

ORIGINALS



HENRY KUTTNER and C. L. MOORE

**Memorable Stories of
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NO BOUNDARIES

BY HENRY KUTTNER

AHEAD OF TIME

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NO BOUNDARIES

by

Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore

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"HENRY KUTTNER AND C. L. MOORE bring to science fiction the surrealistic but logical vividness of the best fantasy. They are among the most imaginative, technically skilled and literarily adroit of all today's science-fantasy writers."

—H. H. Holmes, *New York Herald-Tribune*

This new collection substantiates Mr. Holmes's opinion richly and excitingly. Here are three long novelettes, together with short stories, that explore the furthest reaches of imagination and the closest areas of emotion with power and with humor and with a sense of human purpose. This is Kuttner-Moore at their best.

Vintage Season

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

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

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

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

the first thing Oliver thought of when he looked at them was, *Expensive!*

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

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

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

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

Happily and with excitement in their voices they called to the man, and when he answered his own voice blended so perfectly in cadence with theirs that it sounded like

three people singing together. Their voices, like their clothing, seemed to have an elegance far beyond the ordinary, to be under a control such as Oliver Wilson had never dreamed of before this morning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

singers sing, with perfect breath control and voice placement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a little odd that he didn't inquire into Oliver's motives. Oliver was not yet sure enough of the man to explain. He couldn't very well say, "Since the lease was signed, I've been offered three times what the house is worth if I'll sell it before the end of May." He couldn't say, "I want the money, and I'm going to use my own nuisance-value to annoy you until you're willing to move out." After all, there seemed no reason why they shouldn't. After seeing them, there seemed doubly no reason, for it was

clear they must be accustomed to surroundings infinitely better than this timeworn old house.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They had, in fact, paid a great deal of money, considerably more than the rooms were worth even in that year of high prices and high wages. The country was just moving into one of those fabulous eras which are later referred to

as the Gay Forties or the Golden Sixties—a pleasant period of national euphoria. It was a stimulating time to be alive—while it lasted.

“All right,” Oliver said resignedly. “I’ll do my best.”

But he was conscious, as the next few days went by, that he was not doing his best. There were several reasons for that. From the beginning the idea of making himself a nuisance to his tenants had been Sue’s, not Oliver’s. And if Oliver had been a little less determined the whole project would never have got under way. Reason was on Sue’s side, but—

For one thing, the tenants were so fascinating. All they said and did had a queer sort of inversion to it, as if a mirror had been held up to ordinary living and in the reflection showed strange variations from the norm. Their minds worked on a different basic premise, Oliver thought, from his own. They seemed to derive covert amusement from the most unamusing things; they patronized, they were aloof with a quality of cold detachment which did not prevent them from laughing inexplicably far too often for Oliver’s comfort.

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

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

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

They dressed elaborately for each dinner. The man—his name was Omerie—looked extremely handsome in his

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

When they were in the house at other mealtimes, they ate in their rooms. They must have brought a great deal of food with them, from whatever mysterious place they had come. Oliver wondered with increasing curiosity where it might be. Delicious odors drifted into the hall sometimes, at odd hours, from their closed doors. Oliver could not identify them, but almost always they smelled irresistible. A few times the food smell was rather shockingly unpleasant, almost nauseating. It takes a connoisseur, Oliver reflected, to appreciate the decadent. And these people, most certainly, were connoisseurs.

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

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

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

On the third day he lunched with Sue in a little downtown restaurant overlooking the great sweep of the metropolis across the river far below. Sue had shining brown curls and brown eyes, and her chin was a bit more prominent than is strictly accordant with beauty. From childhood Sue had known what she wanted and how to get it, and it seemed to Oliver just now that she had never wanted anything quite so much as the sale of this house.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Parts of? But why?"

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

The trouble was, he thought he did know. It was too unlikely a guess to tell Sue about, and without familiarity with the Sancisco oddities she would only think Oliver was losing his mind. But he had from their talk, a definite impression that there was an actor in bit parts in all these films whose performances they mentioned with something very near to awe. They referred to him as Golconda, which

didn't appear to be his name, so that Oliver had no way of guessing which obscure bit-player it was they admired so deeply. Golconda might have been the name of a character he had once played—and with superlative skill, judging by the comments of the Sanciscos—but to Oliver it meant nothing at all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Excuse me a minute," he muttered to Sue, and was out of his chair before she could speak. He made the door in half a dozen long strides, and the beautifully elegant passerby was only a few steps away when he got there.

Then, with the words he had meant to speak already half-uttered, he fell silent and stood there staring.

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

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

In silence he went back to Sue.

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

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

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

Above the bed a broad picture hung, framing a square of blue water so real Oliver had to look twice to be sure it was not rippling gently from left to right. From the ceil-

ing swung a crystal globe on a glass cord. It turned gently, the light from the windows making curved rectangles in its sides.

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

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

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

Oliver started across the room and then paused and looked down in amazement at the floor, which felt unstable. He had not noticed before that the carpet was pure white, unspotted, and sank about an inch under the pressure of the feet. He saw then that Kleph's feet were bare, or almost bare. She wore something like gossamer buskins of filmy net, fitting her feet exactly. The bare soles were pink as if they had been rouged, and the nails had a liquid gleam like tiny mirrors. He moved closer, and was not as surprised as he should have been to see that they really were tiny mirrors, painted with some lacquer that gave them reflecting surfaces.

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

There was an almost swanlike slope to her shoulders to-day, a roundness and softness to her body that looked unfamiliar and very appealing.

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

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

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

Kleph took up a cup of her own and tilted it to her lips, smiling at Oliver over the rim. She was very beautiful. The pale red hair lay in shining loops against her head and the corona of curls like a halo above her forehead might have been pressed down like a wreath. Every hair kept order as perfectly as if it had been painted on, though the breeze from the window stirred now and then among the softly shining strands.

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

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

Kleph watched him, smiling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Call it a pilgrimage, perhaps."

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

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

"Very much."

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

Oliver stared. "Euphoriac?"

Kleph made a descriptive circle in the air with one

graceful hand, and laughed. "You do not feel the effects yet? Surely you do?"

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

Kleph shuddered delicately. "We get our euphoria less painfully. And without the aftereffects your barbarous alcohols used to have." She bit her lip. "Sorry. I must be euphoric myself to speak so freely. Please forgive me. Shall we have some music?"

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

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

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

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

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

This time she reached out with the other arm. She touched nothing, but when she had held her hand near the wall a sound breathed through the room. It was the sound of water, the sighing of waves receding upon long, sloped beaches. Oliver followed Kleph's gaze toward the picture of the blue water above the bed.

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

The waves lifted and broke in creaming foam and ran seething up a sandy beach. Then through the sound of

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

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

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

It was a comedian, a man in semi-clown make-up, his eyes exaggerated so that they seemed to cover half his face. He stood by a broad glass pillar before a dark curtain and sang a gay, staccato song interspersed with patter that sounded impromptu, and all the while his left hand did an intricate, musical tattoo of the nailtips on the glass of the column. He strolled around and around it as he sang. The rhythms of his fingernails blended with the song and swung widely away into patterns of their own, and blended again without a break.

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

Other performances followed, some of them fragmentary as if lifted out of a completer version. One he knew. The obvious, stirring melody struck his recognition before the figures—marching men against a haze, a great banner

rolling backward above them in the smoke, foreground figures striding gigantically and shouting in rhythm, "Forward, forward the lily banners go!"

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

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

The steam of the intoxicating tea swirled between Oliver and the picture. Music swelled and sank through the room and the fragrant fumes and his own euphoric brain. Nothing seemed strange. He had discovered how to drink the tea. Like nitrous oxide, the effect was not cumulative. When you reached a peak of euphoria, you could not increase the peak. It was best to wait for a slight dip in the effect of the stimulant before taking more.

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

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

What else happened he was quite unable to remember later. He knew Kleph had said some curious things, but they all made sense at the time, and afterward he couldn't

remember a word. He knew he had been offered little glittering candies in a transparent dish, and that some of them had been delicious and one or two so bitter his tongue still curled the next day when he recalled them, and one—Kleph sucked luxuriantly on the same kind—of a taste that was actively nauseating.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When he woke the next morning, alone in his own room, he woke with the memory of Kleph's eyes upon him very

sorrowfully, her lovely tanned face looking down on him with the red hair falling fragrantly on each side of it and sadness and compassion in her eyes. He thought he had probably dreamed that. There was no reason why anyone should look at him with such sadness.

Sue telephoned that day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You would not, Oliver Wilson! I can buy all our refrigeration units with that extra money. You'll just have

to work out some way to give possession by next week, and that's that. You hear me?"

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

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

"Odd?"

"You'll see."

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

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

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

"Young man, I am Madame Hollia. This is my husband." Her voice had an underrunning current of harshness, which was perhaps age. And her face looked almost corsetted, the loose flesh coerced into something like firmness by some invisible method Oliver could not guess at. The make-up was so skillful he could not be certain it

was make-up at all, but he had a definite feeling that she was much older than she looked. It would have taken a lifetime of command to put so much authority into the harsh, deep, musically controlled voice.

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

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

Oliver nodded. "But—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then what—"

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

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

"Oh, Oliver, please!" Sue's fingers closed over the silver

cube. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure Madame Hollia knows best. Don't you *want* to get those people out?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kleph wore the same softly downy robe Oliver had seen before, except that today it was not white, but a pale, clear

blue that gave her tan an apricot flush. She was smiling.

"Why, Hollia!" Her tone was at its most musical. "I thought I recognized voices from home. How nice to see you. No one knew you were coming to the—" She broke off and glanced at Oliver and then away again. "Hara, too," she said. "What a pleasant surprise."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It will be worse than grotesque; it will be outmoded and therefore faintly ridiculous.

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

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

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

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

Kleph put out both hands for it eagerly, the eiderdown sleeves falling back from her rounded arms. Oliver had a quick glimpse of that mysterious scar before the sleeve fell back, and it seemed to him that there was the faintest trace of a similar scar vanishing into Hara's cuff as he let his own arm drop.

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

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

Madame Hollia shuddered with ponderous delicacy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Madame Hollia moved majestically toward the steps.

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

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

"One word of advice," she said huskily. "You say you

sleep here? Move out, young man. Move out before to-night."

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

It was music, in a way. But much more than music. And it was a terrible sound, the sounds of calamity and of all human reaction to calamity, everything from hysteria to heartbreak, from irrational joy to rationalized acceptance.

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

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

He went upstairs almost in a daze, hardly knowing what he was doing. He pushed Kleph's door open. He looked inside—

What he saw there he could not afterward remember except in a blurring as vague as the blurred ideas the music roused in his brain. Half the room had vanished behind a mist, and the mist was a three-dimensional screen upon which were projected— He had no words for them. He was not even sure if the projections were visual. The mist was spinning with motion and sound, but essentially it was neither sound nor motion that Oliver saw.

This was a work of art. Oliver knew no name for it. It transcended all art-forms he knew, blended them, and out of the blend produced subtleties his mind could not begin

to grasp. Basically, this was the attempt of a master composer to correlate every essential aspect of a vast human experience into something that could be conveyed in a few moments to every sense at once.

The shifting visions on the screen were not pictures in themselves, but hints of pictures, subtly selected outlines that plucked at the mind and with one deft touch set whole chords ringing through the memory. Perhaps each beholder reacted differently, since it was in the eye and the mind of the beholder that the truth of the picture lay. No two would be aware of the same symphonic panorama, but each would see essentially the same terrible story unfold.

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

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

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

He saw lovely women laugh and shake their curls, and the laughter shriek into hysteria and the hysteria into music. He saw one man's face, over and over—a long,

dark, saturnine face, deeply lined, sorrowful, the face of a powerful man wise in worldliness, urbane—and helpless. That face was for awhile a recurring motif, always more tortured, more helpless than before.

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

“Oliver, Oliver—” Kleph’s sweet voice came out of a fog at him. He was leaning dizzily against the doorpost looking down into her eyes. She, too, had that dazed blankness he must show on his own face. The power of the dreadful symphony still held them both. But even in this confused moment Oliver saw that Kleph had been enjoying the experience.

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

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

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

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

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

The familiar fragrance of the hot sweet tea was on his tongue before he knew he had complied. Its relaxing fumes floated up through his brain and in a moment or two the

world felt stable around him again. The room was as it had always been. And Kleph—

Her eyes were very bright. Sympathy showed in them for him, but for herself she was still brimmed with the high elation of what she had just been experiencing.

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

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

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

"But—"

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

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

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

"No," Kleph said, "not this. Nothing gloomy." And she put out her hand again. The nameless new Richard faded and there was a swirl of changing pictures and changing

voices, all blurred together, before the scene steadied upon a stageful of dancers in pastel ballet skirts, drifting effortlessly through some complicated pattern of motion. The music that went with it was light and effortless too. The room filled up with the clear, floating melody.

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

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

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

Kleph shook her head, her eyes upon his warm with—was it sympathy?

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

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

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

He looked down at his cup, rose-quartz, exhaling a thin plume of steam from its crescent-slit opening. This time, he thought, maybe he could make the tea work for him. For he remembered how it loosened the tongue, and there

was a great deal he needed to know. The idea that had come to him on the porch in the instant of silent rivalry between Kleph and Sue seemed now too fantastic to entertain. But some answer there must be.

Kleph herself gave him the opening.

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

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

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

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

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

"What rules?"

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

A memory clicked over suddenly in Oliver's mind. He had never heard the queer, lagging tune before, but he thought he knew the words. He remembered what Hollia's husband had said when he heard that line of song, and he leaned forward. She would not answer a direct question, but perhaps—

"Was the weather this warm in Canterbury?" he asked, and held his breath. Kleph hummed another line of the song and shook her head, eyes still closed.

"It was autumn there," she said. "But bright, wonder-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He held her off and looked down in amazement. She sobbed once more, caught a deep breath, and said, "Oh, Oliver, Oliver—" Then she shook her head and pulled free, turning away to hide her face. "I . . . I am sorry,"

she said unevenly. "Please forgive me. It does not matter . . . I *know* it does not matter . . . but—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kleph's eyes fixed his for a silent moment. Then her shoulders drooped and her whole body went limp with resignation beneath the soft blue robe. "I am a fool," she said gently. "It must have been easy to trap me. You really believe—what you say?"

Oliver nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He began to feel better. The flesh settled on his bones again, and the warm clothing of temporal assurance settled upon his flesh, and he was no longer naked and in the vortex of unstable time.

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

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

"Now this month of May is almost over—the loveliest May in recorded times. A perfect May in a wonderful period. You have no way of knowing what a good, gay period you live in, Oliver. The very feeling in the air of the cities—that wonderful national confidence and happiness—everything going as smoothly as a dream. There were other Mays with fine weather, but each of them had a war or a famine, or something else wrong." She hesitated,

grimaced and went on rapidly. "In a few days we are to meet at a coronation in Rome," she said. "I think the year will be 800—Christmastime. We—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Omerie in an angry voice answered the unspoken question.

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

"S-subsonic?"

"Call it a gadget," Omerie interpreted impatiently. "Probably a small metal box that—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That stupid Holliä—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kleph darted a scared glance at Oliver and nodded guiltily.

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

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

"I know it was wrong. I am very sorry—but you will not stop me if Cenbe says no."

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

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

"We could give up the house!" Kleph cried wildly. "Let

Hollia have it! How can you stand this long enough to hunt—”

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

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

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

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

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

It was dawn before they found the box, tucked inside the ripped seam of a sofa cushion. Omerie took it upstairs without a word. Five minutes later the pressure in the air abruptly dropped and peace fell blissfully upon the house.

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

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

Omerie went on after a moment. “It was partly our fault for not insuring that we had the house to ourselves,” he said. “Living here with us, you could scarcely help suspecting. Shall we say that in return for your promise,

I reimburse you in part for losing the sale price on this house?"

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

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

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

Kleph's voice was soothing. "I am sorry," she said many times, in the intervals when the voice paused. "I am truly sorry. Believe me, you will find it does not matter. I know . . . I am sorry—"

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

"Not Hollia," Klia said firmly.

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

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

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

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

"What do you think?" Klia demanded.

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

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

All the chairs in the house were collected in the three

front bedrooms. The furniture was rearranged to make room for them, and dozens of covered cups had been set out on trays. Oliver recognized Kleph's rose-quartz set among the rest. No steam rose from the thin crescent-openings, but the cups were full. Oliver lifted one and felt a heavy liquid move within it, like something half-solid, sluggishly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You might be—hurt—if you went out tonight," she

was saying in a muffled voice. "I know it will not matter, in the end, but—remember you promised, Oliver."

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

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

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

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

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

The vast, incredible crash was louder than sound. He felt the whole house shake under him, felt rather than heard the timbers grind upon one another like broken bones, while he was still in the borderland of sleep. When he woke fully he was on the floor among the shattered fragments of the window.

How long or short a time he had lain there he did not know. The world was still stunned with that tremendous noise, or his ears still deaf from it, for there was no sound anywhere.

He was halfway down the hall toward the front rooms when sound began to return from outside. It was a low, indescribable rumble at first, prickled with countless tiny distant screams. Oliver's eardrums ached from the terrible impact of the vast unheard noise, but the numbness was wearing off and he heard before he saw it the first voices of the stricken city.

The door to Kleph's room resisted him for a moment. The house had settled a little from the violence of the—the explosion?—and the frame was out of line. When he got the door open he could only stand blinking stupidly into the darkness within. All the lights were out, but there was a breathless sort of whispering going on in many voices.

The chairs were drawn around the broad front windows so that everyone could see out; the air swam with the fragrance of euphoria. There was light enough here from outside for Oliver to see that a few onlookers still had their hands to their ears, but all were craning eagerly forward to see.

Through a dreamlike haze Oliver saw the city spread out with impossible distinctness below the window. He knew quite well that a row of houses across the street blocked the view—yet he was looking over the city now, and he could see it in a limitless panorama from here to the horizon. The houses between had vanished.

On the far skyline fire was already a solid mass, painting the low clouds crimson. That sulphurous light reflecting back from the sky upon the city made clear the rows upon rows of flattened houses with flame beginning to lick up among them, and farther out the formless rubble of what had been houses a few minutes ago and was now nothing at all.

The city had begun to be vocal. The noise of the flames rose loudest, but you could hear a rumble of human voices like the beat of surf a long way off, and staccato noises of screaming made a sort of pattern that came and went continuously through the web of sound. Threading it in undulating waves the shrieks of sirens knit the web together

into a terrible symphony that had, in its way, a strange, inhuman beauty.

Briefly through Oliver's stunned incredulity went the memory of that other symphony Kleph had played here one day, another catastrophe retold in terms of music and moving shapes.

He said hoarsely, "Kleph—"

The tableau by the window broke. Every head turned, and Oliver saw the faces of strangers staring at him, some few in embarrassment avoiding his eyes, but most seeking them out with that avid, inhuman curiosity which is common to a type in all crowds at accident scenes. But these people were here by design, audience at a vast disaster timed almost for their coming.

Kleph got up unsteadily, her velvet dinner gown tripping her as she rose. She set down a cup and swayed a little as she came toward the door, saying, "Oliver . . . Oliver—" in a sweet, uncertain voice. She was drunk, he saw, and wrought up by the catastrophe to a pitch of stimulation in which she was not very sure what she was doing.

Oliver heard himself saying in a thin voice not his own, "W-what was it, Kleph? What happened? What—" But *happened* seemed so inadequate a word for the incredible panorama below that he had to choke back hysterical laughter upon the struggling questions, and broke off entirely, trying to control the shaking that had seized his body.

Kleph made an unsteady stoop and seized a steaming cup. She came to him, swaying, holding it out—her panacea for all ills.

"Here, drink it, Oliver—we are all quite safe here, quite safe." She thrust the cup to his lips and he gulped automatically, grateful for the fumes that began their slow, coiling surcease in his brain with the first swallow.

"It was a meteor," Kleph was saying. "Quite a small meteor, really. We are perfectly safe here. This house was never touched."

Out of some cell of the unconscious Oliver heard himself saying incoherently, "Sue? Is Sue—" he could not finish.

Kleph thrust the cup at him again. "I think she may be safe—for awhile. Please, Oliver—forget about all that and drink."

"But you *knew!*" Realization of that came belatedly to his stunned brain. "You could have given warning, or—"

"How could we change the past?" Kleph asked. "We knew—but could we stop the meteor? Or warn the city? Before we come we must give our word never to interfere—"

Their voices had risen imperceptibly to be audible above the rising volume of sound from below. The city was roaring now, with flames and cries and the crash of falling buildings. Light in the room turned lurid and pulsed upon the walls and ceiling in red light and redder dark.

Downstairs a door slammed. Someone laughed. It was high, hoarse, angry laughter. Then from the crowd in the room someone gasped and there was a chorus of dismayed cries. Oliver tried to focus upon the window and the terrible panorama beyond, and found he could not.

It took several seconds of determined blinking to prove that more than his own vision was at fault. Kleph whimpered softly and moved against him. His arms closed about her automatically, and he was grateful for the warm, solid flesh against him. This much at least he could touch and be sure of, though everything else that was happening might be a dream. Her perfume and the heady perfume of the tea rose together in his head, and for an instant, holding her in this embrace that must certainly be the last time he ever held her, he did not care that something had gone terribly wrong with the very air of the room.

It was blindness—not continuous, but a series of swift, widening ripples between which he could catch glimpses of the other faces in the room, strained and astonished in the flickering light from the city.

The ripples came faster. There was only a blink of sight between them now, and the blinks grew briefer and briefer, the intervals of darkness more broad.

From downstairs the laughter rose again up the stairwell. Oliver thought he knew the voice. He opened his

mouth to speak, but a door nearby slammed open before he could find his tongue, and Omerie shouted down the stairs.

"Hollia?" he roared above the roaring of the city. "Hollia, is that you?"

She laughed again, triumphantly. "I warned you!" her hoarse, harsh voice called. "Now come out in the street with the rest of us if you want to see any more!"

"Hollia!" Omerie shouted desperately. "Stop this or—"

The laughter was derisive. "What will you do, Omerie? This time I hid it too well—come down in the street if you want to watch the rest."

There was angry silence in the house. Oliver could feel Kleph's quick, excited breathing light upon his cheek, feel the soft motions of her body in his arms. He tried consciously to make the moment last, stretch it out to infinity. Everything had happened too swiftly to impress very clearly on his mind anything except what he could touch and hold. He held her in an embrace made consciously light, though he wanted to clasp her in a tight, despairing grip, because he was sure this was the last embrace they would ever share.

The eye-straining blinks of light and blindness went on. From far away below the roar of the burning city rolled on, threaded together by the long, looped cadences of the sirens that linked all sounds into one.

Then in the bewildering dark another voice sounded from the hall downstairs. A man's voice, very deep, very melodious, saying:

"What is this? What are you doing here? Hollia—is that you?"

Oliver felt Kleph stiffen in his arms. She caught her breath, but she said nothing in the instant while heavy feet began to mount the stairs, coming up with a solid, confident tread that shook the old house to each step.

Then Kleph thrust herself hard out of Oliver's arms. He heard her high, sweet, excited voice crying, "Cenbe! Cenbe!" and she ran to meet the newcomer through the waves of dark and light that swept the shaken house.

Oliver staggered a little and felt a chair seat catching

the back of his legs. He sank into it and lifted to his lips the cup he still held. Its steam was warm and moist in his face, though he could scarcely make out the shape of the rim.

He lifted it with both hands and drank.

When he opened his eyes it was quite dark in the room. Also it was silent except for a thin, melodious humming almost below the threshold of sound. Oliver struggled with the memory of a monstrous nightmare. He put it resolutely out of his mind and sat up, feeling an unfamiliar bed creak and sway under him.

This was Kleph's room. But no—Kleph's no longer. Her shining hangings were gone from the walls, her white resilient rug, her pictures. The room looked as it had looked before she came, except for one thing.

In the far corner was a table—a block of translucent stuff—out of which light poured softly. A man sat on a low stool before it, leaning forward, his heavy shoulders outlined against the glow. He wore earphones and he was making quick, erratic notes upon a pad on his knee, swaying a little as if to the tune of unheard music.

The curtains were drawn, but from beyond them came a distant, muffled roaring that Oliver remembered from his nightmare. He put a hand to his face, aware of a feverish warmth and a dipping of the room before his eyes. His head ached, and there was a deep malaise in every limb and nerve.

