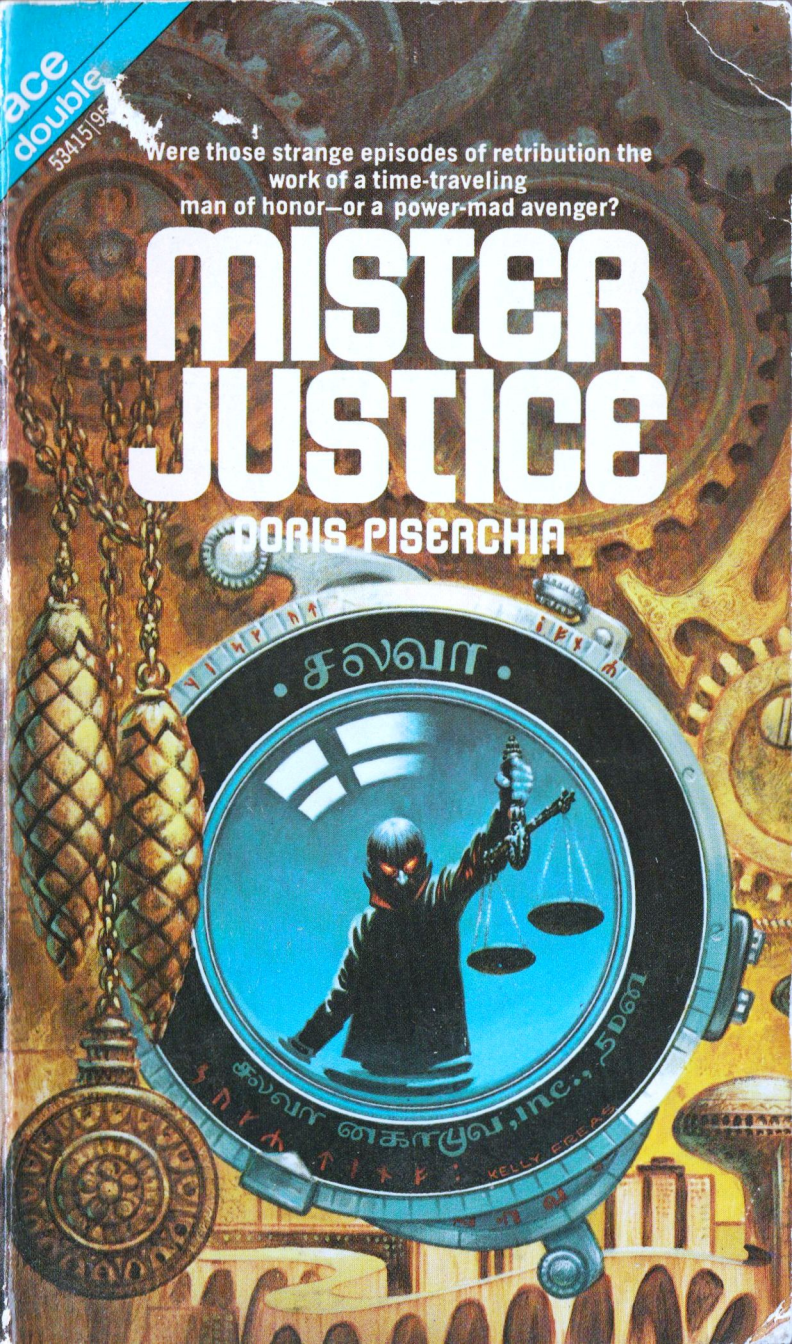


ace
double
53415195

Were those strange episodes of retribution the
work of a time-traveling
man of honor—or a power-mad avenger?

MISTER JUSTICE

DORIS PISERCHIA



Turner squirmed in his chair. "I think we're assuming a lot. We're in an uproar because of some photographs. They could be phony."

"They aren't."

"So Justice has taken pictures of things that happened three and four decades ago with a camera invented eleven years ago?"

"Yes."

"He has a time machine?"

Daniel hesitated.

Turner persisted. "A big one that produces the power and a little hook-up that he carries around with him to go on his trips?"

Again Daniel didn't answer.

"You know how outlandish that sounds?"

Daniel shrugged.

"Who else do you know who can travel in time?"

"Nobody."

"Who else is near to cracking the barrier?"

"Nobody," said Daniel wearily.

"Yet you're confident Mr. Justice can do it?"

