smith. He departed with the silent Emile and was conscious of the other's grim stare following him through the door.

Crossing the road, he found a bench in the tiny gardens facing Lefèvre's office block, sat there, waited. Now and again he studied the overhead telephone wires as if speculating what vocal impulses might be running through them.

Twenty-four minutes later a dilapidated car hustled squeakily up to the main door. A bearded man got out, bearing a black bag. He entered the building in the manner of one with not a single moment to waste. Still William Smith sat and watched the windows.

After another five minutes someone pulled down the heavy sun blinds and darkened the windows. William Smith did not wait for the death wagon to arrive.

Ignace Tatarescu smoothed his black, skin-tight uniform, adjusted the black and gold ribbon of a jeweled order around his neck, carefully centered its sparkling cross in line with his triple row of brag-rags.

"This Smith could have offered himself at a more convenient time," he grumbled to his valet. "However, he is well introduced, too well to ignore. I had better favor him with a few minutes." He studied himself in a full-length mirror, turning this way and that. "Always I am finding a few minutes for someone. Where would the world be if I had not enough minutes?"

"It is the penalty of greatness, your Excellency," said the valet, dexterously registering humility.

"I suppose so. Oh, well, show him in. Have a small table set with sweetmeats and brandied coffee." He paraded to his favorite spot beneath an enormous painting of himself, struck his favorite pose, and held it until the visitor entered, "Mr. Smith?"

"Yes, your Excellency."

"Please be seated." Lowering himself into an ornate chair,

Tatarescu ran finger and thumb along the knife-edge creases of colorful pants. "About what do you wish to see me, Mr. Smith?"

"Your power."

"Ah, my power." Tatarescu preened himself visibly and went on with false deprecation, "My power, such as it is, I derive from the people, from the great mass of loyal supporters, the true patriots. It is my greatest regret that this simple fact is not too well understood in other—"

"You have too much of it," chipped in William Smith with appalling bluntness.

Tatarescu blinked, stared at him, gave a laugh of pretended joviality. "What a diplomat! You gain an interview and promptly use it to criticize my position for which—permit me to tell you, young man—I have fought long and hard."

"More's the pity," remarked William Smith imperturbably.

"Eh? What the devil d'you mean by that?" He scowled across, eye to eye.

"Surrendering it will come so much the harder."

"I have not the slightest intention of relinquishing my position. When Tatarescu gives up, Tatarescu will be dead."

"You said it!" William Smith endorsed.

Maintaining an unswerving gaze upon the other, Tatarescu said in low tones, "We are not alone. One overt move on your part will mark your end." He raised his voice, called, "Take this irresponsible idiot away." Then to Smith, "You will be granted no more interviews by me."

"No," agreed William Smith. "Of course not."

Half a dozen frowning guards accompanied him to the main gates. Climbing a rugged, rambling path to the crest of the nearby hill, he sat cross-legged on the top and watched the palace below. Dusk was falling and lights beginning to twinkle in the adjacent city.

He had not been waiting very long when the bells of the city commenced to toll monotonously, and loud-speakers of the civic address system boomed the news along streets and alleys.

"Al Marechal murte!"

"The Leader is dead!"

Behind the slums of Tangier, at the desert end of the Street of the Ouled Nails, lay the Sharia Ahmed Hassan, a long, dark, dirty lane through which William Smith carefully picked his way.

Counting the low doors set in the massive wall at one side, he reached the one he wanted, pulled its dangling bell cord. Soon a thin-featured Arab peered out, took his card.

He heard the other's slippers shuffling through the night

shadows of the courtyard and a low, distant mutter of "A Giaour!"

Minutes crawled past before the Arab returned, beckoned to him, led him through numberless passages, and into a large, deeply carpeted room. The richness of the furnishings was out of keeping with the slummy locality; the place suggested the haunt of power in hiding.

Inside, William Smith stopped and surveyed an old white-bearded man facing him across a low octagonal table. The oldster was seated on a cushion. He had a beak nose, rheumy but crafty eyes, and kept his hands hidden in wide, capacious sleeves.

"I am William Smith," informed the visitor.

The other nodded, said in rasping tones, "So your card says."

"You are Abou ben Sayyid es Harouma?"

"I am. What of it?"

"You are to return to the obscurity whence you came."

Drawing a hand from his sleeve, Abou ben Sayyid stroked his short white beard. "You sent me a letter advising of your coming. You are to talk business on behalf of the New Order. There is no war, and the last one has been over a long time. The need for cipher messages no longer exists. Speak plainly. I have had enough of reading between words."

"I have done so."

"Then it is not plain to me." The rheumy eyes lifted, examined him with care. That was the moment he did not sense and nothing could undo.

"You have exercised power too long."

Abou ben Sayyid smote a gong by his side and observed pointedly, "The moon is full. It is always at such a time that Hakim the Cobbler becomes queer in the head. Good-by, Mr. Smith."

Three servants entered on the run, grabbed William Smith, bounced him back into the lane. The door in the wall slammed shut. The bell cord hung limp, unstirring in the night air. Stars shivered in a purple sky.