As the bed creaked, the man in the corner turned, sliding the earphones down like a collar. He had a strong, sensitive face above a dark beard, trimmed short. Oliver had never seen him before, but he had that air Oliver knew so well by now, of remoteness which was the knowledge of time itself lying like a gulf between them.

When he spoke his deep voice was impersonally kind.

"You had too much euphoriac, Wilson," he said, aloofly sympathetic. "You slept a long while."

"How long?" Oliver's throat felt sticky when he spoke.

The man did not answer. Oliver shook his head experimentally. He said, "I thought Kleph said you don't get

hangovers from—" Then another thought interrupted the first, and he said quickly, "Where is Kleph?" He looked confusedly toward the door.

"They should be in Rome by now. Watching Charlemagne's coronation at St. Peter's on Christmas Day a thousand years from here."

That was not a thought Oliver could grasp clearly. His aching brain sheered away from it; he found thinking at all was strangely difficult. Staring at the man, he traced an idea painfully to its conclusion.

"So they've gone on—but you stayed behind? Why? You . . . you're Cenbe? I heard your—symphonia, Kleph called it."

"You heard part of it. I have not finished yet. I needed—this." Cenbe inclined his head toward the curtains beyond which the subdued roaring still went on.

"You needed—the meteor?" The knowledge worked painfully through his dulled brain until it seemed to strike some area still untouched by the aching, an area still alive to implication. "The *meteor*? But—"

There was a power implicit in Cenbe's raised hand that seemed to push Oliver down upon the bed again. Cenbe said patiently, "The worst of it is past now, for a while. Forget if you can. That was days ago. I said you were asleep for some time. I let you rest. I knew this house would be safe—from the fire at least."

"Then—something more's to come?" Oliver only mumbled his question. He was not sure he wanted an answer. He had been curious so long, and now that knowledge lay almost within reach, something about his brain seemed to refuse to listen. Perhaps this weariness, this feverish, dizzy feeling would pass as the effect of the euphoriac wore off.

Cenbe's voice ran on smoothly, soothingly, almost as if Cenbe too did not want him to think. It was easiest to lie here and listen.

"I am a composer," Cenbe was saying. "I happen to be interested in interpreting certain forms of disaster into my own terms. That is why I stayed on. The others were dilettantes. They came for the May weather and the spectacle. The aftermath—well why should they wait for that?

As for myself—I suppose I am a connoisseur. I find the aftermath rather fascinating. And I need it. I need to study it at first hand, for my own purposes.”

His eyes dwelt upon Oliver for an instant very keenly, like a physician’s eyes, impersonal and observing. Absently he reached for his stylus and the note pad. And as he moved, Oliver saw a familiar mark on the underside of the thick, tanned wrist.

“Kleph had that scar, too,” he heard himself whisper. “And the others.”

Cenbe nodded. “Inoculation. It was necessary, under the circumstances. We did not want disease to spread in our own time-world.”

“Disease?”

Cenbe shrugged. “You would not recognize the name.”

“But, if you can inoculate against disease—” Oliver thrust himself up on an aching arm. He had a half-grasp upon a thought now which he did not want to let go. Effort seemed to make the ideas come more clearly through his mounting confusion. With enormous effort he went on.

“I’m getting it now,” he said. “Wait. I’ve been trying to work this out. You can change history? You can! I know you can. Kleph said she had to promise not to interfere. You all had to promise. Does that mean you really could change your own past—our time?”

Cenbe laid down his pad again. He looked at Oliver thoughtfully, a dark, intent look under heavy brows. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, the past can be changed, but not easily. And it changes the future, too, necessarily. The lines of probability are switched into new patterns—but it is extremely difficult, and it has never been allowed. The physio-temporal course tends to slide back to its norm, always. That is why it is so hard to force any alteration.” He shrugged. “A theoretical science. We do not change history, Wilson. If we changed our past, our present would be altered, too. And our time-world is entirely to our liking. There may be a few malcontents there, but they are not allowed the privilege of temporal travel.”

Oliver spoke louder against the roaring from beyond the windows. “But you’ve got the power! You could alter his-

tory, if you wanted to—wipe out all the pain and suffering and tragedy—”

“All of that passed away long ago,” Cenbe said.

“Not—*now!* Not—*this!*”

Cenbe looked at him enigmatically for a while. Then—
“This, too,” he said.

And suddenly Oliver realized from across what distances Cenbe was watching him. A vast distance, as time is measured. Cenbe was a composer and a genius, and necessarily strongly empathic, but his psychic locus was very far away in time. The dying city outside, the whole world of *now* was not quite real to Cenbe, falling short of reality because of that basic variance in time. It was merely one of the building blocks that had gone to support the edifice on which Cenbe’s culture stood in a misty, unknown, terrible future.

It seemed terrible to Oliver now. Even Kleph—all of them had been touched with a pettiness, the faculty that had enabled Hollia to concentrate on her malicious, small schemes to acquire a ringside seat while the meteor thundered in toward Earth’s atmosphere. They were all dilettantes, Kleph and Omerie and the other. They toured time, but only as onlookers. Were they bored—sated—with their normal existence?

Not sated enough to wish change, basically. Their own time-world was a fulfilled womb, a perfection made manifest for their needs. They dared not change the past—they could not risk flawing their own present.

Revulsion shook him. Remembering the touch of Kleph’s lips, he felt a sour sickness on his tongue. Alluring she had been; he knew that too well. But the aftermath—

There was something about this race from the future. He had felt it dimly at first, before Kleph’s nearness had drowned caution and buffered his sensibilities. Time traveling purely as an escape mechanism seemed almost blasphemous. A race with such power—

Kleph—leaving him for the barbaric, splendid coronation at Rome a thousand years ago—*how had she seen*

him? Not as a living, breathing man. He knew that, very certainly. Kleph's race were spectators.

But he read more than casual interest in Cenbe's eyes now. There was an avidity there, a bright, fascinated probing. The man had replaced his earphones—he was different from the others. He was a connoisseur. After the vintage season came the aftermath—and Cenbe.

Cenbe watched and waited, light flickering softly in the translucent block before him, his fingers poised over the note pad. The ultimate connoisseur waited to savor the rarities that no non-gourmet could appreciate.

Those thin, distant rhythms of sound that was almost music began to be audible again above the noises of the distant fire. Listening, remembering, Oliver could very nearly catch the pattern of the symphonia as he had heard it, all intermingled with the flash of changing faces and the rank upon rank of the dying—

He lay back on the bed letting the room swirl away into the darkness behind his closed and aching lids. The ache was implicit in every cell of his body, almost a second ego taking possession and driving him out of himself, a strong, sure ego taking over as he himself let go.

Why, he wondered dully, should Kleph have lied? She had said there was no aftermath to the drink she had given him. No aftermath—and yet this painful possession was strong enough to edge him out of his own body.

Kleph had not lied. It was no aftermath to drink. He knew that—but the knowledge no longer touched his brain or his body. He lay still, giving them up to the power of the illness which was aftermath to something far stronger than the strongest drink. The illness that had no name—yet.

Cenbe's new symphonia was a crowning triumph. It had its premiere from Antares Hall, and the applause was an ovation. History itself, of course, was the artist—opening with the meteor that forecast the great plagues of the fourteenth century and closing with the climax Cenbe had caught on the threshold of modern times. But only Cenbe could have interpreted it with such subtle power.

Critics spoke of the masterly way in which he had chosen the face of the Stuart king as a recurrent motif against the montage of emotion and sound and movement. But there were other faces, fading through the great sweep of the composition, which helped to build up to the tremendous climax. One face in particular, one moment that the audience absorbed greedily. A moment in which one man's face loomed huge in the screen, every feature clear. Cenbe had never caught an emotional crisis so effectively, the critics agreed. You could almost read the man's eyes.

After Cenbe had left, he lay motionless for a long while. He was thinking feverishly—

I've got to find some way to tell people. If I'd known in advance, maybe something could have been done. We'd have forced them to tell us how to change the probabilities. We could have evacuated the city.

If I could leave a message—

Maybe not for today's people. But later. They visit all through time. If they could be recognized and caught somewhere, sometime, and made to change destiny—

It wasn't easy to stand up. The room kept tilting. But he managed it. He found pencil and paper and through the swaying of the shadows he wrote down what he could. Enough. Enough to warn, enough to save.

He put the sheets on the table, in plain sight, and weighted them down before he stumbled back to bed through closing darkness.

The house was dynamited six days later, part of the futile attempt to halt the relentless spread of the Blue Death.

The Devil We Know

FOR DAYS the thin, imperative summons had been whispering deep in Carnevan's brain. It was voiceless and urgent, and he likened his mind to a compass needle that would swing, inevitably, toward the nearest magnetic point. It was fairly easy to focus his attention on the business of the moment, but it was, as he had found, somewhat dangerous to relax. The needle wavered and swung imperceptibly, while the soundless cry grew stronger, beating at the citadel of his consciousness. Yet the meaning of the message remained unknown to him.

There was not the slightest question of insanity. Gerald Carnevan was as neurotic as most, and knew it. He held several degrees, and was junior partner in a flourishing New York advertising concern, contributing most of the ideas. He golfed, swam, and played a fair hand of bridge. He was thirty-seven years old, with the thin, hard face of a Puritan—which he was not—and was being blackmailed, in a mild degree, by his mistress. This he did not especially resent, for his logical mind had summed up the possibilities, arrived at a definite conclusion, and then had forgotten.

And yet he had not forgotten. In the depths of his subconscious the thought remained, and it came to Carnevan now. That, of course, might be the explanation of the—the "voice." A suppressed desire to solve the problem com-

pletely. It seemed to fit fairly well, considering Carnevan's recent engagement to Phyllis Mardrake. Phyllis, of Boston stock, would not overlook her fiancé's amours—if they were dragged out into the open. Diana, who was shameless as well as lovely, would not hesitate to do that if matters came to a head.

The compass needle quivered again, swung, and came to a straining halt. Carnevan, who was working late in his office that night, grunted angrily. On an impulse, he leaned back in his chair, tossed his cigarette out the open window, and waited.

Suppressed desires, according to the teachings of psychology, should be brought out into the open, where they could be rendered harmless. With this in mind, Carnevan smoothed all expression from his thin, harsh face and waited. He closed his eyes.

Through the window came the roaring murmur of a New York street. It faded and dimmed almost imperceptibly. Carnevan tried to analyze his sensations. His consciousness seemed enclosed in a sealed box, straining all in one direction. Light patterns faded on his closed lids as the retina adjusted itself.

Voiceless, a message came into his brain. He could not understand. It was too alien—incomprehensible.

But at last words formed. A name. A name that hovered on the edge of the darkness, nebulous, inchoate. *Nefert. Nefert.*

He recognized it now. He remembered the seance last week, which he had attended with Phyllis at her request. It had been cheap, ordinary claptrap—trumpets and lights, and voices whispering. The medium held seances thrice a week, in an old brownstone near Columbus Circle. Her name was Madame Nefert—or so she claimed, though she looked Irish rather than Egyptian.

Now Carnevan knew what the voiceless command was. *Go to Madame Nefert*, it told him.

Carnevan opened his eyes. The room was quite unchanged. This was as he had expected. Already some vague theory had formed within his mind, germinating an

annoyed anger that someone had been tampering with his most exclusive possession—his *self*. It was, he thought, hypnotism. Somehow, during the seance, Madame Nefert had managed to hypnotize him, and his curious reactions of the past week were due to post-hypnotic suggestion. It was somewhat far-fetched, but certainly not impossible.

Carnevan, as an advertising man, inevitably followed certain lines of thought. Madame Nefert would hypnotize a client. That client would return to her, worried and not understanding what had happened, and the medium would, probably, announce that the spirits were taking a hand. When the client had been properly convinced—the first step in advertising campaigns—Madame Nefert would show her hand, whatever she had to sell.

It was the first tenet of the game. Make the customer believe he needs something. Then sell it to him.

Fair enough. Carnevan rose, lit a cigarette, and pulled on his coat. Adjusting his tie before the mirror, he examined his face closely. He seemed in perfect health, his reactions normal, and his eyes well under control.

The telephone rang sharply. Carnevan picked up the receiver.

"Hello. . . . Diana? How are you, dear?" Despite Diana's blackmailing activities, Carnevan preferred to keep matters running along smoothly, lest they grow more complicated. So he substituted "dear" for another epithet that came to his mind.

"I can't," he said at last. "I've an important call to make tonight. Now wait—I'm not turning you down! I'll put a check in the mail tonight."

This seemed satisfactory, and Carnevan hung up. Diana did not yet know of his forthcoming marriage to Phyllis. He was a little worried about how she would take the news. Phyllis, for all her glorious body, was quite stupid. At first Carnevan had found this attribute relaxing, giving him an illusory feeling of power in the moments when they were together. Now, however, Phyllis's stupidity might prove a handicap.

He'd cross that bridge later. First of all, there was Nefert. *Madame Nefert*. A wry smile touched his lips. By all

means, the title. Always look for the trademark. It impresses the consumer.

He got his car from the garage of the office building and drove uptown on the parkway, turning off into Columbus Circle. Madame Nefert had a front parlor and a few tawdry rooms which no one ever saw, since they probably contained her equipment. A placard on the window proclaimed the woman's profession.

Carnevan mounted the steps and rang. He entered at the sound of a buzzer, turned right, and pushed through a half-open door which he closed behind him. Drapes had been drawn over the windows. The room was illuminated by a dim, reddish glow from lamps in the corners.

It was bare. The carpet had been pushed aside. Signs had been made on the floor with luminous chalk. A blackened pot stood in the center of a pentagram. That was all, and Carnevan shook his head disgustedly. Such a stage setting would impress only the most credulous. Yet he decided to play along till he got to the bottom of this most peculiar advertising stunt.

A curtain was twitched aside, revealing an alcove in which Madame Nefert sat on a hard, plain chair. The woman had not even troubled to don her customary masquerade, Carnevan saw. With her beefy, red face and her stringy hair, she resembled a charwoman out of some Shavian comedy. She wore a flowered wrapper, hanging open to reveal a dirty white slip at her capacious bosom.

The red light flickered on her face.

She looked at Carnevan with glassy, expressionless eyes. "The spirits are—" she began, and fell suddenly silent, a choking rattle deep in her throat. Her whole body twitched convulsively.

Suppressing a smile, Carnevan said, "Madame Nefert, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

She didn't answer. There was a long, heavy silence. After a time Carnevan made a tentative movement toward the door, but still the woman did not rouse.

She was playing the game to the hilt. He glanced around, saw something white in the blackened pot, and stepped closer to peer down into the interior. Then he retched

violently, clawed out a handkerchief and, holding it over his mouth, whirled to confront Madame Nefert.

But he could not find words. Sanity came back. He breathed deeply, realized that a clever papier-maché image had almost destroyed his emotional balance.

Madame Nefert had not moved. She was leaning forward, breathing in stertorous, rasping gasps. A faint, insidious odor crept into Carnevan's nostrils.

Someone said sharply, "Now!"

The woman's hand moved in a fumbling, uncertain gesture. Simultaneously Carnevan was conscious of a newcomer in the room. He whirled, to see, seated in the middle of the pentagram, a small huddled figure that was regarding him steadily.

The red light was dim. All Carnevan could see was a head, and a shapeless body concealed by a dark cloak as the man—or boy—squatted. Yet the sight of that head was enough to make his heart jump excitedly.

For it was not entirely human. At first Carnevan had thought it was a skull. The face was thin, with pale, translucent skin of finest ivory laid lightly over the bone, and it was completely hairless. It was triangular, delicately wedge-shaped, without the ugly protruding knobs of the cheekbones which make human skulls so often hideous. The eyes were certainly inhuman. They slanted up almost to where the hair line would have been had the being possessed hair, and they were like cloudy, gray-green stone, flecked with opalescent dancing lights, red-tinted now by the light.

It was a singularly beautiful face, with the clear, passionless perfection of polished bone. The body Carnevan could not see, hidden as it was by the cloak.

Was that strange face a mask? Carnevan knew it was not. By the subtle, unmistakable revolt of his whole physical being, he knew that he looked upon a horror.

With an automatic reflex, he took out a cigarette and lighted it. The being had made no move meanwhile, and Carnevan abruptly realized that the compass needle in his brain had vanished.

Smoke coiled up from his cigarette. He, Gerald Car-

nevan, was standing in this dim, red-lit room, with a fake medium in, presumably, a fake trance behind him, and—something—crouching only a few feet away. Outside, a block distant, was Columbus Circle, with electric signs and traffic.

Electric lights meant advertising. A key clicked in Carnevan's brain. *Get the customer wondering.* In this case he seemed to be the customer. The direct approach was hell on salesmen and their foreplanned tactics. Carnevan began to walk directly toward the being.

The soft, pink, childish lips parted. "Wait," a singularly gentle voice commanded. "Don't cross the pentagram, Carnevan. You can't anyway, but you might start a fire."

"That tears it," the man remarked, almost laughing. "Spirits don't speak colloquial English. What's the idea?"

"Well," said the other, not moving, "to begin with, you may call me Azazel. I'm not a spirit. I'm rather more of a demon. As for colloquial English, when I enter your world I naturally adjust myself to it—or am adjusted. My own tongue cannot be heard here. I'm speaking it, but you hear the Earthly equivalent. It's automatically adjusted to your capabilities."

"All right," Carnevan said. "Now what?" He blew smoke through his nostrils.

"You're skeptical," Azazel said, still motionless. "I could convince you in a moment by leaving the pentagram, but I can't do that without your help. At present, the space I'm occupying exists in both our worlds, coincidentally. I *am* a demon, Carnevan, and I want to strike a bargain with you."

"I expect flashlight bulbs to go off in a moment. But you can fake all the photos you want, if that's the game. I won't pay blackmail," Carnevan said, thinking of Diana and making a mental reservation.

"You do," Azazel remarked, and gave a brief, pithy history of the man's relations with Diana Bellamy.

Carnevan felt himself flushing. "That's enough," he said curtly. "It *is* blackmail, eh?"

"Please let me explain—from the beginning. I got in touch with you first at the seance last week. It's incredibly

difficult for inhabitants of my . . . my dimension to establish contact with human beings. But in this case I managed it. I implanted certain thoughts in your subconscious mind and held you by those."

"What sort of thoughts?"

"Gratifications," Azazel said. "The death of your senior partner. The removal of Diana Bellamy. Wealth. Power, Triumph. Secretly you treasured those thoughts, and so a link was established between us. Not enough, however, for I couldn't really communicate with you till I'd worked on Madame Nefert."

"Go on," Carnevan said quietly. "She's a charlatan, of course."

"So she is." Azazel smiled. "But she is a Celt. A violin is useless without a violinist. I managed to control her somewhat, and induced her to make the necessary preparations so I could materialize. Then I drew you here."

"Do you expect me to believe you?"

The other's shoulders stirred restlessly. "That is the difficulty. If you accept me, I can serve you well—very well indeed. But you will not do that until you believe."

"I'm not Faust," Carnevan said. "Even if I did believe you, why do you think I'd want to—" He stopped.

For a second there was silence. Carnevan angrily dropped his cigarette and crushed it out. "All the legends of history," he muttered. "Folklore—all full of it. Bargains with demons. And always at a price. But I'm an atheist, or an agnostic. Not sure which. A soul—I can't believe I have one. When I die, it's a blackout."

Azazel studied him thoughtfully. "There must be a fee, of course." A curious expression crossed the being's face. There was mockery in it, and fear, too. When he spoke again his voice was hurried.

"I can serve you, Carnevan. I can give you anything you desire—everything, I believe."

"Why did you choose me?"

"The seance drew me. You were the only one present I could touch."

Scarcely flattered, Carnevan frowned. It was impossible

for him to believe. He said, at last, "I wouldn't mind—if I thought this wasn't merely some trick. Tell me more about it. Just what you could do for me."

Azazel spoke further. When he had finished, Carnevan's eyes were glistening.

"Even a little of that—"

"It is easy enough," Azazel urged. "All is ready. The ceremony does not take long, and I'll guide you step by step."

Carnevan clicked his tongue, smiling. "There it is. I can't believe. I tell myself that you're real—but deep inside my brain I'm trying to find a logical explanation. And that's all too easy. If I were convinced you are what you say and can—"

Azazel interrupted. "Do you know anything about teratology?"

"Eh? Why—just the layman's knowledge."

The being stood up slowly. He was wearing, Carnevan saw, a voluminous cloak of some dark, opaque, shimmering material.

He said, "If there is no other way of convincing you—and since I cannot leave the pentagram—I must take this means."

A sickening premonition shot through Carnevan as he saw delicate, slim hands fumbling at the fastenings of the cloak. Azazel cast it aside.

Almost instantly he wrapped the garment around him. Carnevan had not moved. But there was blood trickling down his chin.

Then silence, till the man tried to speak, a hoarse, croaking noise that rasped through the room. Carnevan found his voice.

Unexpectedly his words came out in a half-shriek. Abruptly he whirled and went to a corner, where he stood with his forehead pressed hard against the wall. When he returned, his face was more composed, though sweat gleamed on it.

"Yes," he said. "Yes?"

"This is the way—" Azazel began.

The next morning Carnevan sat at his desk and talked quietly to the demon, who lounged in a chair, invisible to all but one man, and his voice equally masked. Sunlight slanted in through the windows, and a cool breeze brought in the muffled clamor of traffic. Azazel seemed incredibly real sitting there, his body muffled by the cloak, his skull-like, beautiful head whitened by the sunlight.

"Speak softly," the demon cautioned. "No one can hear me, but they can hear you. Whisper—or just think. It will be clear to me."

"Fair enough." Carnevan rubbed his freshly shaven cheek. "We'd better lay out a plan of campaign. You'll have to earn my soul, you know."

"Eh?" For a second the demon looked puzzled; then he laughed softly. "I'm at your service."

"First—we must arouse no suspicion. Nobody would believe the truth, but I don't want them thinking I'm insane—as I may be," Carnevan continued logically. "But we'll not consider that point just now. What about Madame Nefert? How much does she know?"

"Nothing at all," Azazel said. "She was in a trance while under my control. She remembered nothing when she awoke. Still, if you prefer, I can kill her."

Carnevan held up his hand. "Steady on! That's just where people like Faust made their mistakes. They went hog-wild, got drunk on power, and wrapped themselves up till they couldn't even move. Any murders we may commit must be necessary. Here! Just how much control have I over you?"

"A good deal," Azazel admitted.

"Suppose I asked you to kill yourself—told you to do so?"

For answer, the demon picked up a paper knife from the desk and thrust it deeply into his cloak. Remembering what lay under that garment, Carnevan glanced away hurriedly.

Smiling, Azazel replaced the knife. "Suicide is impossible to a demon, by any means."

"Can't you be killed at all?"

There was a little silence. Then—"Not by you," Azazel said.

Carnevan shrugged. "I'm checking up all the angles. I want to know just where I stand. You must obey me, though. Is that right?"

Azazel nodded.

"So. Now I don't want a million dollars in gold dumped into my lap. Gold's illegal, anyway, and people would ask questions. Any advantages I get must come naturally, without arousing the slightest suspicion. If Eli Dale died, the firm would be without a senior partner. I'd get the job. It carries enough money for my purpose."

"I can get you the largest fortune in the world," the demon suggested.

Carnevan laughed a little. "And then? Everything would be far too easy for me. I want to feel the thrill of achieving things myself—with some help from you. If you cheat once at solitaire, it's different from cheating all through the game. I have a good deal of faith in myself, and want to justify that—build up my ego. People like Faust grew jaded. King Solomon must have been bored to death. Then, too, he never used his brain, and I'll bet it atrophied. Look at Merlin!" Carnevan smiled. "He got so used to calling up devils to do what he wanted that a young snip got the best of him without any trouble. No, Azazel—I want Eli Dale to die, but naturally."

The demon looked at his slim, pale hands.

Carnevan shrugged. "Can you change your form?"

"Of course."

"Into anything?"

For answer, Azazel became, in rapid succession, a large black dog, a lizard, a rattlesnake, and Carnevan himself. Finally he resumed his own form and relaxed again in the chair.

"None of those disguises would help you kill Dale," Carnevan grunted. "We want something that won't be suspected. Do you know what disease germs are, Azazel?"