"He can be anywhere. Once a moment is past it is completely open to him."

Resting his chin on his hand, Burgess murmured, "A madman with a power like that."

"There's another possibility," said Daniel, and they looked at him with angry eyes. "There may not be any machine. . . ."

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

DORIS PISERCHIA has appeared in the pages of many magazines and anthologies, most notably Frederik Pohl's BEST SCIENCE FICTION FOR 1972. One of the most important new writers of science fiction, she is known for the vivid dreamlike quality of her prose. This is her first full-length novel.

She resides with her husband in New Jersey.

MISTER JUSTICE

by Doris Piserchia



A Division of Charter Communications Inc.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

MISTER JUSTICE

**Copyright ©, 1973, by Doris Piserchia
An Ace Book. All Rights Reserved.**

First Ace printing: May, 1973

HIERARCHIES

Copyright ©, 1973, by John T. Phillifent

Printed in U.S.A

I

Jan. 6, 2002: Three men named Darby, Scarpi and Olsen built a large coal fire on a hilltop in Pennsylvania. The youngest man, Olsen, seemed uneasy and frequently turned to look down the hill, as if he were expecting to see someone.

Time passed and the fire became a roaring cauldron.

"How much longer do we have to wait?" said Olsen. "Are you sure he's coming?" He was staring down the hill and didn't know that his two companions were closing in behind him.

They picked him up and threw him into the center of the flames. He gave a hideous scream and died.

The man named Scarpi took a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed at the coaldust on his hands. While he was cleaning himself, he absently glanced toward his right. Suddenly he yelled.

"Get that man."

But there was no man. The hilltop was barren of shrubbery and so was the slope for a quarter-mile around them. Scarpi finally decided that what he had glimpsed was a mirage made by the heat of the fire. He couldn't have seen a man crouching behind a small rock taking photographs of them. His eyes had been playing tricks on him.

Jan. 6, 2033: Two men named Scarpi and Darby rode in a black sedan on a deserted road in the mountains of New York. They picked up a hitchhiker along the way. An hour later, they rounded a bend in the road and braked to a quick stop in order to avoid crashing into a fallen tree. A man came walking out of the woods. He paused by the driver's door, yanked it open and stuck a gun against Darby's head.

"Get out," he said. He waved the gun at Scarpi who sat in the back seat. "You, too."

As the two climbed from the car, the stranger passed a plastic seal on the windshield. It was a small replica of the figure of Justice, except that there was a difference. The figure had no blindfold across her eyes.

The hitchhiker hid behind trees and followed the three into the woods. He saw them climb a hill to where a large fire blazed. In horror he watched as the stranger calmly shot Darby and Scarpi in the leg, picked them up one at a time and threw them into the fire.

That same day, New York City Police Department, Fifth Precinct; delivered in the mail: photographs of Carl Scarpi and Jack Darby in the act of murdering a man who was later identified as Philip Olsen. The photography was clean, clear and professional. Included in the material was a note telling the police where they would find the corpses of the executed. The note was signed, "Mr. Justice."

Feb. 15, 1997: In the basement of an abandoned tenement building in New York City, Charles "Little Boy" Keys had an argument with a man named Mace Lipton. The quarrel proceeded quietly with Keys doing most of the talking. All at once he began making threats.

"You can go to hell," said Lipton and made as if to leave.

Keys took a gun from his pocket and shot him dead. Before he buried the body in a hole in the floor, he cut off the right hand. This was wrapped in tarpaper and mailed to Lipton's address.

Feb. 15, 2033: A large carton wrapped in tarpaper was mailed to the address of Charles "Little Boy" Keys. In the carton was his body. He had been shot in the chest. New York City police received a folder in the day's

mail containing photographs of Keys shooting Lipton. Included in the folder was a plastic seal bearing the figure of Justice. She wore no blindfold.

Nov. 1, 2033, New York City: A man named Toby Rook was arrested and bound over for trial. Evidence indicated that he had committed several murders. The newspapers did not mention that "several" meant thirty. The police were aware that Rook had launched himself into his profession at the age of sixteen when he stabbed his girlfriend to death.

Rook had his trial. He was a man with friends. His impulsive character dictated that people either liked him or hated him. Most of those who had hated him were dead. During the trial, Rook showed the public the many faces of his personality. Handsome, hot-tempered, arrogant, he spoke long and earnestly of the various indignities he had suffered at the hands of the police. His friends came forward with two alibis for every charge brought against him. People already hostile toward the police began taking sides with him. They talked about justice. The jury listened, doubted. They looked at the handsome individual in the defendant's chair and their doubts intensified.