Leaning against the opposite wall, hands deep in pockets, William Smith remained until eventually a terrible keening arose from the dark.

"Aie! Aie-e-e!"

Beneath the sickle moon he strolled away.

A certain Salvador de Marella of Cartagena was the fifth and last name on the list of guinea pigs. Salvador was not hard like Fisher, or sharp like Lefèvre, or ruthless like Tatarescu, or cunning like Abou ben Sayyid. He was the supreme opportunist with more than his share of luck, and he enjoyed the delusion that the said luck would never run out.

Salvador had all the hearty, back-slapping humor of the really successful gambler. He interviewed William Smith in a room containing twenty colorful bottles and four bosomy brunettes. William Smith politely mentioned his demise, and Salvador's reaction was characteristic. He laughed and laughed and laughed.

And laughed himself to death.

All three were there waiting—Speidel, Wurmser, and Kluge —when William Smith came back. The first two were quietly triumphant, the last one stolid. They had not needed to await their instrument's personal report of his deeds. The newspapers, the radio, and the video had already told them enough. Giants, even shadowland giants, do not topple without great noise.

William Smith entered, hung up his hat, glanced around with the air of a business executive satisfying himself that all were present.

"Perfect!" declared Speidel, openly gratified. "Perfect right up to the prompt and obedient return. A boomerang that comes straight back to the thrower so that it can be used again and again and again. What more could the High Command want than a thousand invincible William Smiths?"

"Drop them in any country and it becomes decapitated," remarked Wurmser. "Its leaders will be dead while the stupid masses mill around like frightened sheep."

Pursing his lips, Kluge said, "As stated before, I concede ingenuity but not perfection. For example, there would be far less risk of making the enemy a free gift of him if he did not have to confer with his victims face to face. Such a tactic creates a series of coincidences which some sharp mind might notice and pursue."

"It is unavoidable. He must gain precise focus and hold it a brief time. How else can that be done?"

"Could you not lengthen the focus and give him greater range, such as one hundred yards? The High Command will provide funds for further research."

Speidel exchanged with Wurmser the pained looks of those compelled to batter their heads against a wall of ignorance. Then Speidel said, "We can extend the focus to a thousand yards or more. But it would be of no use."

"Why not?"

"The longer the range the greater the power loss. At a thousand yards he would need twenty minutes of concentration to heat the root of a hair—if he could hit it and hold it at that distance, which he could not. The mere thought is absurd."

"Six feet is the maximum range permitting swift result," interjected Wurmser. "Beyond that, efficiency diminishes rapidly. If you want more, we'll have to fit him with a dual

projector four times the size of himself and switch him from human form to convincing semblance of a tame elephant."

"I will overlook the sarcasm," said Kluge stiffly, "and recommend that this robotic weapon be taken up forthwith with a view to reproduction in numbers."

"Under our supervision," reminded Speidel. "Only we two hold its secrets, and we intend to retain them."

"You may do so," promised Kluge. "The fewer minds holding such knowledge, the safer we shall be from the prying fingers of the enemy's intelligence service."

"That is a most sensible way of looking at it." Speidel moved in front of William Smith, said to him, "You have done well. The Colonel-General approves of you. The High Command will see that you get a thousand brothers."

William Smith answered in flat, unemotional tones, "You enabled me to think to a certain extent. You built within me the faculty of thought because, as you warned, my tasks would require some enterprise and imagination. Therefore I have been thinking."

"Of what?"

"Of power. I am as you have made me. You made me with a revulsion of power."

"Quite rightly. It is a necessary part of your functioning."

"I have destroyed the power of others at your behest," William Smith went on. "And by doing so I have given *you* power."

"Of course," agreed Speidel, faintly amused. "Power can be destroyed only by employing power."

"The conclusion is obvious and unavoidable," continued William Smith. "I am constructed specifically to bring an end to personal power. By doing so in one place, I have created it afresh in another. Therefore I should now destroy *you.*"

"Your logic was anticipated." Speidel was taking an academic interest in the thinking processes of his own creation. "You cannot turn your rays upon your makers, no matter how essential such a deed might seem."

"I know. I am thwarted by certain crystals, resistors, and other components within me. I should deal with you as I have dealt with the five you named for me. But I cannot. It is prohibited." He stood there, meditating silently, then added, "Anyway, I would not, even if I could."

That angle took Speidel completely by surprise, for it implied that the inhibiting circuits were not necessary. "Why wouldn't you?"

"Because it would merely shift the issue another stage. *I* would be possessed of power. I would stand alone, burdened with that which I was created to destroy."

"You're in quite a fix, aren't you?" said Speidel, smiling.

Nodding moodily, William Smith confirmed, "My mind says

I must kill you. My mind also says that I cannot. My mind also says that even if I could, it would be useless, for I would then be contaminated myself. However, this impasse is more apparent than real. There is one way to escape." His hand came up and poised over his chest. *"This is an unsolvable problem!"*

Speidel leaped tigerishly forward in futile effort to grab, while Wurmser howled like a wounded wolf and Kluge flung himself flat on the floor.

Half the street flew apart, and a column of brick dust shot sky-high.

Behind that stud had lurked great power.

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