The other nodded. "I know, from your mind."

"Could you transform yourself into toxins?"

"Why not? If I knew which one you wished, I'd locate

a specimen, duplicate its atomic structure, and enter it with my own life force."

"Spinal meningitis," Carnevan said thoughtfully. "That's fatal enough. It'd knock over a man in Dale's senile condition. But I forget whether it's a germ or a virus."

"That doesn't matter," Azazel said. "I'll locate a slide or specimen of the stuff—some hospital should do—and then materialize inside Dale's body as the disease."

"Will it be the same thing?"

"Yes."

"Good enough. The toxin will propagate, I suppose, and that'll be the end of Dale. If it isn't, we'll try something else."

He turned back to his work, and Azazel vanished. The morning dragged past slowly. Carnevan ate at a nearby restaurant, wondering what his familiar demon was doing, and was rather surprised to find that he had a hearty appetite. During the afternoon, Diana phoned. She had apparently found out about Carnevan's engagement to Phyllis. She had already telephoned Phyllis.

Carnevan hung up, rigidly repressing his violent rage. After a brief moment he dialed Phyllis's number. She was not at home, he was told.

"Tell her I'll be out to see her tonight," he growled, and slammed the receiver down in its cradle. It was rather a relief to look up and see the shrouded form of Azazel in the chair.

"It's done," the demon said. "Dale has spinal meningitis. He doesn't know it yet, but the toxin propagated very rapidly. A curious experiment. But it worked."

Carnevan tried to focus his mind. It was Phyllis he was thinking of now. He was in love with her, of course—but she was so damned rigid, so incredibly puritanical. He had made one slip in the past. In her eyes, that might be enough. Would she break the engagement? Surely not! In this day and age, amorous peccadilloes were more or less taken for granted, even by a girl who has been reared in Boston. Carnevan considered his fingernails.

After a time he made an excuse to see Eli Dale, asking his advice on some unimportant business problem, and

scrutinized carefully the old man's face. Dale was flushed and bright-eyed, but otherwise seemed normal. Yet the mark of death was on him, Carnevan knew. He would die, the senior partnership would devolve on someone else—and the first step in Carnevan's plan was taken.

As for Phyllis and Diana—why, after all, he owned a familiar demon! With the powers at his control, he could solve this problem, too. Just how he would do that, Carnevan did not know as yet; ordinary methods, he thought, should be used first in every case. He must not grow too dependent on magic.

He dismissed Azazel for the time and drove that night to Phyllis's home. But before that, he made a stop at Diana's apartment. The scene was brief and stormy while it lasted.

Dark, slim, furious and lovely, Diana said she wouldn't let him marry.

"Why not?" Carnevan wanted to know. "After all, my dear, if you want money, I can arrange that."

Diana said unpleasant things about Phyllis. She hurled an ash tray down and stamped on it. "So I'm not good enough to marry! But she is!"

"Sit down and be quiet," Carnevan suggested. "Try and analyze your feelings—"

"You cold-blooded fish!"

"—and see just where you stand. You're not in love with me. Dangling me on a string gives you a feeling of power and possession. You don't want any other woman to have me."

"I pity any woman who does," Diana remarked, selecting another ash tray. She looked remarkably pretty, but Carnevan was in no mood to appreciate beauty.

"All right," he said. "Listen to me. If you string along, you won't lack for money—or anything. But if you try to cause trouble again, you'll certainly regret it."

"I don't scare easily," Diana snapped. "Where are you going? Off to see that yellow-haired wench, I suppose?"

Carnevan favored her with an imperturbable smile, donned his topcoat, and vanished. He drove to the home

of the yellow-haired wench, where he encountered not-unforeseen difficulties. But finally he out-argued the maid and was ushered in to face an icicle sitting silently on a couch. It was Mrs. Mardrake.

"Phyllis does not wish to see you, Gerald," she said, her prim mouth biting off the words.

Carnevan girded his loins and began to talk. He talked well. So convincing was his story that he almost persuaded himself that Diana was a myth—that the whole affair had been cooked up by some personal enemy. Mrs. Mardrake finally capitulated, after an internal struggle of some length.

"There must be no scandal," she said at last. "If I thought there was a word of truth in what that woman said to Phyllis—"

"A man in my position has enemies," Carnevan said, thus reminding his hostess that, maritally speaking, he was a fish worth hooking. She sighed.

"Very well, Gerald. I'll ask Phyllis to see you. Wait here."

She swept out of the room, and Carnevan suppressed a smile. Yet he knew it would not be this easy to convince Phyllis.

She did not appear immediately. Carnevan guessed that Mrs. Mardrake was having difficulty in persuading her daughter of his bona fides. He wandered about the room, taking out his cigarette case and then, with a glance at the surroundings, putting it back. What a Victorian house!

A heavy family Bible on its stand caught his eye. For want of anything else to do, he went toward it, opening the book at random. A passage leaped up at him.

"If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God."

It was, perhaps, an instinctive reaction that made Carnevan reach up to touch his forehead. He smiled at the conceit. Superstition! Yes—but so were demons.

At that moment Phyllis came in, looking like Evangeline in Acadia, with much the same martyred expression Longfellow's heroine might have worn. Suppressing an ungal-

lant impulse to kick her, Carnevan reached for her hands, failed to capture them, and followed her to a couch.

Puritanism and a pious upbringing has its drawbacks, he thought. This became more evident when, after ten minutes, Phyllis still remained unconvinced of Carnevan's innocence.

"I didn't tell mother everything," she said quietly. "That woman said some things— Well, I could see she was telling the truth."

"I love you," Carnevan said inconsequentially.

"You don't. Or you'd never have taken up with this woman."

"Even if it happened before I knew you?"

"I could forgive many things, Gerald," she said, "but not that."

"You," Carnevan remarked, "don't want a husband. You want a graven image."

It was impossible to break through her calm self-righteousness. Carnevan lost his self-possession. He argued and pleaded, despising himself as he did so. Of all the women in the world, he had to fall in love with the most hide-bound and puritanical of them all. Her silence had the quality of enraging him almost to hysteria. He had an impulse to shout obscenities into the room's quiet, religious atmosphere. Phyllis, he knew, was humiliating him horribly, and deep within him something cowered rawly under the lashing he could not stop himself from giving it.

"I love you, Gerald," was all she would say. "But you don't love me. I can't forgive you this. Please go before you make it worse."

He flung out of the house, seething with fury, hot and sick with the realization that he had failed to maintain his poise. Phyllis, Phyllis, Phyllis! An imperturbable iceberg. She knew nothing of humanity. Emotions had never existed in her breast unless they were well-schooled, dainty as an antimacassar of lace. A china doll, expecting the rest of the world to be of china. Carnevan stood by his car, shaking with rage, wishing more than anything else on earth to hurt Phyllis as he himself had been hurt.

Something stirred inside the car. It was Azazel, the

cloak shrouding his dark body, the bone-white face expressionless.

Carnevan flung out an arm behind him, pointing. "The girl!" he said hoarsely. "She . . . she—"

"You need not speak," Azazel murmured. "I read your thoughts. I shall—do as you wish."

He was gone. Carnevan sprang into the car, inserted the key, savagely started the motor. As the vehicle began to move he heard a thin, knife-edged scream lancing out from the house he had left.

He stopped the car and raced back, chewing his lip.

As the hastily summoned physician said, Phyllis Mar-drake had suffered a severe nervous shock. The reason was unknown, but, presumably, it might have been the ordeal of her interview with Carnevan, who said nothing to dispel that illusion. Phyllis simply lay and twitched, her eyes staring glassily. Sometimes her lips formed words.

"The cloak— Under the cloak—"

And then she would alternately laugh and scream until exhaustion claimed her.

She would recover, but it would take some time. In the meanwhile, Phyllis was sent to a private sanitarium, where she fell into hysterics whenever she saw Dr. Joss, who happened to be baldheaded. Her jabbering about cloaks grew less frequent, and occasionally Carnevan was permitted to visit her. For she asked for him. The quarrel had been patched up, and Phyllis half-admitted that she had been wrong in her stand.

When she had completely recovered she would marry Carnevan. But there must be no more slips.

The horror she had seen was buried deep in her mind, emerging only during delirium, and in her frequent nightmares. Carnevan was thankful that she did not remember Azazel. Yet he saw much of the demon these days—for he was fulfilling a malicious, cruel little scheme of his own.

It had started soon after Phyllis's breakdown, when Diana kept telephoning him at the office. At first Carnevan spoke shortly to her. Then he realized that she, actually, was responsible for Phyllis's near-madness.

It was, of course, right that she should suffer. Not death. Anyone might die. Eli Dale, for example, was already fatally ill with spinal meningitis. But a more subtle form of punishment—a torture such as Phyllis had undergone.

Carnevan's face wore an expression that was not pleasant to see as he summoned the demon and issued instructions.

"Slowly, gradually, she will be driven insane," he said. "She will be given time to realize what is happening. Give her—glimpses, so to speak. A cumulative series of inexplicable happenings. I'll give you the detailed directions when I work them out. She told me that she isn't easily frightened," Carnevan finished, and rose to pour himself a drink. He offered one to the demon, but it was refused.

Azazel sat motionless in a dark corner of the apartment, occasionally glancing out of the window to where Central Park lay far below.

Carnevan was struck by a sudden thought. "How do you react to this? Demons are supposed to be evil. Does it give you pleasure to . . . to hurt people?"

The beautiful skull face was turned toward him. "Do you know what evil is, Carnevan?"

The man splashed soda into his rye. "I see. A matter of semantics. Of course, it's an arbitrary term. Humanity has set up its own standards—"

Azazel's slanted, opalescent eyes glittered. "That is moral anthropomorphism. And egotism. You haven't considered environment. The physical properties of this world of yours caused good and evil, as you know it."

It was Carnevan's sixth drink, and he felt argumentative. "That I don't quite understand. Morality comes from the mind and the emotions."

"A river has its source," Azazel countered. "But there's a difference between the Mississippi and the Colorado. If human beings had evolved in—well, my world, for example—the whole pattern of good and evil would have been entirely different. Ants have a social structure. But it isn't like yours. The environment is different."

"There's a difference between insects and men, too."

The demon shrugged. "We are not alike. Less alike than

you and an ant. For both of you have, basically, two common instincts. Self-preservation and propagation of the species. Demons can't propagate."

"Most authorities agree on that," Carnevan granted. "Possibly it explains the reason for changelings, too. How is it that there are so many kinds of demons?"

Azazel questioned him with his eyes.

"Oh—you know. Gnomes and kobolds and trolls and jinn and werewolves and vampires and—"

"There are more kinds of demons than humanity knows," Azazel explained. "The reason is pretty obvious. Your world tends toward a fixed pattern—a state of stasis. You know what entropy is. The ultimate aim of your universe is a unity, changeless and eternal. Your branches of evolution will finally meet and remain at one fixed type. Such offshoots as the moa and the auk will die out, as dinosaurs and mammoths have died. In the end there will be stasis. My universe tends toward physical anarchy. In the beginning there was only one type. In the end it will be ultimate chaos."

"Your universe is like a negative of mine," Carnevan pondered. "But—wait! You said demons can't die. And they can't propagate. How can there be any progress at all?"

"I said demons can't commit suicide," Azazel pointed out. "Death may come to them, but from an outside source. That applies to procreation, too."

It was too confused for Carnevan. "You must have emotions. Self-preservation implies fear of death."

"Our emotions are not yours. Clinically, I can analyze and understand Phyllis's reactions. She was reared very rigidly, and subconsciously she has resented that oppression. She never admitted, even to herself, her desire to break free. But you were a symbol to her. Secretly she admired and envied you, because you were a man and, as she thought, able to do whatever you wanted. Love is a false synonym for propagation, as the soul is a wish fulfillment creation growing out of self-preservation. Neither exists. Phyllis's mind is a maze of inhibitions, fears, and hopes. Puritanism, to her, represents security. That was

why she couldn't forgive you for your affair with Diana. It was an excuse for retreating to the security of her former life pattern."

Carnevan listened interestedly. "Go on."

"When I appeared to her, the psychic shock was violent. Her subconscious ruled for a time. That was why she became reconciled to you. She is an escapist; her previous security seemed to have failed, so she fulfills both her escape wish and her desire for protection by agreeing to marry you."

Carnevan mixed himself another drink. He remembered something.

"You just said the soul is nonexistent—eh?"

Azazel's body stirred under the shrouding cloak. "You misunderstood me."

"I don't think so," Carnevan said, feeling a cold, deadly horror under the warm numbness of liquor. "Our bargain was that you serve me in exchange for my soul. Now you imply that I have no soul. What was your real motive?"

"You're trying to frighten yourself," the demon murmured, his strange eyes alert. "All through history, religion has been founded on the hypothesis that souls exist."

"Do they?"

"Why not?"

"What is a soul like?" Carnevan asked.

"You couldn't imagine," Azazel said. "There'd be no standard of comparison. By the way, Eli Dale died two minutes ago. You're now the senior partner of the firm. May I congratulate you?"

"Thank you," Carnevan nodded. "We'll change the subject, if you like. But I intend to find out the truth sooner or later. If I have no soul, you're up to something else. However—let's get back to Diana."

"You wish to drive her mad."

"I wish *you* to drive her mad. She is the schizophrenic type—slim and long boned. She has a stupid sort of self-confidence. She has built her life on a foundation of things she knows to be real. Those things must be removed."

"Well?"

"She is afraid of the dark," Carnevan said, and his smile

was quite unpleasant. "Be subtle, Azazel. She will hear voices. She will see people following her. Delusions of persecution. One by one her senses will begin to fail her. Or, rather, deceive her. She'll smell things no one else does. She'll hear voices. She'll taste poison in her food. She'll begin to feel things—unpleasant things. If necessary, she may, at the last—see things."

"This is evil, I suppose," Azazel observed, rising from his chair. "My interest is purely clinical. I can reason that such matters are important to you, but that's as far as it goes."

The telephone rang. Carnevan learned that Eli Dale was dead—spinal meningitis.

To celebrate the occasion, he poured another drink and toasted Azazel, who had vanished to visit Diana. Carnevan's thin, hard face was only slightly flushed by the liquor he had consumed. He stood in the center of the apartment and revolved slowly, eyeing the furnishings, the books, the bric-a-brac. It would be well to find another place—something larger and better. A place suitable for a married couple. He wondered how long it would be before Phyllis was completely recovered.

Azazel— Just what was the demon after?—he wondered. Certainly not his soul. What, then?

One night, two weeks later, he rang the bell of Diana's apartment. The girl's voice asked who was there, and she opened the door a slight crack before admitting Carnevan. He was shocked at the change in her.

There was little tangible alteration. Diana was holding herself under iron control, but her make-up was too heavy. That in itself was revealing. It was a symbol of the mental shield she was trying to erect against the psychic invasion. Carnevan said solicitously, "Good Lord, Diana, what's wrong? You sounded hysterical over the phone. I told you last night you should see a doctor."

She fumbled for a cigarette, which trembled slightly in her hands as Carnevan lit it. "I have. He . . . he wasn't much help, Jerry. I'm so glad you're not angry at me any more."

"Angry? Here, sit down. That's it. I'll mix a drink. No, I got over being angry; we get along together, and Phyllis—well, we couldn't have our cake and eat it. She's in a sanitarium, you know, and it'll be a long while before she gets out. Even then she may be a lunatic—" Carnevan hesitated.

Diana pushed back her dark hair and turned to face him on the couch. "Jerry, do you think I'm going crazy?"

"No, I don't," he said. "I think you need a rest, or a change."

She didn't hear. Her head was tilted to one side, as though she listened to a soundless voice. Glancing up, Carnevan saw Azazel standing across the room—invisible to the girl, but apparently not inaudible.

"Diana!" he said sharply.

Her lips parted. Her voice was unsteady as she looked at him. "Sorry. You were saying?"

"What did the doctor tell you?"

"Nothing much." She did not wish to follow up the line of discussion. Instead, she took the drink Carnevan had mixed, eyed it, and sipped the highball. Then she put down the glass.

"Anything wrong?" the man asked.

"No. How does it taste to you?"

"All right."

Carnevan wondered just what Diana had tasted in her drink. Bitter almonds, perhaps. Another of Azazel's deft illusions. He ran his fingers through the girl's hair, feeling a thrill of power as he did so. A nasty sort of revenge, he thought. Odd that Diana's distress did not touch him in the slightest degree. Yet he was not basically evil, Carnevan knew. The old, old problem of arbitrary standards—right and wrong.

Azazel said—and his words were heard by Carnevan alone: "Her control cannot last much longer. I think she'll break tomorrow. A manic-depressive may commit suicide, so I'll guard against that. Every dangerous weapon she touches will seem red-hot to her."

Abruptly, without warning, the demon vanished. Carne-

van grunted and finished his drink. From the corner of his eye he saw something move.

Slowly he turned his head, but it was gone. What had it been? Like a black shadow. Formless, inchoate. Without reason, Carnevan's hands were shaking. Utterly amazed, he put down his drink and surveyed the apartment.

Azazel's presence had never affected him thus before. It was probably a reaction—no doubt he had been keeping a tight control over his nerves, without noticing it. After all, demons *are* supernatural.

From the corner of his eye he again saw the cloudy blackness. This time he did not move as he tried to analyze it. The thing hovered just on the edge of his range of vision. Imperceptibly, his eyes moved slightly, and it was gone.

A formless black cloud. Formless? No, it was, he thought, spindle-shaped, motionless and upright on its axis. His hands were shaking more than ever.

Diana was eyeing him. "What's the matter, Jerry? Am I making you nervous?"

"Too much work at the office," he said. "I'm the new senior partner, you know. I'll push off now. You'd better see that doctor again tomorrow."

She did not reply, only watching him as he let himself out of the apartment. Driving home, Carnevan again caught a brief glimpse of the black, foggy spindle. Not once could he get a clear view of it. It hovered just on the border of his vision. He sensed, though he could not see, certain features cloudily discerned in it. What they were he could not guess. But his hands trembled.

Coldly, furiously, his intellect fought against the unreasonable terror of his physical structure. He faced the alien. Or—No—he did not face it. It slid away and vanished. Azazel?

He called the demon's name, but there was no response. Hurtling toward his apartment, Carnevan sucked at his lower lip and thought hard. How—Why—

What was so unreasonably, subtly horrifying about this—this apparition?

He did not know, unless it was, perhaps, that vague hint of features in the blackness which he could never face di-

rectly. He sensed that those features were unspeakable, and yet he had a perverse curiosity to behold them directly. Once safe in his apartment, he again glimpsed the black spindle, at the edge of his vision, near the window. He swung swiftly to face it; it vanished. But at that moment a shock of unreasoning horror gripped Carnevan, a deadly, sickening feeling that he *might* see that against which his whole physical being revolted.

"Azazel," he called softly.

Nothing.

"Azazel!"

Carnevan poured a drink, lit a cigarette and found a magazine. He was untroubled until bedtime and during the night, but in the morning, when first he opened his eyes, something black and spindle-shaped skittered away as he looked toward it.

He telephoned Diana. She seemed much better, she said. Apparently Azazel wasn't on the job. Unless the black thing *was* Azazel. Carnevan hurriedly drove to his office, had black coffee sent up, and then drank milk instead. His nerves needed soothing rather than stimulating.

Twice that morning the black spindle appeared in the office. Each time there was that horrifying knowledge that if Carnevan looked at it directly, the features would be clear to him. And in spite of himself, he tried to look. Vainly, of course.

His work suffered. Presently he knocked off and drove to the sanitarium to see Phyllis. She was much better, and spoke of the forthcoming marriage. Carnevan's palms were clammy as a black spindle retreated hurriedly across the sunny, pleasant room.

Worst of all, perhaps, was the realization that if he *did* succeed in looking squarely at the phantasm, he would not go mad. But he would want to. That he realized quite well. His instinctive physical reaction told him as much. Nothing belonging to this universe or any remotely kindred one could bring about the empty hollowness within his body, the shocking feeling that his cellular structure was trying to shrink away from the—the spindle.

He drove back to Manhattan, narrowly avoiding an accident on the George Washington Bridge as he closed his eyes to avoid seeing what wasn't there when he opened them again. It was past sundown. The jeweled towers of New York rose against a purple sky. Their geometrical neatness looked devoid of warmth, inhospitable and unhelpful. Carnevan stopped at a bar, drank two whiskeys, and left when a black spindle ran across the mirror.

Back in his apartment, he sat with his head in his hands for perhaps five minutes. When he stood up, his face was hard and vicious. His eyes flickered slightly; then he caught himself.

"Azazel," he said—and then more loudly: "Azazel! I am your master! Appear to me!"

His thought probed out, forceful, hard as iron. Behind it lay unformed terror. Was Azazel the black spindle? Would he appear—completely?

"Azazel! I am your master! Obey me! I summon you!"

The demon stood before Carnevan, materializing from empty air. The beautiful face of pale bone was expressionless; the slanted, opalescent, pupil-less eyes were impassive. Under the dark cloak, Azazel's body shivered once and was still.

With a sigh, Carnevan sank down in his chair. "All right," he said. "Now what's up? What's the idea?"

Azazel said quietly, "I went back to my own world. I would have remained there had you not summoned me."

"What is this—spindle thing?"

"It is not of your world," the demon said. "It is not of mine. It pursues me."

"Why?"

"You have your stories of men who have been haunted. Sometimes by demons. In my world—I have been haunted."

Carnevan licked his lips. "By this thing?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

Azazel's shoulders seemed to bunch together. "I do not know. Except that it is very horrible, and it pursues me."

Carnevan lifted his hands and pushed hard at his eyes.

"No. No. It's too crazy. *Something* haunting a demon. Where did it come from?"

"I know of my universe and yours. That is all. This thing came from outside both our time sectors, I think."

With a sudden flash of insight, Carnevan said, "That was why you offered to serve me."

Azazel's face did not change. "Yes. The thing was getting closer and closer to me. I thought if I entered your universe, I might escape it. But it followed."

"And you couldn't enter this world without my help. All that talk about my soul was so much guff."

"Yes. The thing followed me. I fled back to my universe, and it did not pursue. Perhaps it could not. It may be able to move in only one direction—from its world to mine, and then to yours, but not the other way. It remained here, I know."

"It remained," Carnevan said, very white, "to haunt me."

"You feel the same horror toward it? I wondered. We are so unlike physically—"

"I never see it directly. It has—features?"

Azazel did not answer. Silence hung in the room.

At last Carnevan bent forward in his chair. "The thing haunts you—unless you go back to your own world. Then it haunts me. Why?"

"I don't know. It's alien to me, Carnevan."

"But you're a demon! You have supernatural powers—"

"Supernatural to you. There are powers supernatural to demons."

Carnevan poured himself a drink. His eyes were narrowed.

"Very well. I have enough power over you to keep you in this world, or you wouldn't have returned when I summoned you. So it's a deadlock. As long as you stay here, that thing will haunt you. I won't let you go to *your* world, for then it would haunt me—as it has been doing. Though it seems to be gone now."

"It has not gone," Azazel said tonelessly.

Carnevan's body shook uncontrollably. "Mentally I can

tell myself not to be frightened. Physically the thing is . . . is—”

“It is horrible even to me,” Azazel said. “Remember, I have seen it directly. Eventually it will destroy me, if you keep me in this world of yours.”

“Humans have exorcised demons,” Carnevan pointed out. “Isn’t there any way you can exorcise that thing?”

“No.”

“A blood sacrifice?” Carnevan suggested nervously. “Holy water? Bell, book and candle?” He sensed the foolishness of the proposals as he made them.

But Azazel looked thoughtful. “None of those. But perhaps—life force.” The dark cloak quivered.

Carnevan said, “Elementals have been exorcised, according to folklore. But first it’s necessary to make them visible and tangible. Giving them ectoplasm—blood—I don’t know.”

The demon nodded slowly. “In other words, translating the equation to its lowest common denominator. Humans cannot fight a disembodied spirit. But if that spirit is drawn into a vessel of flesh, it is subject to earthly physical laws. I think that is the way, Carnevan.”

“You mean—”

“The thing that pursues me is entirely alien, But if I can reduce it to its lowest common denominator, I can destroy it. As I could destroy you, had I not promised to serve you. And of course, if your destruction would help me. Suppose I give that thing a sacrifice. It must, for a time, partake of the nature of the thing it assimilates. Human life force should do.”