Rook was acquitted for lack of evidence. As he walked from the courtroom, he thumbed his nose at the jury.

Nov. 5, 2033, New York City Police Department, Eighth Precinct; received in the day's mail: photographs of Toby Rook in the act of killing twelve people. Included in the folder was a card signed by Mr. Justice. It told the police where they would find Rook's body.

He hung from the yardarm of a derelict boat in the East River, his own knife in his heart.

March 30, 1999, New York: A man named Jacob Levy walked down the street and stopped to look in a

store window. All at once he groaned and grabbed at his stomach. In a few minutes his groans became shrill screams. He died before the ambulance arrived. Poison had been dropped into the coffee he drank at a cafe a short time before.

March 30, 2034, the mountains of New York: A group of people met at a private inn to wine, dine and discuss business. Their numbers were twenty-three. Six of them had shrimp toast as an appetizer, the rest ate egg-roll. As the dessert was being served, one of the guests who had eaten shrimp toast began screaming in pain. The man beside him also screamed. Then another.

Six of the twenty-three died of poisoning.

In a coffee can in the kitchen the police found a packet of tapes. They played them and listened to the six poison victims conspiring to kill a man named Jacob Levy. Also in the can was a plastic seal left by Mr. Justice.

April 17, 1998, New York: Twelve men played poker in a garage. The door suddenly burst open. Several hooded men ran in and sprayed the room with machine-gun bullets.

March 31, 2034, a New York mountain retreat: A group of people met to wine, dine and discuss business. Their numbers were sixty-five. In the midst of dinner a stranger came walking into the room. Clashed in his hands was a machine gun. He stopped several yards away from the seated group and calmly opened fire with his weapon.

Fourteen of the group lived; not a hair of their heads was touched. The rest were dead. The survivors swore the stranger had left the way he came, through the open door. The lookouts swore just as vehemently that no one could have gotten past them.

Mr. Justice mailed material to the police: photog-

raphs of the mass killing of twelve men in a garage thirty-seven years before, plus tapes identifying forty-eight members of the group as having been involved in the conspiracy to kill. The five who had done the actual shooting were among the dead.

April 5, 2034, *New York Times*, front page, a letter:

Mr. Justice,

You are a sick man in need of medical treatment. I urge you to stop this insane vendetta of yours and surrender yourself to the authorities. I promise that you will not be harmed.

John F. Jenson
Governor of New York

April 9, 2034, New York City, Fifth Precinct Police Station: An anonymous phone caller reported that a crime was being committed. The police arrived at the docks and found three men beating another man with chains. The attackers had guns. In the resulting shoot-out, two policemen were killed. The three criminals were taken to jail. The jail was new and was virtually impossible to escape from without assistance. Sometime during the night the three killers got away.

April 10, 2034: The police received an anonymous phone call. The bodies of the escaped killers were found in an apartment. They had been shot.

April 11, 2034, *New York Times* front page, a letter:

Mr. Justice,

In the name of decency and sanity, stop your killing and surrender yourself to the authorities. This country neither needs nor wants your kind of justice. We have a skilled force of people equipped to deal with criminals.

Any lawbreaker who is brought into an American court will receive full dues according to the law.

Clyde M. Sullivan

President of the United States

April 14, 2034, New York City: A dwelling was broken into and its five residents were subjected to torture and death by persons unknown.

April 15, 2034, a New York City Police Station: Found on the front lawn, bound and gagged, two male and three female hippies along with photographs of them torturing and murdering five persons the day before.

Dec. 12, 2034, a New York court: The trial of the five hippies was completed; the verdict was guilty. Empowered by the Unusually Brutal Crime Amendment, the judge sentenced the defendants to death in the gas chamber on 1 July 2034.

The sentence was appealed. July 1 came and went. After the trial was reviewed, a new date of execution was set for 3 September. The sentence was appealed.

September 3 came and went. After the trial was reviewed, a new date of execution was set for January 5, 2035. The sentence was appealed.

On January 5, 2035 a prison guard in the women's ward wheeled a cart bearing dinner trays into a cell. She found the three female hippies lying on the floor. In the men's ward the two male hippies were also found on the floor. All were dead of cyanide gas. Somehow, someone had tampered with their cigarettes.