Carnevan listened eagerly. “Will it work?”

“I think it will. I will give the thing a human sacrifice. It will become briefly and partially, human, and a demon can easily destroy a human being.”

“A sacrifice—”

“Diana. It will be easiest, since I already have weakened the fortress of her consciousness. I must break down all the barriers of her brain—a psychical substitute for the sacrificial knife of pagan religions.”

Carnevan gulped the last of his drink. "Then you can destroy the thing?"

Azazel nodded. "That is my belief. But what will be left of Diana will be in no way human. You will be asked questions by the authorities. However, I shall try to protect you."

And with that he vanished before Carnevan could raise an objection. The apartment was deadly still. Carnevan looked around, half expecting to see the black spindle flashing away as he glanced toward it. But there was no trace of anything supernatural.

He was still sitting in the chair, half an hour later, when the telephone rang. Carnevan answered it.

"Yes. . . . Who? . . . *What?* Murdered? . . . No, I . . . I'll be right over."

He replaced the receiver and straightened, eyes aglow. Diana was—was dead. Murdered, quite horribly, and there were certain factors that puzzled the police. Well, he was safe. Suspicion might point at him, but nothing could ever be proved. He had not gone near Diana all that day.

"Congratulations, Azazel," Carnevan said softly. He crushed out his cigarette and turned to get his topcoat from the closet.

The black spindle had been waiting behind him. This time it did not flash away as he looked at it.

It did not flash away. Carnevan saw it. He saw it distinctly. He saw every feature of what he had mistakenly imagined to be a spindle of black fog.

The worst part of it was that Carnevan didn't go mad.

Home There's No Returning

THE GENERAL opened the door and came softly into the big, bright underground room. There by the wall under the winking control panels lay the insulated box, nine feet long, four feet wide, just as it always lay, just as he always saw it—day or night, waking or sleeping, eyes open or closed. The box shaped like a tomb. But out of it, if they were lucky, something would be born.

The General was tall and gaunt. He had stopped looking at himself in the mirror because his own face had begun to frighten him with its exhaustion, and he hated to meet the look of his own sunken eyes. He stood there feeling the beat of unseen machinery throb through the rock all around him. His nerves secretly changed each rhythmic pulse into some vast explosion, some new missile against which all defenses would be useless.

He called sharply in the empty laboratory, "Broome!"

No answer. The General walked forward and stood above the box. Over it on the control panel lights winked softly on and off, and now and then a needle quivered. Suddenly the General folded up his fist and smashed the knuckles down hard on the reverberent metal of the box. A sound like hollow thunder boomed out of it.

"Easy, easy," somebody said. Abraham Broome was standing in the doorway, a very old man, small and wrin-

kled, with bright, doubtful eyes. He shuffled hastily to the box and laid a soothing hand on it, as if the box might be sentient for all he knew.

"Where the hell were you?" the General asked.

Broome said, "Resting. Letting some ideas incubate. Why?"

"You were *resting*?" The General sounded like a man who had never heard the word before. Even to himself he sounded strange. He pressed his eyelids with finger and thumb, because the room seemed to be dwindling all around him, and the face of Broome receded thinly into gray distances. But even with shut eyes he could still see the box and the sleeping steel giant inside, waiting patiently to be born. Without opening his eyes, he said, "Wake it up, Broome."

Broome's voice cracked a little. "But I haven't fin—" "Wake it up."

"Something's gone wrong, General?"

General Conway pressed his eyelids until the darkness inside reddened—as all this darkness underground would redden when the last explosions came. Perhaps tomorrow. Not later than the day after. He was almost sure of that. He opened his eyes quickly. Broome was looking at him with a bright, dubious gaze, his lids sagging at the outer corners with the weight of unregarded years.

"I can't wait any longer," Conway said carefully. "None of us can wait. This war is too much for human beings to handle any more." He paused and let the rest of his breath go out in a sigh, not caring—perhaps not daring—to say the thing aloud that kept reverberating in his head like steadily approaching thunder. Tomorrow, or the day after—that was the deadline. The enemy was going to launch an all-out attack on the Pacific Front Sector within the next forty-eight hours.

The computers said so. The computers had ingested every available factor from the state of the weather to the conditions of the opposing general's childhood years, and this was what they said. They could be wrong. Now and then they were wrong, when the date they received was in-

complete. But you couldn't go on the assumption that they would be. You had to assume an attack would come before day after tomorrow.

General Conway had not—he thought—slept since the last attack a week ago, and that was a minor thing compared to what the computers predicted now. He was amazed in a remote, unwondering way, that the general who preceded him had lasted so long. He felt a sort of gray malice toward the man who would come after him. But there wasn't much satisfaction in that thought, either. His next in command was an incompetent fool. Conway had taken up responsibility a long time ago, and he could no more lay it down now than he would detach his painfully swimming head for a while and set it gently aside on some quiet shelf to rest. No, he would have to carry his head on his shoulders and his responsibilities on his back until—

"Either the robot can take over the job or it can't," he said. "But we can't wait any longer to find out."

He stooped suddenly and with a single powerful heave tore the box-lid open and sent it crashing back. Broome stepped up beside him and the two of them looked down on the thing that lay placidly inside, face up, passionless, its single eye unlit and as blank as Adam's before he tasted the fruit. The front panel of its chest was open upon a maze of transistors, infinitely miniature components, thin silver lines of printed circuits. A maze of fine wiring nested around the robot, but most of it was disconnected by now. The robot was almost ready to be born.

"What are we waiting for?" Conway demanded harshly. "I said wake it up!"

"Not yet, General. It isn't safe—yet. I can't predict what might happen—"

"Won't it work?"

Broome looked down at the steel mask winking with reflected lights from the panel boards above it. His face wrinkled up with hesitation. He bent to touch one finger to a wire that led into the massive opened chest at a circuit labeled "In-Put."

"It's programed," he said very doubtfully. "And yet—"

"Then it's ready," Conway's voice was flat. "You heard me, Broome. I can't wait any longer. Wake it up."

"I'm afraid to wake it up," Broome said . . .

The General's ears played a familiar trick on him. *I'm afraid—I'm afraid* . . . He couldn't make the voice stop echoing. But fear is what all flesh is heir to, he thought. Flesh knows its limitations. It was time for steel to take over.

Pushbutton warfare used to look like the easy way to fight. Now man knows better. Man knows what the weakest link is—himself. Flesh and blood. Man has the hardest job of all, the job of making decisions on incomplete data. Until now, no machine could do that. The computers were the very heartbeat and brain-pulse of pushbutton war, but they were limited thinkers. And they could shrug off responsibility with an easy, "No answer—insufficient data." After which it was up to man to give them what more they needed. The right information, the right questions, the right commands. No wonder the turnover in generals was so high.

So the Electronic Guidance Operator was conceived. The General looked down at it, lying quietly waiting for birth. EGO was its name. And it would have free will, after a fashion. The real complexity of the fabulous computers lies not in the machines themselves, but in the programing fed into them. The memory banks are no good at all without instructions about how to use the data. And instructions are extremely complex to work out.

That was going to be EGO's job from now on. EGO had been designed to act like the human brain, on only partial knowledge, as no machine before had ever done. Flesh and blood had reached their limits, Conway thought. Now was the hour for steel to take over. So EGO lay ready to taste the first bite of the apple Adam bit. Tireless like steel, resourceful like flesh, munching the apple mankind was so tired of munching. . . .

"What do you mean, afraid?" Conway asked.

"It's got free will," Broome said. "Don't you see? I

can't set up free will *and* controls. I can only give it one basic order—*win the war*. But I can't tell it how. I don't know how. I can't even tell it what not to do. EGO will simply wake like—well, like a man educated and matured in his sleep, waking for the first time. It will feel needs, and act on its wants. I can't control it. And that scares me, General."

Conway stood still, blinking, feeling exhaustion vibrate shrilly in his nerve ends. He sighed and touched the switch on his lapel microphone. "Conway here. Send Colonel Garden to Operation Christmas. And a couple of MPS."

Broome burst into very rapid speech. "No, General! Give me another week. Give me just a few days—"

"You've got about two minutes," Conway said. He thought, See how you like quick decisions. And this is only one. I've had five years of it. How long since I slept last? Well, never mind, never mind that. Make Broome decide. Push him. *Resting!*

Broome said, "I won't do it. No. I can't take the responsibility. I need more time to test—"

"You'll go on testing till doomsday. You'll never activate it," Conway said.

The door opened. The two MPs followed Colonel Garden into the room. Garden's uniform looked sloppy, as usual. The man wasn't built for a uniform. But the dark pouches under his eyes tempered Conway's contempt. Garden hadn't slept much lately, either. It was past time for all of them now—EGO must pick up the burden and justify its name.

"Arrest Broome," Conway said. He ignored their startled looks. "Colonel, can you wake up this robot?"

"Wake it up, sir?"

Conway gestured impatiently. "Activate it, start it going."

"Well, yes, sir, I do know how, but—"

Conway didn't bother to listen. He pointed to the robot, and whatever else Garden was saying became a meaningless yammer in his ears. Forty-eight hours, he thought—time enough to test it before the attack comes, if we're lucky. And it had better work. He pressed thumb and finger

to his eyes again to keep the room from swinging in slow, balancing circles around him.

Broome from the far end of nowhere said, "Wait, General! Give me just one day more! It isn't—"

Conway waved his hand, not opening his eyes. He heard one of the MPs say something, and there was a brief scuffle. Then the door closed. The General sighed and opened his eyes.

Garden was looking at him with the same doubt Broome had shown. Conway scowled and the other man turned quickly to the box where the robot lay. He stooped as Broome had done and touched with one finger the wire cord still leading into the spot marked "In-Put."

"Once this is detached, sir, he's on his own," he said.

"The thing has its orders," the General said briefly. "Go on, do something."

There was a little pinging noise as Garden neatly detached the cord. He closed the steel plate that sealed Ego's inwards. He ran his hands around the steel limbs to make sure all the nest of wires was clear. Then he got up and crossed to the instrument panel.

"Sir," he said.

Conway didn't answer for a moment. He was rocking just perceptibly to and fro, heel and toe, like a tower beginning to totter. He said, "Don't tell me anything I don't want to hear."

Garden said composedly, "I don't know just what to expect, sir. Will you tell me as soon as the robot starts to respond? Even the slightest—"

"I'll tell you." Conway looked down at the placid blind face. Wake up, he thought. Or else don't. It doesn't really matter. Because we can't go on like this. Wake up. Then I can sleep. Or don't wake up. Then I can die.

The round, flat, cyclopean lens of the robot's eye began to glow softly. In the same moment a rising hum of power from the instrument panel made the lights dim, and all the reflections shimmering from Ego's steel surfaces paled and then burned strong again as auxiliary switches kicked in. One by one the lights on the panel went out. The quivering needles rocked to and fro at zero and quieted.

The robot stared blankly up at the ceiling, not moving. Conway, looking down, thought, Now it's your turn. I've gone as far as a man can go. Take over, robot. Move!

The robot's whole body shivered very, very slightly. The eye brightened until it sent a cone of light straight up at the ceiling. Without the slightest warning it lifted both arms at once out of the box and smashed its metal hands together with a clang that made both men jump. Conway gasped with surprise and released tension. Uselessly he said, "Garden!"

Garden opened a switch and the singing whine of power died. The robot was motionless again, but this time, like an effigy on a tomb, it lay with palms pressed together hard. The shivering began again and rhythmic clicking sounds like many clocks ticking out of phase could be heard faintly from deep inside the big steel cylinder of the body.

"What's happening?" Conway asked, whispering without knowing why. "What made it do that?"

"Activation," Garden said, also whispering. "It—" He paused, cleared his throat self-consciously, and spoke aloud. "I'm not too familiar with this, sir. I suppose the basic tensions are setting up. They'll be relieved through energy transformation of some kind or other, depending on the homeostatic principle that Broome—"

From the box and the supine robot a strange, hollow voice spoke in a kind of howl. "*Want. . .*" it said painfully, and then seemed to stop itself short. "*Want. . .*" it said again, and ceased abruptly.

"What is it?" Conway wasn't sure whether he was addressing Ego or Garden. The sound of the voice frightened him. It was so mindless, like a ghost's, flat and hollow.

"There's a speaker in its chest," Garden said, his own voice a little shaken. "I'd forgotten. But it ought to communicate better than this. It—he—EGO—" Garden gestured helplessly. "Some kind of block, I should think." He stepped forward and bent over the box, looking down. "You—want something?" he asked awkwardly, sounding foolish. Conway thought what an ineffectual man he was.

But at least the robot was awake now. Surely in a little while it would be adjusted, ready to take over. . . .

Well, maybe they could all relax a little, after that. Maybe Conway could even sleep. A sudden panic shook him briefly as he thought, What if I've forgotten how to sleep? And exhaustion rolled up over him like water washing over a man of sand, relaxing and crumbling away the very components of his limbs. In just a moment I'll be free, Conway thought. When EGO takes over. I've made it. I haven't gone mad or killed myself. And now I won't have to think any more. I'll just stand here, without moving. I won't even lie down. If gravity wants to pull me down, that's up to gravity. . . .

Garden, bending over the box, said again, "What is it you want?"

"*Want. . . .*" Ego said. And suddenly the prayerful hands flashed apart, the four-foot arms flung wide like shining flails. Then it lay motionless again, but Colonel Garden was no longer leaning over the box. Conway saw, with hazy detachment, that Garden was crumpling down against the wall. The flail had caught him across the side of the neck, and he lay with his head at an angle like a jointed doll, more motionless now than the robot.

Moving slowly, Conway touched the switch of his lapel microphone. The silence hummed receptively. There was a long interval while he couldn't quite remember his name. But presently he spoke.

"General Conway here. Bring Broome back to Operation Christmas."

He looked down at the robot. "Wait a while," he said. "Broome will know."

The robot's arms bent. The steel hands closed upon the sides of the box, and with a shriek of metal parting from metal it ripped the box apart.

Now it was born. Born? Untimely ripped, Conway thought. Untimely ripped. . . . I suppose I was wrong. What next?

EGO rose upright, eight feet tall, solid as a tower, and like a walking tower it moved. It moved straight forward until the wall stopped it. Slowly it turned, its cone of vision

sweeping the room, its motions at first jerky and uneven, but becoming smoother and surer with the warming-up process of the newly activated machine. It was still trembling just perceptibly, and the ticking rose and fell inside it, drew out in slow series, quickened, burst into rapid chatter, slowed again. Sorting, accepting, rejecting, evaluating the new-found world which was now the robot's burden. . . .

It saw the wall of control panels which had activated it. The beam of its sight swept the panels briefly, and then with a burst of surprising speed it rushed across the room toward the panels. Its hands danced over the plugboard, the switches, the dials.

Nothing happened. The panels were dead.

"*Want. . .*" said the hollow, inhuman cry from EGO's reverberating chest. And with two sweeps of the steel hands it sheared cleanly off the board all the projecting globes and dials and switches. It sank steel fingers into the sockets and ripped the plating off. It wound both hands deep into the colored wiring inside and ripped great handfuls out in a sort of measured frenzy.

"EGO!" Conway said.

It heard him. It turned, very fast. The bright gaze bathed him for a moment. He felt cold as it held him in its focus, as if a mind the temperature of steel were locked with his. He could almost feel the touch of the newfledged, infinitely resourceful brain.

The light of its gaze passed him and saw the door. It dismissed Conway. It surged forward like a tank and hit the door flatly with its chest, cracking the panels in two. With a single motion it swept the wreckage away on both sides and rolled forward through the splintered frame.

By the time Conway reached the door the robot was a long way off down the underground corridor, moving faster and faster, dwindling toward the vanishing point like a shrinking drop of quicksilver. Going—somewhere.

"General Conway, sir," somebody said.

He turned. The two MPs flanked Abraham Broome who was craning forward trying to see the wrecked instrument panel from between them.

"Dismissed," Conway said. "Come in, Broome."

The old man went past him obliviously, stooped over Garden's body, shook his head.

"I was afraid of something like this," he said.

Conway felt a moment of intense envy for the motionless Garden. He said, "Yes. I'm sorry. One casualty. We'll all be casualties if EGO doesn't work. How do we know what the other side's doing now? Maybe they've got an EGO too. I made a mistake, Broome. I should have looked ahead a little further. What do we do now?"

"What happened?" Broome was looking incredulously at the shattered wall where the instrument panels had been. "Where's the robot now? I've got to know the details."

A communicator high on the wall coughed and then called Conway's name. Slowly and heavily Conway's mind tried to accept the new demands. But what the communicator said was a jumble of meaningless sounds until one word sprang out at him. *Emergency.*

Attack? An alarm rang shrilly deep in his head. "Repeat," he said wearily.

"General Conway? A robot is destroying equipment in Sector Sub-Five. Attempts to immobilize it are failing. General Conway? A robot is destroying—"

"All right," Conway said. At least, this wasn't an attack, then. Or anyway, not an attack from the enemy. "Conway here. Orders. Don't harm the robot. Instructions follow. Stand by."

He looked at Broome inquiringly, realizing that the old man had been buzzing at him anxiously in meaningless words. "General, General, I've got to know exactly what happened—"

"Shut up and I'll tell you," Conway said. "Wait."

He walked over to a hand basin at the wall, drew a glass of chemical-tasting water and found the tube of benzedrine pills in his pocket. It wouldn't help much. He had been living on the stuff too long. But this ought to be the last push—had to be the last—and every extra ounce of stimulus helped. He could let go soon, but not yet.

He gave Broome a concise, thirty-second summary in a falsely brisk voice. The old man stood silent, pinching

his lip and gazing at Conway with a blank face, his mind obviously ranging around the abstract regions inside his head.

"Well?" Conway asked. "What do you think? Is it running wild or isn't it?" He wanted to reach out and shake Broome awake, but he pushed the impulse down. Once already he had forced the issue over Broome's protest, and he had been wrong. Perhaps fatally wrong. Now he must let the old man think.

"I believe it's on the job," Broome said with maddening deliberation. "I was afraid of something like this—uncontrolled reaction. But the program's built into it and I think it's operating toward the goal we set it. One thing's wrong, of course. It ought to communicate better. There shouldn't be that speech block. We'll have to find out what it wants and why it can't tell us." He paused and blinked up at the com-box on the wall. "Sub-five, didn't they say? What's in Sub-Five?"

"The library," Conway said, and they looked at each other in silence for a second. Then Conway sighed another of his deep, collapsing sighs and said, "Well, we've got to stop it, somehow, and fast. EGO's the most important thing we've got, but if it tears the whole base up—"

"Not quite the most important," Broome said. "Have you thought what it may do next? Since the library was its first goal?"

"What? Don't make me guess."

"It seems to be hunting information. The next stop after the library might be the computers, don't you think?"

Conway said, "Good God," in a flat, exhausted tone. Then he laughed a little without making a sound. He would have to jump into action in the next few moments, and he wasn't sure he could do it. He'd been a fool, of course, pushing action on the robot too soon. Without precautions. He'd gambled, and maybe he had lost. But he knew he'd still do the same if he had it to do over. The gamble wasn't lost yet. And what alternative had he?

"Yes," he said. "The computers. You're right. If it goes after them we'll have to smash it."

"If we can," Broome said soberly. "It thinks fast."

Wearily Conway straightened his shoulders, wondering whether the benzedrine was going to take hold this time. He didn't feel it yet, but he couldn't wait.

"All right," he said. "Let's get going. We know our jobs. Mine's to immobilize Ego, unless he goes for the computers. Yours—find out what he wants. Get it from him before he smashes himself and us. Come on. We've wasted enough time." He gripped Broome's thin arm and hurried him toward the door. On the way he touched his lapel switch and said into the receptive hum at his shoulder, "Conway here. I'm on my way in. Where's the robot?"

The thin little voice of the mike started to say, "Just leaving Sub-Five, sir—through the wall. We—" But then the com-box in the laboratory behind them coughed loudly and shouted out in a metallic bellow, "Robot broke through the wall into Sub-Seventeen!" There was a tinny astonishment in its voice. "Destroying equipment in storage files—" All of this was funneled through the Communications Room, and the echoes of the complaint from Sub-Seventeen could be heard mingling confusedly through the lapel mike. Conway clicked it on and off several times.

"Com Room!" he said into the noisy turmoil. "Find out which way the robot's heading."

There was a brief pause, during which the com box behind them roared out its diminishing report of damage. Then, "It's heading inward, sir," the mike said thinly. "Toward Sub-Thirty."

Conway glanced down at Broome, who nodded and shaped a silent word with his lips. "Computers." Conway set his jaw.

"Start sending up heavy-duty robots to head it off," he told the mike crisply. "Immobilize the robot if you can but don't damage him without my orders." He laid his hand over the lapel mike to deafen it, hearing a small, distant uproar filtering out from under his palm as he urged Broome to a trot down the long corridor where the robot had dwindled to a shining dot such a short time ago. But he was hearing his own last words repeating over and over in undiminishing echoes inside his head. "My orders—my orders—my orders—"

He thought he could go on giving orders—up to a point. Just long enough to get EGO under control. No longer.

"Broome," he said abruptly, "*can* the robot take over?" And he held his breath waiting for the answer, wondering what he would do if it was no.

"I never doubted it," Broome said. Conway let his breath out with a feeling of luxury in the sigh. But Broome went on, "If we can find out why he went wrong, of course. I have an idea, but I don't see how I can test it—"

"What?"

"Maybe an iteration loop. A closed series of steps that repeat themselves over and over. But I don't know what's involved. He says 'want' and then blocks completely. I don't know why. Some compulsion is driving him so powerfully he doesn't even bother to open doors to get at what it is he wants. I don't know what. My job's to find out."

Conway thought to himself, "Maybe I know what." But he didn't explore the thought. It was too chilly in the mind, and yet so simple he wondered why Broome hadn't thought of it. Or maybe he had. . . .

EGO's goal was winning the war. But suppose it was not possible to win the war? . . .

Conway shook his head sharply and put that idea firmly away.

"Okay, you know your job," he said. "Now about mine—how can we stop him without harming him?" With a small fraction of his mind he noticed that he was personalizing the robot now. EGO had begun to assume an identity.

Broome shook his head unhappily as he trotted beside Conway. "That's one reason I was afraid to activate him." Broome was doing it too. "He's complex, General. I've got him pretty well cushioned against normal jolts, but an artificial brain isn't like a human brain. One little injury means malfunction. And besides, he's so fast I'm not sure what would stop him even if we didn't have to worry about damage."

"There's a limit to what I can bring up in time, anyhow," Conway said. "What about ultrasonics? We could cripple him, maybe—"

"Let me think about it. Ultrasonics that close might scramble something." Broome was panting heavily from their rapid pace.

Conway uncovered the mike. "Com Room? Get a supersonic squad in the computer room corridor fast. But wait orders. If the robot shows up don't open fire until—"

He broke off abruptly, having overshot the usefulness of the mike without realizing it. He was at the Com Room door and his own voice was crackling at him out of a box hanging low in the greenish gloom over the communications officer's chair about ten feet away.

He let the door swing shut behind him and was engulfed in noise and darkness. The big glass information panels and the colored circles of the com screens glowed bright and the faces of the men swam dimly in the gloom, highlights picked out on their cheekbones and foreheads in gold and red, green and faint blue reflected from the instruments they tended. General Conway automatically flashed a tired glance around the boards and screens that told him what was happening on the entire Pacific Front. He saw the radar shadows of the fleet, checked the code board for wind and weather, the status panel for plane assignments. But the information meant nothing. His brain refused to accept the burden. He had only one problem now.

"Where's the robot?" he asked. He had to shout to make himself heard, because to the normal noise of the room with its complex of relayed voices was now added a crashing uproar Conway failed to identify for a moment.

The communications officer nodded toward a bluish television screen at his left, part of a long row. Small and bright upon it a doll-sized robot could be seen, raging through a doll-sized storeroom. But the noise it made was life-size. It seemed to be hunting for something, and its method was frantic. It didn't open drawers—it ripped the whole side off cabinets and swept the contents out with great, rhythmic, scything motions, sending them spinning through the air. Now and then the bright cone of its glance would swerve to follow the fall of some object briefly, and twice the robot paused to snatch up items and turn them

tentatively over. But clearly, whatever it wanted was not here. And as clearly, it operated on true egoism—whatever it found useless it destroyed furiously. It had no referent but its own immediate need.

"And maybe he's right," Conway thought. "Maybe if we can't get him whatever he needs nothing down here is worth keeping."

Behind him he heard Broome and the communications officer conferring in strained voices above the tumult.

"I don't know," the officer was shouting. "It tore up the library so fast we couldn't tell what it had read and what it hadn't. You see how it's going now. It moves so fast—"

Broome leaned over the communications officer's shoulder and punched the two-way button on the intercom for Sub-Seventeen where the robot was raging.

"EGO," he said into the mike. "Do you hear me?"

The robot ripped down the side of the last cabinet, swept its contents out in a rhythmic shower. Amplified over the screen they heard Broome's voice echo back to them from the tiny greenish storeroom on the wall. The robot paused very briefly. Then it stood up straight, turned around once in a very rapid circuit that swept its cone of light across the walls.

"Want—" its hollow voice howled, and instantly shut itself off into silence again. It crashed its hands together like something in the last extremity of desperation, and then walked straight for the wall at the corner of the room.

The wall bent, cracked and opened. The robot stalked through and out of sight.

It seemed to Conway that every face in the room swung around toward his, pale ovals glistening with drops of gold and red and greenish sweat in the darkness. It was up to him now. They waited for instructions.

He wanted to lash out as the robot had lashed, tear these floating luminous screens down and smash the glowing panels with them, silence the yammering voices from the walls. Responsibilities he could not handle buzzed like hot bees around his head. It was too much, too much. A deep wave of exhaustion washed over him, followed by a wave of hysteric exhilaration, both so ghostly and so far

away they hardly seemed to touch Conway at all. He was somebody else entirely, infinite distances off, with ghostly problems that had no relation to the vacuum of the here and now. . . .

"General?" Broome's voice said. "General?"

Conway coughed. "The robot," he said briskly. "We've got to stop him. You plotting his course so far, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. Screen Twelve."

Twelve was one of the hanging panels, transparent in the dark, a net of luminous gold lines on it marking the corridors, with the sectors showing in dim blue numerals. "The red dots are the robot, sir," the sergeant told him.

They watched a disembodied hand float forward from behind the screen and add fluorescent grease-dots to the lengthening red line which had started in Broome's lab, crossed the library and storeroom and gone out by the solid wall. They stalked now across the next three sectors, wading through the walls as they went in an elongating luminous chain of red.

Their goal was obvious to everyone. About seven inches ahead in the heart of the map lay a round room with bright green squares glowing around its walls. They all knew what the green squares were. They all knew how intimately their own survival hinged upon the blizzard of electronic impulses storming through those incredibly complex calculations in the computers. Every mind in the room clicked over like the computers themselves, considering what would happen when the robot reached that room.

"The supersonic team," Conway said crisply. "The heavy-duty robots. Where are they?"

"The supersonics are coming up from level six, sir. About five minutes for them. The HD robots should intersect in about three minutes. You can see them in—what is it? purple?—on the plot panel."

A slow line of purple dots was moving inward down a gold-lined corridor from the periphery of the chart.

"Too slow," Conway said, watching the red dots which marked the footsteps of the thinking robot. Or was it thinking, now? "Anybody know if those walls between are plaster or stone?" There was a silence. Nobody did.

But as they watched, the red dots paused at a gold line, rebounded twice, reversed themselves and made for a break in the line that indicated a door.

"Stone," Conway said. "That one, anyhow. I hope he didn't jar anything loose trying."

"Maybe we'd better hope he did," Broome said.

Conway looked at the old man. "I'm going to stop him," he said. "Understand? We're not going to junk EGO. We need him too badly. I'm sorry we weren't better prepared to handle him, but I'd do it again if I had to. We can't wait."

"He's moving fast, sir," the communications officer said.

Conway looked at the screen. He bit his lip painfully and then said, "Volunteers. I want somebody to jump in there and delay him. I don't care how. Trip him. Wave a red rag in his face. Anything to gain time. Every second counts. All right, corporal. Lieutenant, that's two."

"We can't spare any more from here," the communications officer said.

"All right, on your way," Conway snapped. "Get him on the screens, sergeant."

Three round television screens clicked into bluish life, showing a trail of wrecked desks and smashed equipment. In the third screen EGO, looking very small and remote and innocent, was smashing himself head-on against a too-narrow door. On the last smash the door-frame gave way and EGO surged through and stalked off down the tiny, diminishing corridor beyond. On the plot board the red dots showed him only about five inches away from the calculator room.

"But what do you *want* with the calculators?" Broome was murmuring as he stared after the vanishing figure on the screen. He tapped irritably with his nails on the metal table. "Maybe," he said, and paused. He looked up at Conway. "I'm no good here, General. I'm going to the calculator room. I have some ideas, but the analogue computer thinks a lot faster than I do. EGO moves too fast. It may take machines to figure out machines. Anyhow, I'll try."

"Go on, go on then," Conway said. "You've got be-

tween five and ten minutes. After that—"He didn't finish, but in his mind he said, "—I can rest. One way or the other, I can rest."

The communications officer had been clicking television screens on and off, hunting. Now he said, "Look, sir! The volunteer team—God, he's tall!" The observation was spontaneous; until now the communications room hadn't seen EGO alongside human figures.

EGO was a stalking giant in a dimly lit corridor on the screen. The volunteers had just burst out of a corridor door ten paces ahead of him, and he towered mightily over them. You could see their tiny, scared faces no bigger than peas turned up toward the oblivious, striding giant as he followed the searchlight splash of his single eye down the hall.

The two men must have moved at a dead run from here to there. They hadn't had time to pick and choose, and their instructions had been ambiguous, but somewhere on the way they had snatched up a stout steel beam which now showed like a bright thread across the corridor. One man darted across the hall just ahead of the robot, and the two of them braced the beam shoulder high from opposite doorways, making a barrier across the path.

The robot didn't even glance at the obstacle. He struck the beam squarely, the clang echoing through the corridor and reverberating from the screen into the communications room. EGO bounced a little, recovered his balance, measured the situation and then stooped to pass under the bar. Hastily the two men lowered their burden. Again a clang and a recoil, and this time the bar bent into a deep V at the point of impact. Over the screen they heard one of the men yell as the end of the bar caught him. EGO heaved upward with both hands, stepped under the bar and stalked off down the hall.

"Thirty seconds saved," Conway said bitterly. "And one man down. Where are the HDs now?"

"About a minute and a half away, sir. Coming along corridor eight. They ought to intersect just outside the calculator room door. See, on the board?"

Slowly and heavily, it seemed to Conway, the purple

dots moved against the darkness, ploddingly. A floating hand materialized and added two more red dots to the chain of EGO's footsteps moving toward the heart of the citadel. The red dots were ahead. They were going to outstrip the purple.

"I'm going to fail," Conway said to himself. He thought of all the human lives here underground, wholly dependent upon him, and all the lives outside, confident that the Pacific Front was in good hands. He wondered what the commanding general on the other side was doing now, and what he would do if he knew. . . .

"Look, sir," the communications officer said.

There was still one man of the volunteer team left on his feet. He hadn't given up yet. EGO's last heave had apparently snapped the steel bar off short at the V, leaving one end like a bent club. It must have been very heavy, but the man in the corridor was operating on a drive too intense to notice the weight. Club on shoulder, he was sprinting after EGO down the hall.

They saw him lessen the distance between them. They saw him at the robot's heels. Distantly they heard him shout.

"EGO!" he called, as he had heard Broome call the name. And in answer, as the robot had answered before, EGO paused, turned, bathed the man in the cold one-eyed beam of its searchlight.

"Want—" the strangled, metallic voice said hollowly, and stopped.

The man with the club jumped high and smashed for the single bright eye in the robot's forehead.

"Is it safe?" Conway asked. "Will he hurt him, Broome?" But he got no answer. Broome had disappeared.

On the screen the robot struck upward furiously with both hands, parrying the club just in time. The crash of impact made the screen shiver. The man had time and strength for one more swing, and this time at the height of its arc EGO seized the club and plucked it almost casually out of the man's hands. Over his enormous steel shoulder he sent it clanging down the corridor behind him.

Conway glanced quickly at the chart. The purple dots

were gaining. The red dot at the end of EGO's chain wavered left and right as EGO dodged the two blows of the club. Conway looked back at the screen.

The disarmed man hesitated only briefly. Then he gathered himself and sprang straight up toward the blank steel face with its single eye. By some miracle he passed between the closing arms and locked his own arms around the steel neck. His body blinded the torch-like lens of the robot's eye, and he clung desperately, legs and arms clenched around the lurching steel tower of EGO's body.

From the darkness beyond their struggling figures a heavy, rhythmic thudding began to be heard, making the television screen vibrate a little.

"The heavy-duties," Conway breathed. He glanced again at the chart, not needing it to see the line of purple dots almost at the corridor intersection now, and the red dot of EGO wavering erratically.

The robot didn't depend on vision alone. You could tell that by his motion. But the clinging man disturbed him. The heaving weight pulled him off balance. Ego plucked futilely at the man for an instant, staggering thirty degrees off course toward the left-hand wall. Then the steel hands got a grip on the clinging man, and the robot ripped him away easily and smoothly, with a gesture like tearing a shirt off his chest, and flung him with casual force against the wall.

Beyond EGO, at the far end of the corridor, you could see the tall double doors of the calculator room. Ego stood for a moment as if he were collecting himself. The screen seemed to be wavering, and Conway made a futile, steadying motion toward it. The vibration was so strong now that vision blurred upon it.

"What's the matter?" Conway asked irritably. "Is it out of focus, or—"

"Look, sir," the communications officer said. "Here they come."

Like a walking wall the heavy robots wheeled out of the darkness at the edge of the screen, their ponderous tread making the whole scene shudder. Heavily they ground to

a halt facing EGO, and stood there shoulder to shoulder across the corridor, their backs to the calculator doors.

EGO stood for a moment quite still, but shivering all over, his single eye sweeping from left to right and back again over them, infinitely fast. Something about these units of his own kind seemed to kindle a new and compelling drive, and EGO gathered himself together and lowered his shoulders and head a little, and surged forward as if eager for battle. The HDs, locked together in an unswerving row, braced themselves and stood firm.

The crash made every screen in the communications room flicker in distant sympathy. Sparks sprang out and steel plates groaned. EGO hung for an instant motionless upon the steel wall that opposed him, then fell back, staggered, braced himself to crash again.

But he did not charge. He stood there sweeping his bright scanner over the line, and the clicking in his chest rose and fell so loudly the listeners in the communications room could hear it plainly. A storm of alternate choices seemed to be pouring through the electronic mind of the thinker.

While EGO hesitated, the steel wall he confronted moved, curving outward at both ends toward the solitary figure. It was clear what the intention of the operators was. If these ponderous shapes could be made to close EGO in they could immobilize him by sheer massiveness, like tame elephants immobilizing a wild one.

But EGO saw the trap in the instant *before* the line began to move. His backward step and quick spin showed it. Conway thought his eye flashed brighter, and his whirl was incongruously light-footed. In contrast to the heavy-duty machines he looked like a steel dancer in his light, keen balance. He made a quick feint toward one end of the line, and the robots massed sluggishly together to receive him. They opened a gap in their line when they moved, and EGO darted for the gap. But instead of passing through it he put out both arms and pushed delicately and fiercely at the two sides of the opening, in exactly the right spots. The two robots leaned ponderously outward, tipped just barely off their balance. They leaned, leaned,

inexorably leaned and fell. Each carried its next companion down with it. The corridor thundered with the crash.

Trampling on the fallen machines, the line closed up and moved ponderously forward. Ego ran at it with a clear illusion of joyous motion, stooped, struck two robots at once with the same delicate, exact precision, knowing before he struck at just what hidden fulcrum point their balance rested. The corridor thundered again with the tumult of their collapse. As the line tried to close once more over the fallen warriors Ego's hands shot out and helped them heavily together, smashing two more into one another with unexpected momentum. This time as he touched them his touches were sharp blows, and the steel plating buckled in like tin.

In less than two minutes the walking wall was a mass of staggering leviathans, half of them out of commission, the rest stumbling ponderously over their fallen comrades trying to reform a line already too short to work.

So much for that try, Conway thought. Then the super-sonics were their last hope. There wouldn't be time for more. Maybe there wasn't even time for that.

"Where's the supersonic squad?" he asked, impressed at the false briskness of his own voice. The communications officer looked up at the luminous chart.

"Almost there, General. Half a minute away."

Conway glanced once at the television screen, which now showed Ego standing over the prostrate metal giants and swaying rather oddly as he looked down. It wasn't like his behavior pattern to hesitate like this. There seemed to be something on his mind. Whatever it was, it might mean a few moments' leeway.

"I'm going out there myself, sergeant," Conway said. "I—I want to be on the spot when—" He paused, realizing that he was saying aloud what was really a private soliloquy, Conway to Conway, with no eavesdroppers. What he meant was that he wanted to be there when the end came—one way or the other. He had envied the robot, he had hoped infinite things for it. He had begun to iden-

tify with the powerful and tireless steel. Win or lose, he wanted to be on the spot at the payoff.

Running down the corridor was like running in a dream, floating, almost, his legs numb and the sound of his footfalls echoing from feathery distances. Each time his weight jolted down he wondered if that knee could take it, whether it wouldn't fold and let him fall, let him lie there and rest. . . . But no, he wanted to stand beside EGO and see the steel face and hear the mindless voice when they destroyed the robot, or the robot destroyed them all. The third chance—success—seemed too remote to consider.

When he got there he hardly knew it. He was dimly aware that he had stopped running, so there must be a reason. He was standing with his hand on a doorknob, his back leaning against the panels, gasping for breath. To the left stretched the narrow corridor down which he had run. Before him the broad hall loomed where men had fought EGO and failed, and machines had fought him and now lay almost still, or staggered futilely, out of control.

No matter how clearly you see a scene on television screens, you never really experience it until you get there. Conway had forgotten, in this brief while, how tall EGO really was. There was a smell of machine oil and hot metal in the air, and dust motes danced in the cone of EGO's searchlight as he stooped over the fallen robots. He was about to do something. Conway couldn't guess what.

Running footsteps and the clank of equipment sounded down the corridor to the left. Conway turned his head a little and saw the supersonic squad pounding toward him. He thought, maybe there's still a chance. If EGO delays another two minutes. . . .

On the floor the fallen robots still twitched and stirred in response to the distant commands of their operators. But a heavy-duty robot, fallen, isn't easy to set upright again. EGO stooped over the nearest, seeming almost puzzled.

Then with sudden, rather horrifying violence, he reached out and ripped the front plate off his victim with one rending motion. His gaze plunged shining into the entrails of the thing, glancing in bright reflections off the tubes and

the wiring so coarse in comparison with his own transistors and printed circuits. He put one a steel hand, sank his fingers deep and ripped again, gazing, engrossed, at the havoc he made. There was something frightful about this act of murder, one robot deliberately disemboweling another on his own initiative, with what seemed the coolest scientific interest.

But whatever Ego sought wasn't there. He straightened and went on to the next, ripped, stooped, studied the ticking and flashing entrails intently, his own inward ticking quite loud as if he were muttering to himself.

Conway, beckoning the supersonic squad on, thought to himself, "In the old days they used to tell fortunes that way. Maybe he's doing it now. . . ." And once more the chilly thought swam up to the surface of his consciousness that perhaps he knew what drove the robot to desperation. Perhaps he too knew the future, and the knowledge and the pressure made the two of them kin. *Win the war* was what Ego's ticking entrails commanded, just as the more complex neurons of Conway's brain commanded him. But what if winning was impossible, and Ego knew. . . .

The supersonic squad, running hard, burst out of the side corridor and pulled up short at their first sight of Ego in the—no, not flesh. In the shining steel, giant-tall, with the cyclops eye glaring. The sergeant panted something at Conway, trying to salute, forgetting that both his hands were full of equipment.

Conway with his pointing finger drew a semicircle in front of him before the calculator room door.

"Set the guns up, quick—along here. We've got to stop him if he tries to get in."

Ego straightened from his second victim and moved on to a third, hesitating over it, looking down.

The squad had, after all, only about thirty seconds to spare. They had been assembling their equipment as they ran, and now with speed as precise as machinery they took up positions along the line Conway had assigned them. He stood against the door, looking down at their stooping backs as they drew up the last line of defense with their own bodies and their guns between Ego and

the calculators. Or no, Conway thought, maybe I'm the last line. For some remote and despairing thought was shaping itself in his mind as he looked at Ego. . . .

In exactly the same second that the first ultrasonic gun swung its snout toward the corridor, Ego straightened and faced the double doors and the circle of men kneeling behind their guns. It seemed to Conway that over their heads he and Ego looked at each other challengingly for a moment.

"Sergeant," Conway said in a tense voice. "Cut him off at the leg, halfway to the knee. And pinpoint it *fine*. He's full of precision stuff and he's worth a lot more than you or me."

Ego bathed them in his cold headlight beam. Conway, wondering if the robot had understood, said quickly, "Fire."

You could hear the faintest possible hissing, nothing more. But a spot of heat glowed cherry-red and then blinding white upon Ego's left leg just below the knee.

Conway thought, "It's hopeless. If he charges us now he'll break through before we can—"

But Ego had another defense. The searchlight glance blinked once, and then Conway felt a sudden, violent discomfort he couldn't place, and the heat-spot went red again and faded. The sergeant dropped the gun nozzle and swore, shaking his hand.

"Fire on six," he said. "Eight, stand by."

Ego stood motionless, and the discomfort Conway felt deepened in rhythm with a subtle, visible vibration that pulsed through the steel tower before him.

A second sonic gun hissed faintly. A spot of red sprang out on the robot's leg. The vibration deepened, the discomfort grew worse. The heat-spot faded to nothing.

"Interference, sir," the sergeant said. "He's blanketing the sound-wave with a frequency of his own—something he's giving out himself. Feel it?"

"But why doesn't he charge?" Conway asked himself, not aloud, for fear the robot could really understand. And he thought, maybe he can't charge and broadcast the protecting frequency at the same time. Or maybe he hasn't

thought yet that he could wade right through before we could hurt him much. And Conway tried to picture to himself the world as it must look to EGO, less than an hour old, with impossible conflicts raging in the electronic complexities of his chest.

Conway said, "The eight-gun's on another frequency? Keep trying, sergeant. Maybe he can't blanket them all at once. Hold out as long as you can."

He opened the door behind him quickly and softly and went into the computer room.

This was another world. For a moment he forgot everything that lay outside the double doors and stood there taking in the feel and smell and sight of the room. It was a good place. He had always liked to be here. He could forget what stood eight feet tall and poised for destruction outside the door, and what lay waiting in the future, no farther away than day after tomorrow. He looked up at the high, flat faces of the computers, liking the way the lights winked, the sound of tape feeding through drums, the steady, pouring sound of typewriter keys, the orderly, dedicated feel of the place.

Broome looked up from the group around the typewriter of the analogue computer. All the men in the room had left their jobs and were clustering here, where the broad tape flowed out from under the keys and the columns of print poured smoothly, like water, onto the paper.

"Anything?" Conway asked.

Broome straightened painfully, easing his back.

"I'm not sure."

"Tell me," Conway said. "Quick. He'll be here in seconds."

"He's set up a block, accidentally. That's pretty sure. But how and why we still don't—"

"Then you don't know anything," Conway said flatly. "Well, I think I may have a—"

On the other side of the door sudden tumult broke out. Steel feet thudded, men shouted, equipment crackled and spat. The shouting rose to a crescendo and fell silent. The double doors crashed open and EGO stood on the thresh-

hold, facing the calculators. Here and there on his steel body spots of dull heat were fading. He was smeared with stains of oil and blood, and his searchlight eye swept around the room with a controlled speed that yet had something frantic in it. EGO looked at the calculators and the calculators placidly ticked on, rolling out unheeded data under the jaws of their typewriters as every man in the room faced the robot.

In the open doorway behind EGO the squad sergeant stumbled into sight, blood across his face, the nozzle of a sonic-gun in his hand.

"No," Conway said. "Wait. Stand aside, Broome. Let EGO get to the calculators."

He paid no attention to the buzz of shocked response. He was looking at EGO with almost hypnotized attention, trying to force the cogs of his own thinking to mesh faster. There was still a chance. Just a shadow of a chance, he knew that. And if he let EGO at the calculators and EGO failed, he wasn't sure he could interfere in time to save anything. But he had to try. A line of dialogue out of something he couldn't identify floated through his mind. *Yet I will try the last.* Some other desperate commander in his last battle, indomitable in the face of defeat. Conway grinned a little, knowing himself anything but indomitable. And yet—*I will try the last.*

EGO still stood motionless in the doorway. Time moves so much slower than thought. The robot still scanned the computers and thought with complex tickings to himself. Conway stepped aside, leaving the way clear. As he moved he saw his own image swim up at him from the stained surfaces of the robot body, his own gaunt face and hollow eyes reflected as if from a moving mirror smeared with oil and blood, as if it were he himself who lived inside the robot's body, activating it with his own drives.

EGO's pause on the threshold lasted only a fraction of a second. His glance flicked the calculators and dismissed them one by one, infinitely fast. Then, as Broome had done, EGO wheeled to the analogue computer and crossed the floor in three enormous strides. Almost contemptuously, without even scanning it, he ripped out the program-

ing tape. He slapped a blank tape into the punching device and his fingers flickered too fast to watch as he stamped his own questions into the wire. In seconds he was back at the computer.

Nobody moved. The mind was dazzled, trying to follow his speed. Only the computer seemed fast enough to keep pace with him, and he bent over the typewriter of the machine tautly, one machine communing with its kinsman, and the two of them so infinitely faster than flesh and blood that the men could only stand staring.

Nobody breathed. Conway—because thought is so fast—had time to say to himself with enormous hopefulness, "He'll find out the answer. He'll take over now. When the new assault starts he'll handle it and win, and I can stop trying any more. . . ."

The stream of printed answers began to pour out under the typewriter bar, and Ego bent to read. The bright cone of his sight bathed the paper. Then with a gesture that was savage as a man's, he ripped off the tape as if he were tearing out a tongue that had spoken intolerable words. And Conway knew the computer had failed them, Ego had failed, Conway had gambled and lost.

The robot straightened up and faced the machines. His steel hands shot out in a furious, punishing motion, ready to rip the computers apart as he had already ripped the other machines which had failed him.

Conway in a voice of infinite disillusion said, "Ego, wait. It's all right."

As always when you spoke its name, the robot paused and turned. And faster than data through the computers there poured through Conway's mind a torrent of linking thoughts. He saw his own image reflected upon the robot's body, himself imprisoned in the reflection as Ego was jailed in a task impossible to achieve.

He realized that he understood the robot as no one else alive could do, because only he knew the same tensions. It was something the computers couldn't deduce. But it was something Conway had partly guessed all along, and forbidden himself to recognize until the last alternative failed and he had to think for himself.

Win the war was the robot's basic drive. But he had to act on incomplete information, like Conway himself, and that meant that EGO had to assume responsibility for making wrong decisions that might lose the war, which he was not allowed to do. Neither could he shift responsibility as the computers could, saying, "No answer—insufficient data." Nor could he take refuge in neurosis or madness or surrender. Nor in passing the duty on to someone else, as Conway had tried to do. So all he could do was seek more knowledge furiously, almost at random, and all he could want was—

"I know what you want," Conway said. "You can have it. I'll take over, EGO. You can stop wanting, now."

"*Want*—" the robot howled inhumanly, and paused as usual, and then rushed on for the first time to finish his statement, "*—to stop wanting!*"

"Yes," Conway said. "I know. So do I. But now you can stop, EGO. Turn yourself off. You did your best."

The hollow voice said much more softly, "Want to stop. . . ." and then hovering on the brink of silence, ". . . stop want. . . ." It ceased. The shivering stopped. A feel of violence seemed to die upon the air around the robot, as if intolerable tensions had relaxed at last inside it. There was a series of clear, deliberate clickings from the steel chest, as of metallic decisions irrevocably reached, one after another. And then something seemed to go out of the thing. It stood differently. It was a machine again. Nothing more than a machine.