January 6, 2035, *New York Times*, front page, a letter:

Mr. Justice,

We apologize to the people of the world for your behavior. We do not apologize for our courts. The due process of law is often lengthy. We intend to improve

this condition. Obviously you possess a distorted sense of justice. Perhaps you also have no patience. Would you care to try some?

Clyde M. Sullivan
President of the United States

January 7, 2035, a New York City police station: A man, bound and gagged, was found lying on the front lawn. The officer who discovered him thought he looked familiar. To his horror he realized the man was Abner Teech.

The situation was embarrassing. Abner Teech was the Vice President. Tied to his neck was a folder containing enough evidence to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that he had committed extortion thirty years before when he was an obscure politician.

The police decided to leave it to the judge. One was quietly approached. The judge decided that New York hadn't jurisdiction over Abner Teech because his crime of extortion had been committed while he was a resident of Washington, D.C. It was a technicality, to be sure, but Teech was no common man and the law must be exact. The judge quietly advised the Vice President to turn himself over to the authorities in Washington, then he was set free.

Teech didn't go to the police in Washington. He went home. The New York police frowned, the judge who had handled the case frowned, everyone involved frowned.

January 10, 2036, Washington, D.C.: Abner Teech was delivered, bound and gagged, onto the front lawn of a police station. Tied about his neck was a folder which contained evidence showing that fifteen years earlier he had engaged in a conspiracy to pad construction contracts and had made a profit of \$50,000.

It was an embarrassing situation. It was kept quiet. That same afternoon Abner Teech walked the streets a free man. The evidence against him had been misplaced and couldn't be located.

That evening he was found bound and gagged on the front lawn of the Supreme Court building. Around his neck was tied a folder. Its contents revealed that five years ago he had financed eight loanshark companies and had cleaned up to the tune of a million dollars.

No one knew how it happened but the new evidence against the Vice President was misplaced. He was not detained.

January 12, 2036, a New York police station: Abner Teech walked in and asked to be placed under arrest. He confessed to the crime of extortion. No one but his lawyer learned immediately why he had given himself up. Later everyone heard about it.

According to Teech, he was having dinner alone in his home when a man walked in. This in itself was startling since the house and grounds were guarded by federal agents. Nevertheless the stranger came walking into the dining room and sat down beside the Vice President.

The man's face had an odd shiny material on it that kept the features from coming into clear focus. Teech couldn't describe him other than to say that he was tall and slender and had brown hair.

The stranger had spoken calmly and quietly for a few minutes. Then he had laid a small seal of Justice on the table, after which he stood up and left the room. The federal agents were alerted at once. They searched the house and grounds but found no one.

Teech had thought it over before deciding to place himself in the hands of the law. They at least knew what mercy meant. Mr. Justice didn't. Teech was told that if he didn't publicly confess to at least one of his major

crimes he would be tried in some deserted spot by Mr. Justice, not for one of his crimes but for all of them. His punishment would be the maximum demanded by the law, imprisonment for the remainder of his life. Mr. Justice said he would imprison Teech, that he would do it personally, that the sentence would hold for as long as the Vice President lived and that he would never again see daylight as a free man.

Eventually Abner Teech was sentenced to seven years in a federal penitentiary. More than once he was asked to describe the visitor who had sent him running to the police. He tried, but there wasn't much that he could say. Mr. Justice had sat in his dining room no more than four minutes. He had spoken as if he were reading a grocery list; he inflected no particular word or phrase. Though he had threatened, he had done it impassionately. He obviously knew how to disguise his personality.

How tall was Mr. Justice? About six feet. As for build, he was on the slender side, but Teech had already mentioned that. Yes, he had seen the hands. They were long and bony and the nails were trimmed and clean. His hair? It was ordinary brown hair, straight and dark, combed back, no sideburns to speak of. Why worry about the hands? No, they weren't wrinkled, neither were they particularly smooth; they were just hands.

The clothes? A brown flannel suit, white shirt, gray tie, no pin, no handkerchief. Shoes? Teech hadn't noticed.

The face? It had something on it, not a mask, something like gelatin or plastic. It was shiny and Mr. Justice kept moving his head so that the light bounced off it from different angles. It was impossible to describe the features.

What about the eyes? They were light blue. Lashes? Dark. Ears? Not large but not small enough to attract special notice.