Conway looked at his own face in the motionless reflection. The robot couldn't take it, he thought. No wonder. He couldn't even speak to ask for relief, because the opposite of *want* is *not want*, and when he said the first word, its negative forced him to want nothing, and so to be silent. No, we asked too much. He couldn't take it. Meeting his own eyes in the reflection, he wondered if he was speaking to the Conway of a long minute ago. Perhaps he was. That Conway couldn't take it either. But this one had to, and could.

EGO couldn't act on partial knowledge. No machine could. You can't expect machines to face the unknown.

Only human beings can do that. Steel isn't strong enough. Only flesh and blood can do it, and go on.

"Well, now I know," he thought. And it seemed strange, but he wasn't as tired as he had been before. Always until now there had been EGO to fall back on if he had to, but something he must not try until he reached the last gasp. Well, now he had reached it. And EGO couldn't carry the load.

He laughed gently to himself. The thought that had chilled him came back and he looked at it calmly. Maybe *win the war* was impossible. Maybe that paradox was what had stopped EGO. But Conway was human. It didn't stop him. He could accept the thought and push it aside, knowing that sometimes humans really do achieve the impossible. Maybe that was all that had kept them going this long.

Conway turned his head slowly and looked at Broome.

"Know what I'm going to do?" he asked.

Broome shook his head, the bright eyes watchful.

"I'm going to bed," Conway said. "I'm going to sleep. I know my limitations now. The other side's *only* flesh and blood too. They have the same problems we have. They have to sleep too. You can wake me up when the next attack starts. Then I'll handle it—or I won't. But I'll do my best and that's all anybody can do."

He moved stiffly past EGO toward the door, pausing for a moment to touch his palm against the motionless steel chest. It felt cold and not very steady against his hand.

"What do I mean, *only* flesh and blood?" he asked.

Exit the Professor

WE HOGBENS are right exclusive. That Perfesser feller from the city might have known that, but he come busting in without an invite, and I don't figger he had call to complain afterward. In Kaintuck the polite thing is to stick to your own hill of beans and not come nosing around where you're not wanted.

Time we ran off the Haley boys with that shotgun gadget we rigged up—only we never could make out how it worked, somehow—that time, it all started because Rafe Haley come peeking and prying at the shed winder, trying to get a look at Little Sam. Then Rafe went round saying Little Sam had three haid's or something.

Can't believe a word them Haley boys say. Three haid's! It ain't natcheral, is it? Anyhow, Little Sam's only got two haid's, and never had no more since the day he was born.

So Maw and I rigged up that shotgun thing and peppered the Haley boys good. Like I said, we couldn't figger out afterward how it worked. We'd tacked on some dry cells and a lot of coils and wires and stuff and it punched holes in Rafe as neat as anything.

Coroner's verdict was that the Haley boys died real sudden, and Sheriff Abernathy come up and had a drink of corn with us and said for two cents he'd whale the tar outa me. I didn't pay no mind. Only some damyankee re-

porter musta got wind of it, because a while later a big, fat, serious-looking man come around and begun to ask questions.

Uncle Les was sitting on the porch, with his hat over his face. "You better get the heck back to your circus, mister," he just said. "We had offers from old Barnum hisself and turned 'em down. Ain't that right, Saunk?"

"Sure is," I said. "I nêver trusted Phineas. Called Little Sam a freak, he did."

The big solemn-looking man, whose name was Perfesser Thomas Galbraith, looked at me. "How old are you, son?" he said.

"I ain't your son," I said. "And I don't now, nohow."

"You don't look over eighteen," he said, "big as you are. You couldn't have known Barnum."

"Sure I did. Don't go giving me the lie. I'll wham you."

"I'm not connected with any circus," Galbraith said. "I'm a biogeneticist."

We sure laughed at that. He got kinda mad and wanted to know what the joke was.

"There ain't no such word," Maw said. And at that point Little Sam started yelling, and Galbraith turned white as a goose wing and shivered all over. He sort of fell down. When we picked him up, he wanted to know what had happened.

"That was Little Sam," I said. "Maw's gone in to comfort him. He's stopped now."

"That was a subsonic," the Perfesser snapped. "What is Little Sam—a short-wave transmitter?"

"Little Sam's the baby," I said, short-like. "Don't go calling him outa his name, either. Now, s'pose you tell us what you want."

He pulled out a notebook and started looking through it.

"I'm a—a scientist," he said. "Our foundation is studying eugenics, and we've got some reports about you. They sound unbelievable. One of our men has a theory that natural mutations can remain undetected in undeveloped cultural regions, and—" He slowed down and stared at Uncle Les. "Can you really fly?" he asked.

Well, we don't like to talk about that. The preacher gave us a good dressing-down once. Uncle Les had got likkered up and went sailing over the ridges, scaring a couple of bear hunters outa their senses. And it ain't in the Good Book that men should fly, neither. Uncle Les generally does it only on the sly, when nobody's watching.

So anyhow Uncle Les pulled his hat down further on his face and growled.

"That's plumb silly. Ain't no way a man can fly. These here modern contraptions I hear tell about—'tween ourselves, they don't really fly at all. Just a lot of crazy talk, that's all."

Galbraith blinked and studied his notebook again.

"But I've got hearsay evidence of a great many unusual things connected with your family. Flying is only one of them. I know it's theoretically impossible—and I'm not talking about planes—but—"

"Oh, shet your trap."

"The medieval witches' salve used aconite to give an illusion of flight—entirely subjective, of course."

"Will you stop pestering me?" Uncle Les said, getting mad, on account of he felt embarrassed, I guess. Then he jumped up, threw his hat down on the porch, and flew away. After a minute he swooped down for his hat and made a face at the Perfesser. He flew off down the gulch and we didn't see him fer a while.

I got mad, too.

"You got no call to bother us," I said. "Next thing Uncle Les will do like Paw, and that'll be an awful nuisance. We ain't seen hide nor hair of Paw since that other city feller was around. He was a census taker, I think."

Galbraith didn't say anything. He was looking kinda funny. I gave him a drink and he asked about Paw.

"Oh, he's around," I said. "Only you don't see him no more. He likes it better that way, he says."

"Yes," Galbraith said, taking another drink. "Oh, God. How old did you say you were?"

"Didn't say nothing about it."

"Well, what's the earliest thing you can remember?"

"Ain't no use remembering things. Clutters up your haid too much."

"It's fantastic," Galbraith said. "I hadn't expected to send a report like that back to the foundation."

"We don't want nobody prying around," I said. "Go way and leave us alone."

"But, good Lord!" He looked over the porch rail and got interested in the shotgun gadget. "What's that?"

"A thing," I said.

"What does it do?"

"Things," I said.

"Oh. May I look at it?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll give you the dingus if you'll go away."

He went over and looked at it. Paw got up from where he'd been sitting beside me, told me to get rid of the damyankee, and went into the house. The Perfesser came back. "Extraordinary!" he said. "I've had training in electronics, and it seems to me you've got something very odd there. What's the principle?"

"The what?" I said. "It makes holes in things."

"It can't fire shells. You've got a couple of lenses where the breech should—how did you say it worked?"

"I dunno."

"Did you make it?"

"Me and Maw."

He asked a lot more questions.

"I dunno," I said. "Trouble with a shotgun is you gotta keep loading it. We sorta thought if we hooked on a few things it wouldn't need loading no more. It don't, neither."

"Were you serious about giving it to me?"

"If you stop bothering us."

"Listen," he said, "it's miraculous that you Hogbens have stayed out of sight so long."

"We got our ways."

"The mutation theory must be right. You must be studied. This is one of the most important discoveries

since—" He kept on talking like that. He didn't make much sense.

Finally I decided there was only two ways to handle things, and after what Sheriff Abernathy had said, I didn't feel right about killing nobody till the Sheriff had got over his fit of temper. I don't want to cause no ruckus.

"S'pose I go to New York with you, like you want," I said. "Will you leave the family alone?"

He halfway promised, though he didn't want to. But he knuckled under and crossed his heart, on account of I said I'd wake up Little Sam if he didn't. He sure wanted to see Little Sam, but I told him that was no good. Little Sam couldn't go to New York, anyhow. He's got to stay in his tank or he gets awful sick.

Anyway, I satisfied the Perfesser pretty well and he went off, after I'd promised to meet him in town next morning. I felt sick, though, I can tell you. I ain't been away from the folks overnight since that ruckus in the old country, when we had to make tracks fast.

Went to Holland, as I remember. Maw always had a soft spot fer the man that helped us get outa London. Named Little Sam after him. I fergit what his name was. Gwynn or Stuart or Pepys—I get mixed up when I think back beyond the War between the States.

That night we chewed the rag. Paw being invisible, Maw kept thinking he was getting more'n his share of the corn, but pretty soon she mellowed and let him have a demijohn. Everybody told me to mind my p's and q's.

"This here Perfesser's awful smart," Maw said. "All perfessers are. Don't go bothering him any. You be a good boy or you'll ketch heck from me."

"I'll be good, Maw," I said. Paw whaled me alongside the haid, which wasn't fair, on account of I couldn't see him.

"That's so you won't fergit," he said.

"We're plain folks," Uncle Les was growling. "No good never come of trying to get above yourself."

"Honest, I ain't trying to do that," I said. "I only figgered—"

"You stay outa trouble!" Maw said, and just then

we heard Grandpaw moving in the attic. Sometimes Grandpaw don't stir for a month at a time, but tonight he seemed right frisky.

So, natcherally, we went upstairs to see what he wanted.

He was talking about the Perfesser.

"A stranger, eh?" he said. "Out upon the stinking knave. A set of rare fools I've gathered about me for my dotage! Only Saunk shows any shrewdness, and, dang my eyes, he's the worst fool of all."

I just shuffled and muttered something, on account of I never like to look at Grandpaw direct. But he wasn't paying me no mind. He raved on.

"So you'd go to this New York? 'Sblood, and hast thou forgot the way we shunned London and Amsterdam—and Nieuw Amsterdam—for fear of questioning? Wouldst thou be put in a freak show? Nor is that the worst danger."

Grandpaw's the oldest one of us all and he gets kinda mixed up in his language sometimes. I guess the lingo you learned when you're young sorta sticks with you. One thing, he can cuss better than anybody I've ever heard.

"Shucks," I said. "I was only trying to help."

"Thou puling brat," Grandpaw said. "'Tis thy fault and thy dam's. For building that device, I mean, that slew the Haley tribe. Hadst thou not, this scientist would never have come here."

"He's a perfesser," I said. "Name of Thomas Galbraith."

"I know. I read his thoughts through Little Sam's mind. A dangerous man. I never knew a sage who wasn't. Except perhaps Roger Bacon, and I had to bribe him to—but Roger was an exceptional man. Hearken:

"None of you may go to this New York. The moment we leave this haven, the moment we are investigated, we are lost. The pack would tear and rend us. Nor could all thy addlepated flights skyward save thee, Lester—dost thou hear?"

"But what are we to do?" Maw said.

"Aw, heck," Paw said. "I'll just fix this Perfesser. I'll drop him down the cistern."

"An' spoil the water?" Maw screeched. "You try it!"

"What foul brood is this that has sprung from my seed?" Grandpaw said, real mad. "Have ye not promised the Sheriff that there will be no more killings—for a while, at least? Is the word of a Hogben naught? Two things have we kept sacred through the centuries—our secret from the world, and the Hogben honor! Kill this man Galbraith and ye'll answer to me for it!"

We all turned white. Little Sam woke up again and started squealing. "But what'll we do?" Uncle Les said.

"Our secret must be kept," Grandpaw said. "Do what ye can, but no killing. I'll consider the problem."

He seemed to go to sleep then, though it was hard to tell.

The next day I met Galbraith in town, all right, but first I run into Sheriff Abernathy in the street and he gave me a vicious look.

"You stay outa trouble, Saunk," he said. "Mind what I tell you, now." It was right embarrassing.

Anyway, I saw Galbraith and told him Grandpaw wouldn't let me go to New York. He didn't look too happy, but he saw there was nothing that could be done about it.

His hotel room was full of scientific apparatus and kinda frightening. He had the shotgun gadget set up, but it didn't look like he'd changed it any. He started to argue.

"Ain't no use," I said. "We ain't leaving the hills. I spoke outa turn yesterday, that's all."

"Listen, Saunk," he said. "I've been inquiring around town about you Hogbens, but I haven't been able to find out much. They're close-mouthed around here. Still, such evidence would be only supporting factors. I know our theories are right. You and your family are mutants and you've got to be studied!"

"We ain't mutants," I said. "Scientists are always

calling us outa our names. Roger Bacon called us homunculi, only—”

“*What?*” Galbraith shouted. “Who did you say?”

“Uh—he’s a share-cropper over in the next county,” I said hasty-like, but I could see the Perfesser didn’t swaller it. He started to walk around the room.

“It’s no use,” he said. “If you won’t come to New York, I’ll have the foundation send a commission here. You’ve got to be studied, for the glory of science and the advancement of mankind.”

“Oh, golly,” I said. “I know what that’d be like. Make a freak show outa us. It’d kill Little Sam. No. You gotta go away and leave us alone.”

“Leave you alone? When you can create apparatus like this?” He pointed to the shotgun gadget. “How *does* that work?” he wanted to know, sudden-like.

“I told you, I dunno. We just rigged it up. Listen, Perfesser. There’d be trouble if people came and looked at us. Big trouble. Grandpaw says so.”

Galbraith pulled at his nose.

“Well, maybe—suppose you answered a few questions for me, Saunk.”

“No commission?”

“We’ll see.”

“No, sir. I won’t—”

Galbraith took a deep breath.

“As long as you tell me what I want to know, I’ll keep your whereabouts a secret.”

“I thought this foundation thing of yours knows where you are.”

“Ah—yes,” Galbraith said. “Naturally they do. But they don’t know about *you*.”

That gave me an idea. I coulda killed him easy, but if I had, I knew Grandpaw would of ruined me entire and, besides, there was the Sheriff to think of. So I said, “Shucks,” and nodded.

My, the questions that man asked! It left me dizzy. And all the while he kept getting more and more excited.

“How old is your grandfather?”

“Gosh, I dunno.”

"Homunculi—mm-m. You mentioned that he was a miner once?"

"No, that was Grandpaw's paw," I said. "Tin mines, they were, in England. Only Grandpaw says it was called Britain then. That was during a sorta magic plague they had then. The people had to get the doctors—droons? Droods?"

"Druids?"

"Uh-huh. The Druids was the doctors then, Grandpaw says. Anyhow, all the miners started dying round Cornwall, so they closed up the mines."

"What sort of plague was it?"

I told him what I remembered from Grandpaw's talk, and the Perfesser got very excited and said something about radioactive emanations, as nearly as I could figger out. It made oncommon bad sense.

"Artificial mutations caused by radioactivity!" he said, getting real pink around the jowls. "Your grandfather was born a mutant! The genes and chromosomes were rearranged into a new pattern. Why, you may all be supermen!"

"Nope," I said. "We're Hogbens. That's all."

"A dominant, obviously a dominant. All your family were—ah—peculiar?"

"Now, look!" I said.

"I mean, they could all fly?"

"I don't know how yet, myself. I guess we're kinda freakish. Grandpaw was smart. He allus taught us not to show off."

"Protective camouflage," Galbraith said. "Submerged in a rigid social culture, variations from the norm are more easily masked. In a modern, civilized culture, you'd stick out like a sore thumb. But here, in the backwoods, you're practically invisible."

"Only Paw," I said.

"Oh, Lord," he sighed. "Submerging these incredible natural powers of yours. . . . Do you know the things you might have done?" And then all of a sudden he got even more excited, and I didn't much like the look in his eyes.

"Wonderful things," he repeated. "It's like stumbling on Aladdin's lamp."

"I wish you'd leave us alone," I said. "You and your commission!"

"Forget about the commission. I've decided to handle this privately for a while. Provided you'll cooperate. Help me, I mean. Will you do that?"

"Nope," I said.

"Then I'll bring the commission down from New York," he said triumphantly.

I thought that over.

"Well," I said finally, "what do you want me to do?"

"I don't know yet," he said slowly. "My mind hasn't fully grasped the possibilities."

But he was getting ready to grab. I could tell. I know that look.

I was standing by the window looking out, and all of a sudden I got an idea. I figured it wouldn't be smart to trust the Perfesser too much, anyhow. So I sort of ambled over to the shotgun gadget and made a few little changes on it.

I knew what I wanted to do, all right, but if Galbraith had asked me why I was twisting a wire here and bending a whozis there I couldn't of told him. I got no eddication. Only now I knew the gadget would do what I wanted it to do.

The Perfesser had been writing in his little notebook. He looked up and saw me.

"What are you doing?" he wanted to know.

"This don't look right to me," I said. "I think you monkeyed with them batteries. Try it now."

"In here?" he said, startled. "I don't want to pay a bill for damages. It must be tested under safety conditions."

"See that weathercock out there, on the roof?" I pointed it out to him. "Won't do no harm to aim at that. You can just stand here by the winder and try it out."

"It—it isn't dangerous?" He was aching to try the gadget, I could tell. I said it wouldn't kill nobody, and he

took a long breath and went to the window and cuddled the stock of the gun against his cheek.

I stayed back aways. I didn't want the Sheriff to see me. I'd already spotted him, sitting on a bench outside the feed-and-grain store across the street.

It happened just like I thought. Galbraith pulled the trigger, aiming at the weathercock on the roof, and rings of light started coming out of the muzzle. There was a fearful noise. Galbraith fell flat on his back, and the commotion was something surprising. People began screaming all over town.

I kinda felt it might be handy if I went invisible for a while. So I did.

Galbraith was examining the shotgun gadget when Sheriff Abernathy busted in. The Sheriff's a hard case. He had his pistol out and handcuffs ready, and he was cussing the Perfesser immediate and rapid.

"I seen you!" he yelled. "Your city fellers think you can get away with anything down here. Well, you can't!"

"Saunk!" Galbraith cried, looking around. But of course he couldn't see me.

Then there was an argument. Sheriff Abernathy had seen Galbraith fire the shotgun gadget and he's no fool. He drug Galbraith down on the street, and I come along, walking soft. People were running around like crazy. Most of them had their hands clapped to their faces.

The Perfesser kept wailing that he didn't understand.

"I seen you!" Abernathy said. "You aimed that dingus of yours out the window and the next thing everybody in town's got a toothache! Try and tell me you don't understand!"

The Sheriff's smart. He's known us Hogbens long enough so he ain't surprised when funny things happen sometimes. Also, he knew Galbraith was a scientist feller. So there was a ruckus and people heard what was going on and the next thing they was trying to lynch Galbraith.

But Abernathy got him away. I wandered around town for a while. The pastor was out looking at his church windows, which seemed to puzzle him. They was stained glass, and he couldn't figger out why they was hot. I

coulda told him that. There's gold in stained-glass windows; they use it to get a certain kind of red.

Finally I went down to the jailhouse. I was still invisible. So I eavesdropped on what Galbraith was saying to the Sheriff.

"It was Saunk Hogben," the Perfesser kept saying. "I tell you, he fixed that projector!"

"I saw you," Abernathy said. "You done it. Ow!" He put up his hand to his jaw. "And you better stop it, fast! That crowd outside means business. Half the people in town have got toothaches."

I guess half the people in town had gold fillings in their teeth.

Then Galbraith said something that didn't surprise me too much. "I'm having a commission come down from New York; I meant to telephone the foundation tonight. They'll vouch for me."

So he was intending to cross us up, all along. I kinda felt that had been in his mind.

"You'll cure this toothache of mine—and everybody else's—or I'll open the doors and let in that lynch mob!" the Sheriff howled. Then he went away to put an icebag on his cheek.

I snuck back away, got visible again, and made a lot of noise coming along the passage, so Galbraith could hear me. I waited till he got through cussing me out. I just looked stupid.

"I guess I made a mistake," I said. "I can fix it; though."

"You've done enough fixing!" He stopped. "Wait a minute. What did you say? You can cure this—what *is* it?"

"I been looking at that shotgun gadget," I said. "I think I know what I did wrong. It's sorta tuned in on gold now, and all the gold in town's shooting out rays or heat or something."

"Induced selective radioactivity," Galbraith muttered, which didn't seem to mean much. "Listen. That crowd outside—do they ever have lynchings in this town?"

"Not more'n once or twice a year," I said. "And we already had two this year, so we filled our quota. Wish

I could get you up to our place, though. We could hide you easy."

"You'd better do something!" he said. "Or I'll get that commission down from New York. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

I never seen such a man fer telling lies and keeping a straight face.

"It's a cinch," I said. "I can rig up the gadget so it'll switch off the rays immediate. Only I don't want people to connect us Hogbens with what's going on. We like to live quiet. Look, s'pose I go back to your hotel and change over the gadget, and then all you have to do is get all the people with toothaches together and pull the trigger."

"But—well, but—"

He was afraid of more trouble. I had to talk him into it. The crowd was yelling outside, so it wasn't too hard. Finally I went away, but I came back, invisible-like, and listened when Galbraith talked to the Sheriff.

They fixed it all up. Everybody with toothaches was going to the Town Hall and set. Then Abernathy would bring the Perfesser over, with the shotgun gadget, and try it out.

"Will it stop the toothaches?" the Sheriff wanted to know. "For sure?"

"I'm—quite certain it will."

Abernathy had caught that hesitation.

"Then you better try it on me first. Just to make sure. I don't trust you."

It seemed like nobody was trusting nobody.

I hiked back to the hotel and made the switch-over in the shotgun gadget. And then I run into trouble. My invisibility was wearing thin. That's the worst part of being just a kid.

After I'm a few hunnerd years older I can stay invisible all the time if I want to. But I ain't right mastered it yet. Thing was, I needed help now because there was something I had to do, and I couldn't do it with people watching.

I went up on the roof and called Little Sam. After

I'd tuned in on his haid, I had him put the call through to Paw and Uncle Les. After a while Uncle Les come flying down from the sky, riding mighty heavy on account of he was carrying Paw. Paw was cussing because a hawk had chased them.

"Nobody seen us, though," Uncle Les said. "I *think*."

"People got their own troubles in town today," I said. "I need some help. That Perfesser's gonna call down his commission and study us, no matter what he promises."

"Ain't much we can do, then," Paw said. "We cain't kill that feller. Grandpaw said not to."

So I told 'em my idea. Paw being invisible, he could do it easy. Then we made a little place in the roof so we could see through it, and looked down into Galbraith's room.

We was just in time. The Sheriff was standing there, with his pistol out, just waiting, and the Perfesser, pale around the chops, was pointing the shotgun gadget at Abernathy. It went along without a hitch. Galbraith pulled the trigger, a purple ring of light popped out, and that was all. Except that the Sheriff opened his mouth and gulped.

"You wasn't faking! My toothache's gone!"

Galbraith was sweating, but he put up a good front. "Sure it works," he said. "Naturally. I told you—"

"C'mon down to the Town Hall. Everybody's waiting. You better cure us all, or it'll be just too bad for you."

They went out. Paw snuck down after them, and Uncle Les picked me up and flew on their trail, keeping low to the roofs, where we wouldn't be spotted. After a while we was fixed outside one of the Town Hall's windows, watching.

I ain't heard so much misery since the great plague of London. The hall was jam-full, and everybody had a toothache and was moaning and yelling. Abernathy come in with the Perfesser, who was carrying the shotgun gadget, and a scream went up.

Galbraith set the gadget on the stage, pointing down at the audience, while the Sheriff pulled out his pistol again

and made a speech, telling everybody to shet up and they'd get rid of their toothaches.

I couldn't see Paw, natcherally, but I knew he was up on the platform. Something funny was happening to the shotgun gadget. Nobody noticed, except me, and I was watching for it. Paw—invisible, of course—was making a few changes. I'd told him how, but he knew what to do as well as I did. So pretty soon the shotgun was rigged the way we wanted it.

What happened after that was shocking. Galbraith aimed the gadget and pulled the trigger, and rings of light jumped out, yaller this time. I'd told Paw to fix the range so nobody outside the Town Hall would be bothered. But inside—

Well, it sure fixed them toothaches. Nobody's gold filling can ache if he ain't got a gold filling.

The gadget was fixed now so it worked on everything that wasn't growing. Paw had got the range just right. The seats was gone all of a sudden, and so was part of the chandelier. The audience, being bunched together, got it good. Pegleg Jaffe's glass eye was gone, too. Them that had false teeth lost 'em. Everybody sorta got a once-over-lightly haircut.