Timbre of the voice? Pleasant, not high or scratchy,

not too deep. Accent? Teech wasn't enough of a linguist to be certain. Mr. Justice spoke English like an educated American.

It wasn't much to go on. Still, it was something. For three years there had been nothing at all.

2037, New York City: Arthur Bingle, a young man old in subtlety and craft, liked the gambling life. It was obvious to him and to everybody that Mr. Justice wouldn't tolerate crime in New York. Lawns of police stations were daily decorated with some bound and gagged criminal. Every few days a body turned up with the seal of Justice sticking to it. Shady characters were fleeing the state for safer pastures.

But Arthur Bingle liked the gambling life. When he thought about Mr. Justice, he did it with a quick smile and a slow shaking of his head. He didn't think Justice would be captured as quickly as most people predicted. The guy had a strong thing going for him.

Shady operations were Bingle's bag. No one knew what his aspirations were. He began by setting up a little numbers game. His friends advised against it.

"You don't understand Mr. Justice," Bingle said.

"And you do?"

"No, but I like to do what I please."

The numbers game thrived. Bingle got away with it. His friends didn't know why. Only Bingle knew. He also had a strong thing going for him.

The city of New York was clean, so was the state. There was plenty of grumbling over the fact. Law enforcement agents began to breathe a little easier. It looked as if Mr. Justice had retired.

July 14, 2037, Chicago: A group of people met on the top floor of a swank hotel. Wining, dining and discussing business were on the agenda. In the midst of dinner, a skylight above the table was suddenly heard

to roll open. Fifty heads raised to look at a man standing on the roof. In his hands was clasped a machine gun.

II

Bailey. That was all they ever called him. Maybe he didn't have a first name. It didn't matter. Bailey was the type who concerned himself with important matters.

He was big and scrubbed-looking. He wore a wig and good suits. His eyes were gray and round and shining. His nose was long. His chest was large, his belly was a washboard. He had a mouth like a double-edged blade. He resembled a lawyer or a high-class pimp. Bailey smiled a great deal but few associated the habit with humor. He had a high IQ. He was a patriot. He was the tail that wagged the dog of Secret Service.

Turner had a first name but no one used it, not even his wife. She was number three. Turner had trouble empathizing with women. His bank book showed a balance of \$125,000. He seldom used any of it. Though money was usually a means to an end, Turner required no more than he made in the Service. An athlete in college, he didn't move these days unless he had to. He had cracked the books and run all those downs so that he could relax later. Now he had what he wanted and knowing it didn't make him feel guilty.

A man was nothing unless he was somebody in his own eyes. Youngsters were awed by the idea of spies and undercover work. Turner was no youngster but he was still awed by the same idea, which was why he was a good agent, plus the fact that he had a high IQ and was a patriot.

Thomas Burgess. Tom to his friends. He had two friends, Bailey and Turner. Burgess was small and thin and gray. It was his observation that people never did

anything for nothing. A good look at a man's destination would tell you what motivated him. Once you knew why he did something, you had a piece of his background. Keep adding pieces and you backed him into a hole he couldn't get out of without your spotting him.

Burgess was extremely intelligent. He was a patriot. He was an agent in the Secret Service.

"This is the one I want," Bailey said. He smiled his meaningless smile and tossed a paper onto the table. Turner snatched it up, glanced at it and passed it on to Burgess. Sunshine came in the windows, glittered on the chrome furniture, glittered on the plastic walls, glittered on the perspiration beading Bailey's forehead like strands of pearls.

Burgess looked at the paper and then looked up. "You're joking. This kid is twelve years old."

Bailey was a professional smiler. He could do it even when enraged. "What else have you learned about him? You spent forty seconds reading."

The expression on Burgess' face didn't change. "Middle class, mama and papa, no sibs, an I.Q. to knock your eye out, medical prognosis predicts he'll live to one-ten barring bullets, slashes, drowning or bludgeoning."

"You plan on taking your time," said Turner. He regarded Bailey with curiosity. "Ten, fifteen years?"

"Maybe," said Bailey. He smiled at Burgess. "Notice his SP?"

"Strength-potential maximum. He'll be as strong as a bull. So what? He'll be using his brains, not his muscles."

"But twelve," said Turner. "For God's sake, Bailey—" "Yes?"

Turner stared, shrugged, remained silent.