Also, the whole audience lost their clothes. Shoes ain't growing things, and no more are pants or shirts or dresses. In a trice everybody in the hall was naked as needles. But, shucks, they'd got rid of their toothaches, hadn't they?

We was back to home an hour later, all but Uncle Les, when the door busted open and in come Uncle Les, with the Perfesser staggering after him. Galbraith was a mess. He sank down and wheezed, looking back at the door in a worried way.

"Funny thing happened," Uncle Les said. "I was flying along outside town and there was the Perfesser running away from a big crowd of people, with sheets wrapped around 'em—some of 'em. So I picked him up. I brung him here, like he wanted." Uncle Les winked at me.

"Ooooh!" Galbraith said. "Aaaah! Are they coming?" Maw went to the door.

"They's a lot of torches moving up the mountain," she said. "It looks right bad."

The Perfesser glared at me.

"You said you could hide me! Well, you'd better! This is your fault!"

"Shucks," I said.

"You'll hide me or else!" Galbraith squalled. "I—I'll bring that commission down."

"Look," I said, "if we hide you safe, will you promise to fergit all about that commission and leave us alone?"

The Perfesser promised. "Hold on a minute," I said, and went up to the attic to see Grandpaw.

He was awake.

"How about it, Grandpaw?" I asked.

He listened to Little Sam for a second.

"The knave is lying," he told me pretty soon. "He means to bring his commission of stinkards here anyway, recking naught of his promise."

"Should we hide him, then?"

"Aye," Grandpaw said. "The Hoggens have given their word—there must be no more killing. And to hide a fugitive from his pursuers would not be an ill deed, surely."

Maybe he winked. It's hard to tell with Grandpaw. So I went down the ladder. Galbraith was at the door, watching the torches come up the mountain.

He grabbed me.

"Saunk! If you don't hide me—"

"We'll hide you," I said. "C'mon."

So we took him down to the cellar. . . .

When the mob got here, with Sheriff Abernathy in the lead, we played dumb. We let 'em search the house. Little Sam and Grandpaw turned invisible for a bit, so nobody noticed them. And naturally the crowd couldn't find hide nor hair of Galbraith. We'd hid him good, like we promised.

That was a few years ago. The Perfesser's thriving. He ain't studying us, though. Sometimes we take out the bottle we keep him in and study him.

Dang small bottle, too!

Two-Handed Engine

Ever since the days of Orestes there have been men with Furies following them. It wasn't until the Twenty-Second Century that mankind made itself a set of real Furies, out of steel. Mankind had reached a crisis by then. They had a good reason for building man-shaped Furies that would dog the footsteps of all men who kill men. Nobody else. There was by then no other crime of any importance.

It worked very simply. Without warning, a man who thought himself safe would suddenly hear the steady footfalls behind him. He would turn and see the two-handed engine walking toward him, shaped like a man of steel, and more incorruptible than any man not made of steel could be. Only then would the murderer know he had been tried and condemned by the omniscient electronic minds that knew society as no human mind could ever know it.

For the rest of his days, the man would hear those footsteps behind him. A moving jail with invisible bars that shut him off from the world. Never in life would he be alone again. And one day—he never knew when—the jailer would turn executioner.

DANNER leaned back comfortably in his contoured restaurant chair and rolled expensive wine across his tongue, closing his eyes to enjoy the taste of it better. He felt perfectly safe. Oh, perfectly protected. For nearly an hour now he had been sitting here, ordering the most expensive food, enjoying the music breathing softly through the air, the murmurous, well-bred hush of his fellow diners.

It was a good place to be. It was very good, having so much money — now.

True, he had had to kill to get the money. But no guilt troubled him. There is no guilt if you aren't found out, and Danner had protection. Protection straight from the source, which was something new in the world. Danner knew the consequences of killing. If Hartz hadn't satisfied him that he was perfectly safe, Danner would never have pulled the trigger. . . .

The memory of an archaic word flickered through his mind briefly. *Sin*. It evoked nothing. Once it had something to do with guilt, in an incomprehensible way. Not any more. Mankind had been through too much. Sin was meaningless now.

He dismissed the thought and tried the heart-of-palms salad. He found he didn't like it. Oh well, you had to expect things like that. Nothing was perfect. He sipped the wine again, liking the way the glass seemed to vibrate like something faintly alive in his hand. It was good wine. He thought of ordering more, but then he thought no, save it, next time. There was so much before him, waiting to be enjoyed. Any risk was worth it. And of course, in this there had been no risk.

Danner was a man born at the wrong time. He was old enough to remember the last days of utopia, young enough to be trapped in the new scarcity economy the machines had clamped down on their makers. In his early youth he'd had access to free luxuries, like everybody else. He could remember the old days when he was an adolescent and the last of the Escape Machines were still operating, the glamorous, bright, impossible, vicarious visions that didn't really exist and never could have. But then the scarcity economy swallowed up pleasure. Now you got necessities but no more. Now you had to work. Danner hated every minute of it.

When the swift change came, he'd been too young and unskilled to compete in the scramble. The rich men today were the men who had built fortunes on cornering the few luxuries the machines still produced. All Danner had left were bright memories and a dull, resentful feeling of

having been cheated. All he wanted were the bright days back, and he didn't care how he got them.

Well, now he had them. He touched the rim of the wine glass with his finger, feeling it sing silently against the touch. Blown glass? he wondered. He was too ignorant of luxury items to understand. But he'd learn. He had the rest of his life to learn in, and be happy.

He looked up across the restaurant and saw through the transparent dome of the roof the melting towers of the city. They made a stone forest as far as he could see. And this was only one city. When he was tired of it, there were more. Across the country, across the planet the network lay that linked city with city in a webwork like a vast, intricate, half-alive monster. Call it society.

He felt it tremble a little beneath him.

He reached for the wine glass and drank quickly. The faint uneasiness that seemed to shiver the foundations of the city was something new. It was because — yes, certainly it was because of a new fear.

It was because he had not been found out.

That made no sense. Of course the city was complex. Of course it operated on a basis of incorruptible machines. They, and only they, kept man from becoming very quickly another extinct animal. And of these the analogue computers, the electronic calculators, were the gyroscope of all living. They made and enforced the laws that were necessary now to keep mankind alive. Danner didn't understand much of the vast changes that had swept over society in his lifetime, but this much even he knew.

So perhaps it made sense that he felt society shiver because he sat here luxurious on foam-rubber, sipping wine, hearing soft music, and no Fury standing behind his chair to prove that the calculators were still guardians for mankind. . . .

If not even the Furies are incorruptible, what can a man believe in?

It was at that exact moment that the Fury arrived.

Danner heard every sound suddenly die out around him. His fork was halfway to his lips, but he paused,

frozen, and looked up across the table and the restaurant toward the door.

The Fury was taller than a man. It stood there for a moment, the afternoon sun striking a blinding spot of brightness from its shoulder. It had no face, but it seemed to scan the restaurant leisurely, table by table. Then it stepped in under the doorframe and the sun-spot slid away and it was like a tall man encased in steel, walking slowly between the tables.

Danner said to himself, laying down his untasted food, "Not for me. Everyone else here is wondering. I *know*."

And like a memory in a drowning man's mind, clear, sharp and condensed into a moment, yet every detail clear, he remembered what Hartz had told him. As a drop of water can pull into its reflection a wide panorama condensed into a tiny focus, so time seemed to focus down to a pinpoint the half-hour Danner and Hartz had spent together, in Hartz's office with the walls that could go transparent at the push of a button.

He saw Hartz again, plump and blond, with the sad eyebrows. A man who looked relaxed until he began to talk, and then you felt the burning quality about him, the air of driven tension that made even the air around him seem to be restlessly trembling. Danner stood before Hartz's desk again in memory, feeling the floor hum faintly against his soles with the heartbeat of the computers. You could see them through the glass, smooth, shiny things with winking lights in banks like candles burning in colored glass cups. You could hear their faraway chattering as they ingested facts, meditated them, and then spoke in numbers like cryptic oracles. It took men like Hartz to understand what the oracles meant.

"I have a job for you," Hartz said. "I want a man killed."

"Oh no," Danner said. "What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

"Now wait a minute. You can use money, can't you?"

"What for?" Danner asked bitterly. "A fancy funeral?"

"A life of luxury. I know you're not a fool. I know damned well you wouldn't do what I ask unless you got money *and* protection. That's what I can offer. Protection."

Danner looked through the transparent wall at the computers.

"Sure," he said.

"No, I mean it. I—" Hartz hesitated, glancing around the room a little uneasily, as if he hardly trusted his own precautions for making sure of privacy. "This is something new," he said. "I can re-direct any Fury I want to."

"Oh, sure," Danner said again.

"It's true. I'll show you. I can pull a Fury off any victim I choose."

"How?"

"That's my secret. Naturally. In effect, though, I've found a way to feed in false data, so the machines come out with the wrong verdict before conviction, or the wrong orders after conviction."

"But that's — dangerous, isn't it?"

"Dangerous?" Hartz looked at Danner under his sad eyebrows. "Well, yes. I think so. That's why I don't do it often. I've done it only once, as a matter of fact. Theoretically, I'd worked out the method. I tested it, just once. It worked. I'll do it again, to prove to you I'm telling the truth. After that I'll do it once again, to protect you. And that will be it. I don't want to upset the calculators any more than I have to. Once your job's done, I won't have to."

"Who do you want killed?"

Involuntarily Hartz glanced upward, toward the heights of the building where the top-rank executive offices were.

"O'Reilly," he said.

Danner glanced upward too, as if he could see through the floor and observe the exalted shoe-soles of O'Reilly, Controller of the Calculators, pacing an expensive carpet overhead.

"It's very simple," Hartz said. "I want his job."

"Why not do your own killing, then, if you're so sure you can stop the Furies?"

"Because that would give the whole thing away," Hartz said impatiently. "Use your head. I've got an obvious motive. It wouldn't take a calculator to figure out who profits most if O'Reilly dies. If I saved myself from a

Fury, people would start wondering how I did it. But you've got no motive for killing O'Reilly. Nobody but the calculators would know, and I'll take care of them."

"How do I know you can do it?"

"Simple. Watch."

Hartz got up and walked quickly across the resilient carpet that gave his steps a falsely youthful bounce. There was a waist-high counter on the far side of the room, with a slanting glass screen on it. Nervously Hartz punched a button, and a map of a section of the city sprang out in bold lines on its surface.

"I've got to find a sector where a Fury's in operation now," he explained. The map flickered and he pressed the button again. The unstable outlines of the city streets wavered and brightened and then went out as he scanned the sections fast and nervously. Then a map flashed on which had three wavering streaks of colored light criss-crossing it, intersecting at one point near the center. The point moved very slowly across the map, at just about the speed of a walking man reduced to miniature in scale with the street he walked on. Around him the colored lines wheeled slowly, keeping their focus always steady on the single point.

"There," Hartz said, leaning forward to read the printed name of the street. A drop of sweat fell from his forehead onto the glass, and he wiped it uneasily away with his fingertip. "There's a man with a Fury assigned to him. All right, now. I'll show you. Look here."

Above the desk was a news-screen. Hartz clicked it on and watched impatiently while a street scene swam into focus. Crowds, traffic noises, people hurrying, people loitering. And in the middle of the crowd a little oasis of isolation, an island in the sea of humanity. Upon that moving island two occupants dwelt, like a Crusoe and a Friday, alone. One of the two was a haggard man who watched the ground as he walked. The other islander in this deserted spot was a tall, shining, man-formed shape that followed at his heels.

As if invisible walls surrounded them, pressing back the crowds they walked through, the two moved in an empty

space that closed in behind them, opened up before them. Some of the passersby stared, some looked away in embarrassment or uneasiness. Some watched with a frank anticipation, wondering perhaps at just what moment the Friday would lift his steel arm and strike the Crusoe dead.

"Watch, now," Hartz said nervously. "Just a minute. I'm going to pull the Fury off this man. Wait." He crossed to his desk, opened a drawer, bent secretively over it. Danner heard a series of clicks from inside, and then the brief chatter of tapped keys. "Now," Hartz said, closing the drawer. He moved the back of his hand across his forehead. "Warm in here, isn't it? Let's get a closer look. You'll see something happen in a minute."

Back to the news-screen. He flicked the focus switch and the street scene expanded, the man and his pacing jailor swooped upward into close focus. The man's face seemed to partake subtly of the impassive quality of the robot's. You would have thought they had lived a long time together, and perhaps they had. Time is a flexible element, infinitely long sometimes in a very short space.

"Wait until they get out of the crowd," Hartz said. "This mustn't be conspicuous. There, he's turning now."

The man, seeming to move at random, wheeled at an alley corner and went down the narrow, dark passage away from the thoroughfare. The eye of the news-screen followed him as closely as the robot.

"So you do have cameras that can do that," Danner said with interest. "I always thought so. How's it done? Are they spotted at every corner, or is it a beam trans —"

"Never mind," Hartz said. "Trade secret. Just watch. We'll have to wait until—no, no! Look, he's going to try it now!"

The man glanced furtively behind him. The robot was just turning the corner in his wake. Hartz darted back to his desk and pulled the drawer open. His hand poised over it, his eyes watched the screen anxiously. It was curious how the man in the alley, though he could have no inkling that other eyes watched, looked up and scanned the sky, gazing directly for a moment into the attentive, hidden

camera and the eyes of Hartz and Danner. They saw him take a sudden, deep breath, and break into a run.

From Hartz's drawer sounded a metallic click. The robot, which had moved smoothly into a run the moment the man did, checked itself awkwardly and seemed to totter on its steel feet for an instant. It slowed. It stopped like an engine grinding to a halt. It stood motionless.

At the edge of the camera's range you could see the man's face, looking backward, mouth open with shock as he saw the impossible happen. The robot stood there in the alley, making indecisive motions as if the new orders Hartz pumped into its mechanisms were grating against inbuilt orders in whatever receptor it had. Then it turned its steel back upon the man in the alley and went smoothly, almost sedately, away down the street, walking as precisely as if it were obeying valid orders, not stripping the very gears of society in its aberrant behavior.

You got one last glimpse of the man's face, looking strangely stricken, as if his last friend in the world had left him.

Hartz switched off the screen. He wiped his forehead again. He went to the glass wall and looked out and down as if he were half afraid the calculators might know what he had done. Looking very small against the background of the metal giants, he said over his shoulder, "Well, Danner?"

Was it well? There had been more talk, of course, more persuasion, a raising of the bribe. But Danner knew his mind had been made up from that moment. A calculated risk, and worth it. Well worth it. Except—

In the deathly silence of the restaurant all motion had stopped. The Fury walked calmly between the tables, threading its shining way, touching no one. Every face blanched, turned toward it. Every mind thought, "Can it be for me?" Even the entirely innocent thought, "This is the first mistake they've ever made, and it's come for me. The first mistake, but there's no appeal and I could never prove a thing." For while guilt had no meaning in this world,

punishment did have meaning, and punishment could be blind, striking like the lightning.

Danner between set teeth told himself over and over, "Not for me. I'm safe. I'm protected. It hasn't come for me." And yet he thought how strange it was, what a coincidence, wasn't it, that there should be two murderers here under this expensive glass roof today? Himself, and the one the Fury had come for.

He released his fork and heard it clink on the plate. He looked down at it and the food, and suddenly his mind rejected everything around him and went diving off on a fugitive tangent like an ostrich into sand. He thought about food. How did asparagus grow? What did raw food look like? He had never seen any. Food came ready-cooked out of restaurant kitchens or automat slots. Potatoes, now. What did they look like? A moist white mash? No, for sometimes they were oval slices, so the thing itself must be oval. But not round. Sometimes you got them in long strips, squared off at the ends. Something quite long and oval, then, chopped into even lengths. And white, of course. And they grew underground, he was almost sure. Long, thin roots twining white arms among the pipes and conduits he had seen laid bare when the streets were under repair. How strange that he should be eating something like thin, ineffectual human arms that embraced the sewers of the city and writhed pallidly where the worms had their being. And where he himself, when the Fury found him, might. . . .

He pushed the plate away.

An indescribable rustling and murmuring in the room lifted his eyes for him as if he were an automaton. The Fury was halfway across the room now, and it was almost funny to see the relief of those whom it had passed by. Two or three of the women had buried their faces in their hands, and one man had slipped quietly from his chair in a dead faint as the Fury's passing released their private dreads back into their hidden wells.

The thing was quite close now. It looked to be about seven feet tall, and its motion was very smooth, which was unexpected when you thought about it. Smoother than hu-

man motions. Its feet fell with a heavy, measured tread upon the carpet. Thud, thud, thud. Danner tried impersonally to calculate what it weighed. You always heard that they made no sound except for that terrible tread, but this one creaked very slightly somewhere. It had no features, but the human mind couldn't help sketching in lightly a sort of airy face upon that blank steel surface, with eyes that seemed to search the room.

It was coming closer. Now all eyes were converging toward Danner. And the Fury came straight on. It almost looked as if—

"No!" Danner said to himself. "Oh, no, this can't be!" He felt like a man in a nightmare, on the verge of waking. "Let me wake soon," he thought. "Let me wake *now*, before it gets here!"

But he did not wake. And now the thing stood over him, and the thudding footsteps stopped. There was the faintest possible creaking as it towered over his table, motionless, waiting, its featureless face turned toward his.

Danner felt an intolerable tide of heat surge up into his face—rage, shame, disbelief. His heart pounded so hard the room swam and a sudden pain like jagged lightning shot through his head from temple to temple.

He was on his feet, shouting.

"No, no!" he yelled at the impassive steel. "You're wrong! You've made a mistake! Go away, you damned fool! You're wrong, you're wrong!" He groped on the table without looking down, found his plate and hurled it straight at the armored chest before him. China shattered. Spilled food smeared a white and green and brown stain over the steel. Danner floundered out of his chair, around the table, past the tall metal figure toward the door.

All he could think of now was Hartz.

Seas of faces swam by him on both sides as he stumbled out of the restaurant. Some watched with avid curiosity, their eyes seeking his. Some did not look at all, but gazed at their plates rigidly or covered their faces with their hands. Behind him the measured tread came on, and the rhythmic faint creak from somewhere inside the armor.

The faces fell away on both sides and he went through a

door without any awareness of opening it. He was in the street. Sweat bathed him and the air struck icy, though it was not a cold day. He looked blindly left and right, and then plunged for a bank of phone booths half a block away, the image of Hartz swimming before his eyes so clearly he blundered into people without seeing them. Dimly he heard indignant voices begin to speak and then die into awe-struck silence. The way cleared magically before him. He walked in the newly created island of his isolation up to the nearest booth.

After he had closed the glass door the thunder of his own blood in his ears made the little sound-proofed booth reverberate. Through the door he saw the robot stand passionlessly waiting, the smear of spilled food still streaking its chest like some robotic ribbon of honor across a steel shirt-front.

Danner tried to dial a number. His fingers were like rubber. He breathed deep and hard, trying to pull himself together. An irrelevant thought floated across the surface of his mind. I forgot to pay for my dinner. And then: A lot of good the money will do me now. Oh, damn Hartz, damn him, damn him!

He got the number.

A girl's face flashed into sharp, clear colors on the screen before him. Good, expensive screens in the public booths in this part of town, his mind noted impersonally.

"This is Controller Hartz's office. May I help you?"

Danner tried twice before he could give his name. He wondered if the girl could see him, and behind him, dimly through the glass, the tall waiting figure. He couldn't tell, because she dropped her eyes immediately to what must have been a list on the unseen table before her.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Hartz is out. He won't be back today."

The screen drained of light and color.

Danner folded back the door and stood up. His knees were unsteady. The robot stood just far enough back to clear the hinge of the door. For a moment they faced each other. Danner heard himself suddenly in the midst of an uncontrollable giggling which even he realized verged on hysteria. The robot with the smear of food like a ribbon of

honor looked so ridiculous. Danner to his dim surprise found that all this while he had been clutching the restaurant napkin in his left hand.

"Stand back," he said to the robot. "Let me out. Oh, you fool, don't you know this is a mistake?" His voice quavered. The robot creaked faintly and stepped back.

"It's bad enough to have you follow me," Danner said. "At least, you might be clean. A dirty robot is too much—too much—" The thought was idiotically unbearable, and he heard tears in his voice. Half-laughing, half-weeping, he wiped the steel chest clean and threw the napkin to the floor.

And it was at that very instant, with the feel of the hard chest still vivid in his memory, that realization finally broke through the protective screen of hysteria, and he remembered the truth. He would never in life be alone again. Never while he drew breath. And when he died, it would be at these steel hands, perhaps upon this steel chest, with the passionless face bent to his, the last thing in life he would ever see. No human companion, but the black steel skull of the Fury.

It took him nearly a week to reach Hartz. During the week, he changed his mind about how long it might take a man followed by a Fury to go mad. The last thing he saw at night was the streetlight shining through the curtains of his expensive hotel suite upon the metal shoulder of his jail. All night long, waking from uneasy slumber, he could hear the faint creaking of some inward mechanism functioning under the armor. And each time he woke it was to wonder whether he would ever wake again. Would the blow fall while he slept? And what kind of blow? How did the Furies execute? It was always a faint relief to see the bleak light of early morning shine upon the watcher by his bed. At least he had lived through the night. But was this living? And was it worth the burden?

He kept his hotel suite. Perhaps the management would have liked him to go, but nothing was said. Possibly they didn't dare. Life took on a strange, transparent quality, like something seen through an invisible wall. Outside of trying

to reach Hartz, there was nothing Danner wanted to do. The old desires for luxuries, entertainment, travel, had melted away. He wouldn't have traveled alone.

He did spend hours in the public library, reading all that was available about the Furies. It was here that he first encountered the two haunting and frightening lines Milton wrote when the world was small and simple—mystifying lines that made no certain sense to anybody until man created a Fury out of steel, in his own image.

*But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more. . . .*

Danner glanced up at his own two-handed engine, motionless at his shoulder, and thought of Milton and the long-ago times when life was simple and easy. He tried to picture the past. The twentieth century, when all civilizations together crashed over the brink in one majestic downfall to chaos. And the time before that, when people were . . . different, somehow. But how? It was too far and too strange. He could not imagine the time before the machines.

But he learned for the first time what had really happened, back there in his early years, when the bright world finally blinked out entirely and gray drudgery began. And the Furies were first forged in the likeness of man.

Before the really big wars began, technology advanced to the point where machines bred upon machines like living things, and there might have been an Eden on earth, with everybody's wants fully supplied, except that the social sciences fell too far behind the physical sciences. When the decimating wars came on, machines and people fought side by side, steel against steel and man against man, but man was the more perishable. The wars ended when there were no longer two societies left to fight against each other. Societies splintered apart into smaller and smaller groups until a state very close to anarchy set in.

The machines licked their metal wounds meanwhile and healed each other as they had been built to do. They had no need for the social sciences. They went on calmly repro-

ducing themselves and handing out to mankind the luxuries which the age of Eden had designed them to hand out. Imperfectly of course. Incompletely, because some of their species were wiped out entirely and left no machines to breed and reproduce their kind. But most of them mined their raw materials, refined them, poured and cast the needed parts, made their own fuel, repaired their own injuries and maintained their breed upon the face of the earth with an efficiency man never even approached.

Meanwhile mankind splintered and splintered away. There were no longer any real groups, not even families. Men didn't need each other much. Emotional attachments dwindled. Men had been conditioned to accept vicarious surrogates and escapism was fatally easy. Men reoriented their emotions to the Escape Machines that fed them joyous, impossible adventure and made the waking world seem too dull to bother with. And the birth rate fell and fell. It was a very strange period. Luxury and chaos went hand in hand, anarchy and inertia were the same thing. And still the birth rate dropped. . . .

Eventually a few people recognized what was happening. Man as a species was on the way out. And man was helpless to do anything about it. But he had a powerful servant. So the time came when some unsung genius saw what would have to be done. Someone saw the situation clearly and set a new pattern in the biggest of the surviving electronic calculators. This was the goal he set: "Mankind must be made self-responsible again. You will make this your only goal until you achieve the end."

It was simple, but the changes it produced were worldwide and all human life on the planet altered drastically because of it. The machines were an integrated society, if man was not. And now they had a single set of orders which all of them reorganized to obey.

So the days of the free luxuries ended. The Escape Machines shut up shop. Men were forced back into groups for the sake of survival. They had to undertake now the work the machines withheld, and slowly, slowly, common needs and common interests began to spawn the almost lost feeling of human unity again.

But it was so slow. And no machine could put back into man what he had lost—the internalized conscience. Individualism had reached its ultimate stage and there had been no deterrent to crime for a long while. Without family or clan relations, not even feud retaliation occurred. Conscience failed, since no man identified with any other.

The real job of the machines now was to rebuild in man a realistic superego to save him from extinction. A self-responsible society would be a genuinely interdependent one, the leader identifying with the group, and a realistically internalized conscience which would forbid and punish "sin"—the sin of injuring the group with which you identify.

And here the Furies came in.

The machines defined murder, under any circumstances, as the only human crime. This was accurate enough, since it is the only act which can irreplaceably destroy a unit of society.

The Furies couldn't prevent crime. Punishment never cures the criminal. But it can prevent others from committing crime through simple fear, when they see punishment administered to others. The Furies were the symbol of punishment. They overtly stalked the streets on the heels of their condemned victims, the outward and visible sign that murder is always punished, and punished most publicly and terribly. They were very efficient. They were never wrong. Or at least, in theory they were never wrong, and considering the enormous quantities of information stored by now in the analogue computers, it seemed likely that the justice of the machines was far more efficient than that of humans could be.

Someday man would rediscover sin. Without it he had come near to perishing entirely. With it, he might resume his authority over himself and the race of mechanized servants who were helping him to restore his species. But until that day, the Furies would have to stalk the streets, man's conscience in metal guise, imposed by the machines man created a long time ago.

What Danner did during this time he scarcely knew. He

thought a great deal of the old days when the Escape Machines still worked, before the machines rationed luxuries. He thought of this sullenly and with resentment, for he could see no point at all in the experiment mankind was embarked on. He had liked it better in the old days. And there were no Furies then, either.

He drank a good deal. Once he emptied his pockets into the hat of a legless beggar, because the man like himself was set apart from society by something new and terrible. For Danner it was the Fury. For the beggar it was life itself. Thirty years ago he would have lived or died unheeded, tended only by machines. That a beggar could survive at all, by begging, must be a sign that society was beginning to feel twinges of awakened fellow feeling with its members, but to Danner that meant nothing. He wouldn't be around long enough to know how the story came out.

He wanted to talk to the beggar, though the man tried to wheel himself away on his little platform.

"Listen," Danner said urgently, following, searching his pockets. "I want to tell you. It doesn't feel the way you think it would. It feels—"

He was quite drunk that night, and he followed the beggar until the man threw the money back at him and thrust himself away rapidly on his wheeled platform, while Danner leaned against a building and tried to believe in its solidity. But only the shadow of the Fury, falling across him from the street lamp, was real.

Later that night, somewhere in the dark, he attacked the Fury. He seemed to remember finding a length of pipe somewhere, and he struck showers of sparks from the great, impervious shoulders above him. Then he ran, doubling and twisting up alleys, and in the end he hid in a dark doorway, waiting, until the steady footsteps resounded through the night.

He fell asleep, exhausted.

It was the next day that he finally reached Hartz.

"What went wrong?" Danner asked. In the past week he had changed a good deal. His face was taking on, in

its impassivity, an odd resemblance to the metal mask of the robot.

Hartz struck the desk edge a nervous blow, grimacing when he hurt his hand. The room seemed to be vibrating not with the pulse of the machines below but with his own tense energy.

"*Something* went wrong," he said. "I don't know yet. I—"

"You don't know!" Danner lost part of his impassivity.

"Now wait." Hartz made soothing motions with his hands. "Just hang on a little longer. It'll be all right. You can—"

"How much longer have I got?" Danner asked. He looked over his shoulder at the tall Fury standing behind him, as if he were really asking the question of it, not Hartz. There was a feeling, somehow, about the way he said it that made you think he must have asked that question many times, looking up into the blank steel face, and would go on asking hopelessly until the answer came at last. But not in words . . .

"I can't even find that out," Hartz said. "Damn it, Danner, this was a risk. You knew that."

"You said you could control the computer. I saw you do it. I want to know why you didn't do what you promised."

"*Something* went wrong, I tell you. It should have worked. The minute this—business—came up I fed in the data that should have protected you."

"But what happened?"

Hartz got up and began to pace the resilient flooring. "I just don't know. We don't understand the potentiality of the machines, that's all. I thought I could do it. But—"

"*You thought!*"

"I know I can do it. I'm still trying. I'm trying everything. After all, this is important to me, too. I'm working as fast as I can. That's why I couldn't see you before. I'm certain I can do it, if I can work this out my own way. Damn it, Danner, it's complex. And it's not like juggling a comptometer. Look at those things out there."

Danner didn't bother to look.

"You'd better do it," he said. "That's all."

Hartz said furiously, "Don't threaten me! Let me alone and I'll work it out. But don't threaten me."

"You're in this too," Danner said.

Hartz went back to his desk and sat down on the edge of it.

"How?" he asked.

"O'Reilly's dead. You paid me to kill him."

Hartz shrugged. "The Fury knows that," he said. "The computers know it. And it doesn't matter a damn bit. Your hand pulled the trigger, not mine."

"We're both guilty. If I suffer for it, you—"

"Now wait a minute. Get this straight. I thought you knew it. It's a basis of law enforcement, and always has been. Nobody's punished for intention. Only for actions. I'm no more responsible for O'Reilly's death than the gun you used on him."

"But you lied to me! You tricked me! I'll—"

"You'll do as I say, if you want to save yourself. I didn't trick you, I just made a mistake. Give me time and I'll retrieve it."

"How long?"

This time both men looked at the Fury. It stood impassive.

"I don't know how long," Danner answered his own question. "You say you don't. Nobody even knows how he'll kill me, when the time comes. I've been reading everything that's available to the public about this. Is it true that the method varies, just to keep people like me on tenterhooks? And the time allowed—doesn't that vary too?"

"Yes, it's true. But there's a minimum time—I'm almost sure. You must still be within it. Believe me, Danner, I can still call off the Fury. You saw me do it. You know it worked once. All I've got to find out is what went wrong this time. But the more you bother me the more I'll be delayed. I'll get in touch with you. Don't try to see me again."

Danner was on his feet. He took a few quick steps toward Hartz, fury and frustration breaking up the impassive mask which despair had been forming over his

face. But the solemn footsteps of the Fury sounded behind him. He stopped.

The two men looked at each other.

"Give me time," Hartz said. "Trust me, Danner."

In a way it was worse, having hope. There must until now have been a kind of numbness of despair that had kept him from feeling too much. But now there was a chance that after all he might escape into the bright and new life he had risked so much for—if Hartz could save him in time.

Now, for a period, he began to savor experience again. He bought new clothes. He traveled, though never, of course, alone. He even sought human companionship again and found it—after a fashion. But the kind of people willing to associate with a man under this sort of death sentence was not a very appealing type. He found, for instance, that some women felt strongly attracted to him, not because of himself or his money, but for the sake of his companion. They seemed enthralled by the opportunity for a close, safe brush with the very instrument of destiny. Over his very shoulder, sometimes, he would realize they watched the Fury in an ecstasy of fascinated anticipation. In a strange reaction of jealousy, he dropped such people as soon as he recognized the first coldly flirtatious glance one of them cast at the robot behind him.

He tried farther travel. He took the rocket to Africa, and came back by way of the rain-forests of South America, but neither the night clubs nor the exotic newness of strange places seemed to touch him in any way that mattered. The sunlight looked much the same, reflecting from the curved steel surfaces of his follower, whether it shone over lion-colored savannahs or filtered through the hanging gardens of the jungles. All novelty grew dull quickly because of the dreadfully familiar thing that stood forever at his shoulder. He could enjoy nothing at all.

And the rhythmic beat of footfalls behind him began to grow unendurable. He used earplugs, but the heavy vibration throbbed through his skull in a constant measure like an eternal headache. Even when the Fury stood

still, he could hear in his head the imaginary beating of its steps.

He bought weapons and tried to destroy the robot. Of course he failed. And even if he succeeded he knew another would be assigned to him. Liquor and drugs were no good. Suicide came more and more often into his mind, but he postponed that thought, because Hartz had said there was still hope.

In the end, he came back to the city to be near Hartz—and hope. Again he found himself spending most of his time in the library, walking no more than he had to because of the footsteps that thudded behind him. And it was here, one morning, that he found the answer. . . .

He had gone through all available factual material about the Furies. He had gone through all the literary references collated under that heading, astonished to find how many there were and how apt some of them had become—like Milton's two-handed engine—after the lapse of all these centuries. "*Those strong feet that followed, followed after,*" he read. "*. . . with unhurrying chase, And unperturbed pace, Deliberate speed, majestic instancy. . . .*" He turned the page and saw himself and his plight more literally than any allegory:

*I shook the pillaring hours
And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,
I stand amid the dust of the mounded years—
My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.*

He let several tears of self-pity fall upon the page that pictured him so clearly.

But then he passed on from literary references to the library's store of filmed plays, because some of them were cross-indexed under the heading he sought. He watched Orestes hounded in modern dress from Argos to Athens with a single seven-foot robot Fury at his heels instead of the three snake-haired Erinyes of legend. There had been an outburst of plays on the theme when the Furies first came into usage. Sunk in a half-dream of his own boyhood

memories when the Escape Machines still operated, Danner lost himself in the action of the films.

He lost himself so completely that when the familiar scene first flashed by him in the viewing booth he hardly questioned it. The whole experience was part of a familiar boyhood pattern and he was not at first surprised to find one scene more vividly familiar than the rest. But then memory rang a bell in his mind and he sat up sharply and brought his fist down with a bang on the stop-action button. He spun the film back and ran the scene over again.

It showed a man walking with his Fury through city traffic, the two of them moving in a little desert island of their own making, like a Crusoe with a Friday at his heels. . . . It showed the man turn into an alley, glance up at the camera anxiously, take a deep breath and break into a sudden run. It showed the Fury hesitate, make indecisive motions and then turn and walk quietly and calmly away in the other direction, its feet ringing on the pavement hollowly. . . .

Danner spun the film back again and ran the scene once more, just to make doubly sure. He was shaking so hard he could scarcely manipulate the viewer.

"How do you like that?" he muttered to the Fury behind him in the dim booth. He had by now formed a habit of talking to the Fury a good deal, in a rapid, mumbling undertone, not really aware he did it. "What do you make of that, you? Seen it before, haven't you? Familiar, isn't it? Isn't it! *Isn't it!* Answer me, you damned dumb hulk!" And reaching backward, he struck the robot across the chest as he would have struck Hartz if he could. The blow made a hollow sound in the booth, but the robot made no other response, though when Danner looked back inquiringly at it, he saw the reflections of the over-familiar scene, running a third time on the screen, running in tiny reflection across the robot's chest and faceless head, as if it too remembered.

So now he knew the answer. And Hartz had never possessed the power he claimed. Or if he did, had no intention of using it to help Danner. Why should he? His risk was

over now. No wonder Hartz had been so nervous, running that film-strip off on a news-screen in his office. But the anxiety sprang not from the dangerous thing he was tampering with, but from sheer strain in matching his activities to the action in the play. How he must have rehearsed it, timing every move! And how he must have laughed, afterward.

"How long have I got?" Danner demanded fiercely, striking a hollow reverberation from the robot's chest. "How long? Answer me! Long enough?"

Release from hope was an ecstasy, now. He need not wait any longer. He need not try any more. All he had to do was get to Hartz and get there fast, before his own time ran out. He thought with revulsion of all the days he had wasted already, in travel and time-killing, when for all he knew his own last minutes might be draining away now. Before Hartz's did.

"Come along," he said needlessly to the Fury. "Hurry!"

It came, matching its speed to his, the enigmatic timer inside it ticking the moments away toward that instant when the two-handed engine would smite once, and smite no more.

Hartz sat in the Controller's office behind a brand-new desk, looking down from the very top of the pyramid now over the banks of computers that kept society running and cracked the whip over mankind. He sighed with deep content.

The only thing was, he found himself thinking a good deal about Danner. Dreaming of him, even. Not with guilt, because guilt implies conscience, and the long schooling in anarchic individualism was still deep in the roots of every man's mind. But with uneasiness, perhaps.

Thinking of Danner, he leaned back and unlocked a small drawer which he had transferred from his old desk to the new. He slid his hand in and let his fingers touch the controls lightly, idly. Quite idly.

Two movements, and he could save Danner's life. For, of course, he had lied to Danner straight through. He could control the Furies very easily. He could save Danner, but

he had never intended to. There was no need. And the thing was dangerous. You tamper once with a mechanism as complex as that which controlled society, and there would be no telling where the maladjustment might end. Chain-reaction, maybe, throwing the whole organization out of kilter. No.

He might someday have to use the device in the drawer. He hoped not. He pushed the drawer shut quickly, and heard the soft click of the lock.

He was Controller now. Guardian, in a sense, of the machines which were faithful in a way no man could ever be. *Quis custodiet*, Hartz thought. The old problem. And the answer was: Nobody. Nobody, today. He himself had no superiors and his power was absolute. Because of this little mechanism in the drawer, nobody controlled the Controller. Not an internal conscience, and not an external one. Nothing could touch him. . . .

Hearing the footsteps on the stairs, he thought for a moment he must be dreaming. He had sometimes dreamed that he was Danner, with those relentless footfalls thudding after him. But he was awake now.

It was strange that he caught the almost subsonic beat of the approaching metal feet before he heard the storming steps of Danner rushing up his private stairs. The whole thing happened so fast that time seemed to have no connection with it. First he heard the heavy, subsonic beat, then the sudden tumult of shouts and banging doors downstairs, and then last of all the thump, thump of Danner charging up the stairs, his steps so perfectly matched by the heavier thud of the robot's that the metal trampling drowned out the tramp of flesh and bone and leather.

Then Danner flung the door open with a crash, and the shouts and trappings from below funneled upward into the quiet office like a cyclone rushing toward the hearer. But a cyclone in a nightmare, because it would never get any nearer. Time had stopped.

Time had stopped with Danner in the doorway, his face convulsed, both hands holding the revolver because he shook so badly he could not brace it with one.

Hartz acted without any more thought than a robot. He

had dreamed of this moment too often, in one form or another. If he could have tampered with the Fury to the extent of hurrying Danner's death, he would have done it. But he didn't know how. He could only wait it out, as anxiously as Danner himself, hoping against hope that the blow would fall and the executioner strike before Danner guessed the truth. Or gave up hope.

So Hartz was ready when trouble came. He found his own gun in his hand without the least recollection of having opened the drawer. The trouble was that time had stopped. He knew, in the back of his mind, that the Fury must stop Danner from injuring anybody. But Danner stood in the doorway alone, the revolver in both shaking hands. And farther back, behind the knowledge of the Fury's duty, Hartz's mind held the knowledge that the machines could be stopped. The Furies could fail. He dared not trust his life to their incorruptibility, because he himself was the source of a corruption that could stop them in their tracks.

The gun was in his hand without his knowledge. The trigger pressed his finger and the revolver kicked back against his palm, and the spurt of the explosion made the air hiss between him and Danner.

He heard his bullet clang on metal.

Time started again, running double-pace to catch up. The Fury had been no more than a single pace behind Danner after all, because its steel arm encircled him and its steel hand was deflecting Danner's gun. Danner had fired, yes, but not soon enough. Not before the Fury reached him. Hartz's bullet struck first.

It struck Danner in the chest, exploding through him, and rang upon the steel chest of the Fury behind him. Danner's face smoothed out into a blankness as complete as the blankness of the mask above his head. He slumped backward, not falling because of the robot's embrace, but slowly slipping to the floor between the Fury's arm and its impervious metal body. His revolver thumped softly to the carpet. Blood welled from his chest and back.

The robot stood there impassive, a streak of Danner's

blood slanting across its metal chest like a robotic ribbon of honor.

The Fury and the Controller of the Furies stood staring at each other. And the Fury could not, of course, speak, but in Hartz's mind it seemed to.

"Self-defense is no excuse," the Fury seemed to be saying. "We never punish intent, but we always punish action. Any act of murder. Any act of murder. . . ."

Hartz barely had time to drop his revolver in his desk drawer before the first of the clamorous crowd from downstairs came bursting through the door. He barely had the presence of mind to do it, either. He had not really thought the thing through this far.

It was, on the surface, a clear case of suicide. In a slightly unsteady voice he heard himself explaining. Everybody had seen the madman rushing through the office, his Fury at his heels. This wouldn't be the first time a killer and his Fury had tried to get at the Controller, begging him to call off the jailer and forestall the executioner. What had happened, Hartz told his underlings calmly enough, was that the Fury had naturally stopped the man from shooting Hartz. And the victim had then turned his gun upon himself. Powder-burns on his clothing showed it. (The desk was very near the door.) Back-blast in the skin of Danner's hands would show he had really fired a gun.

Suicide. It would satisfy any human. But it would not satisfy the computers.

They carried the dead man out. They left Hartz and the Fury alone, still facing each other across the desk. If anyone thought this was strange, nobody showed it.

Hartz himself didn't know if it was strange or not. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Nobody had ever been fool enough to commit murder in the very presence of a Fury. Even the Controller did not know exactly how the computers assessed evidence and fixed guilt. Should this Fury have been recalled, normally? If Danner's death were really suicide, would Hartz stand here alone now?

He knew the machines were already processing the evidence of what had really happened here. What he couldn't be sure of was whether this Fury had already received its

orders and would follow him wherever he went from now on until the hour of his death. Or whether it simply stood motionless, waiting recall.

Well, it didn't matter. This Fury or another was already, in the present moment, in the process of receiving instructions about him. There was only one thing to do. Thank God there was something he *could* do.

So Hartz unlocked the desk drawer and slid it open, touched the clicking keys he had never expected to use. Very carefully he fed the coded information, digit by digit, into the computers. As he did, he looked out through the glass wall and imagined he could see down there in the hidden tapes the units of data fading into blankness and the new, false information flashing into existence.

He looked up at the robot. He smiled a little.

"Now you'll forget," he said. "You and the computers. You can go now. I won't be seeing you again."

Either the computers worked incredibly fast—as of course they did—or pure coincidence took over, because in only a moment or two the Fury moved as if in response to Hartz's dismissal. It had stood quite motionless since Danner slid through its arms. Now new orders animated it, and briefly its motion was almost jerky as it changed from one set of instructions to another. It almost seemed to bow, a stiff little bending motion that brought its head down to a level with Hartz's.

He saw his own face reflected in the blank face of the Fury. You could very nearly read an ironic note in that stiff bow, with the diplomat's ribbon of honor across the chest of the creature, symbol of duty discharged honorably. But there was nothing honorable about this withdrawal. The incorruptible metal was putting on corruption and looking back at Hartz with the reflection of his own face.

He watched it stalk toward the door. He heard it go thudding evenly down the stairs. He could feel the thuds vibrate in the floor, and there was a sudden sick dizziness in him when he thought the whole fabric of society was shaking under his feet.

The machines were corruptible.

Mankind's survival still depended on the computers,

and the computers could not be trusted. Hartz looked down and saw that his hands were shaking. He shut the drawer and heard the lock click softly. He gazed at his hands. He felt their shaking echoed in an inner shaking, a terrifying sense of the instability of the world.

A sudden, appalling loneliness swept over him like a cold wind. He had never felt before so urgent a need for the companionship of his own kind. No one person, but people. Just people. The sense of human beings all around him, a very primitive need.

He got his hat and coat and went downstairs rapidly, hands deep in his pockets because of some inner chill no coat could guard against. Halfway down the stairs he stopped dead still.

There were footsteps behind him.

He dared not look back at first. He knew those footsteps. But he had two fears and he didn't know which was worse. The fear that a Fury was after him—and the fear that it was not. There would be a sort of insane relief if it really was, because then he could trust the machines after all, and this terrible loneliness might pass over him and go.

He took another downward step, not looking back. He heard the ominous footfall behind him, echoing his own. He sighed one deep sigh and looked back.

There was nothing on the stairs.

He went on down after a timeless pause, watching over his shoulder. He could hear the relentless feet thudding behind him, but no visible Fury followed. No visible Fury.

The Erinyes had struck inward again, and an invisible Fury of the mind followed Hartz down the stairs.

It was as if sin had come anew into the world, and the first man felt again the first inward guilt. So the computers had not failed, after all.

Hartz went slowly down the steps and out into the street, still hearing as he would always hear the relentless, incorruptible footsteps behind him that no longer rang like metal.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Henry Kuttner and Catherine Moore are less a writing team than a case of literary multiple personality. Before their marriage in 1940, they had written separately for a wide variety of magazines, although both were chiefly interested in imaginative fiction. But after 1940 there began one of the most confusing collaborations existing outside of the field of international relations. This eventually led to the development of nineteen different pseudonyms, an increasing inability on the part of the authors to remember who wrote what story, and an interesting pathological state commonly known as the "Who-am-I?" syndrome.

It all began (C. L. Moore believes) when, halfway through a story she was writing, she couldn't decide what was going to happen next and asked her husband. He told her. On the other hand, it all began (Henry Kuttner thinks) when, after finishing a story, he couldn't quite believe it *was* finished, and asked his wife what, if anything, should happen next. She told him. In either case, the fatal step had been taken, and this devoted couple began more and more to collaborate on their stories, using every method known to civilized man, including writing alternative sequences under water.

For some reason neither of the team remembers, various pseudonyms began to be used. For some equally improbable reason, several of the pseudonyms quickly became more popular than the authors' real names, and appeared more frequently in print—chiefly the pseudonym "Lewis Padgett." In reality, many Padgett stories were collaborations, some were written by Catherine Kuttner, and others by Henry Kuttner. As the confusion grew worse, readers occasionally wrote fan letters wanting to know why C. L. Moore wasn't writing so much, and asking why Henry Kuttner couldn't write good stories like Lew Padgett.

The Kuttners had, they feel, caught several bears by their tails—bears named Lewis Padgett, Lawrence O'Donnell, Keith Hammond, Paul Edmonds, Hudson Hastings, C. H. Liddell, and similar pseudonymic phantoms. That was when the "Who-am-I?" syndrome developed. The

authors became assailed with disquieting doubts as to whether or not they themselves really existed. More and more the pseudonyms began to assume personalities of their own. Padgett, the Kuttners gradually decided, lived in a suburb of Cincinnati and looked rather like Woodrow Wilson. He was a pedantic fellow whom the authors came to dislike passionately. O'Donnell ("Larry") was more likable, for the first hour or so; he lived in Greenwich Village, drank a good deal, and was, to be frank, a slob. Keith Hammond was seventeen and rather gawky; he believed everything he wrote. Paul Edmonds, who came of an old New Orleans family, was a sybarite and interested in voodoo. Thus it went.

Finally the Kuttners decided something had to be done about all this before they dwindled to two dots and disappeared. They pulled themselves together, invited all the pseudonymic personalities to one of those house parties in an isolated mansion, and poisoned them. Since then—a couple of years ago—the Kuttners have stuck pretty firmly to their rule of using no pseudonyms and employing a double by-line (as in this book) on collaborations. Each now uses his own name on stories he (or she) writes separately. The only trouble has been with Lewis Padgett, who won't stay dead.

To date seventeen books by the Kuttners have been published, and their work has appeared in some forty-odd anthologies. At present, C. L. Moore is working on a science-fiction novel and on a mystery novel. Henry Kuttner is working on two mystery novels. They are thinking of collaborating on a novel about a writing team that develops a case of literary multiple personality, but haven't decided yet. They live in California, at the moment, and are pretty happy—all things considered.

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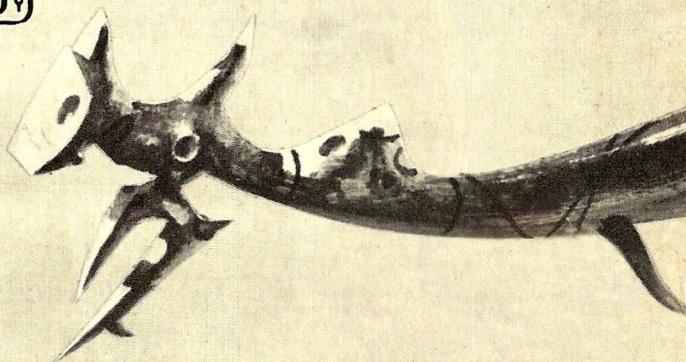
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