They had him a week and he seemed all right, and then he began to cry. He kept it up.

"Take him home," said Bailey.

They tried again in a month. This time he lasted three weeks.

"What the hell makes him bawl?" snarled Turner.

"He isn't used to being among adults." The dry little voice of Burgess was positive but his expression wasn't.

"He isn't afraid," said Bailey.

Turner glared at him. "Then what is it?"

"Principles."

"What the hell does that mean? Kids are always patriotic."

The smile on the blade-like lips grew even more cruel. "How would you feel if you were twelve years old and knew that some day you were going to kill Superman?"

Turner's eyes narrowed. "You give him that much credit? You think a kid can figure things like that?"

"I wouldn't have chosen him if he couldn't."

"That's it," Burgess murmured. "You've hit it on the nose."

"Shut up," said Bailey. His eyes were on Turner. "You didn't answer my question."

Turner frowned. "Someone has to do it."

"Would you like the job if you were a kid?"

"Hell, I'm no kid." There was a hint of blustering in Turner's voice. "We know goddamn well Justice isn't Superman. He's a killer just like Capone or Dillinger."

"You think so stupid you make me sick," said Bailey.

The big brown eyes of Turner widened, then darted toward Burgess and fastened on the shrunken face. "What is this? Damn both of you, you're always talking in riddles. You do it on purpose. But this time I'm not falling for any kidding. We're going to string Justice up by his thumbs because he has it coming. He's a killer. He breaks laws. He's for mob rule. You can't take the law into your own hands. It's dangerous. Let one man get away with it and the first thing you know civilization goes down the drain."

As Turner dropped the words, he examined the two

faces in front of him. Bailey's desire shone like a banner. Then there was Burgess. A dry man. Just dry. Secretive, calm, knowing. But old Bailey wanted to string up Justice.

For some reason Turner found himself asking a why to that last thought. Why did Bailey want Justice? Well, first of all, it was his job. No, that was a hell of an answer. Bailey did most of his work by rote. This Justice thing was like a crusade. Why? It wasn't as if the opposition had never been tough. There had been plenty of wily ones.

Turner went on thinking. Bailey was afraid. Okay, who wasn't? The idea of a vengeful Superman was enough to make anyone afraid. Jealousy? Well, that was no crime. Bailey had enough ego for ten people.

Turner tried to abandon the ego idea and go on to something else in his analyzing. He found he couldn't. He was hung up on ego and Bailey. Something . . . something . . . couldn't snag it.

So, all right, what about Burgess? Little old dry man of forty, thinking his quiet thoughts. Was there any fear there? No, none. Burgess wasn't afraid of Justice. He just wanted him.

How much did Burgess want Justice? Turner began to perspire. Empathize and what did you get? A sensation of murkiness emanating from dry Burgess. But God, how the man wanted Justice.

Bewildered, he clung to the aura coming from the man seated alongside of him, grappled with it and tried to probe deeper. A great deal of emotion existed in Burgess and nobody would ever believe it to look at him.

Why? Turner suddenly didn't want the answer. Almost against his will he continued probing the thick aura with his inner antennae. And encountered . . .

He recoiled in disgust. Good God, who in his right mind would ever associate evil with Burgess? There must be something wrong with his own intuitive sense.

Almost desperately he let a part of himself dive into

the heavy shroud around the little gray man. Again he withdrew, this time in shock. He hadn't been wrong. The evil was there.

He was startled to find himself standing in the middle of the room. These two were the best friends he had, but Bailey was Ego and Burgess was Evil.

The perspiration on his neck became a trickling down his back. In college everyone had called him innocent. *I am innocent*, he thought in dazed wonder. *I want Justice because he's a killer of killers, Bailey wants him because Bailey is jealous, Burgess wants him because Burgess is evil, the kid cries because Justice is Superman.*

He knew he wouldn't last. He was innocent. He was looking but he wasn't seeing. Why? Why couldn't he see what they saw? They had gone to the same schools in the same country, eaten the same philosophies, grown up and taken the same kind of job.

His hands clenched into fists. They shouldn't do it. They were using the job to indulge their own neuroses. That wasn't what patriotism was. Dammit, he wasn't a complete fool, he knew this country wasn't God's blessing to the peons, but it was the best there was and he would work for it to his last breath, only . . . they shouldn't do it for those reasons.

"This is getting us nowhere," said Burgess. He wore a little smile. "We have to think of the boy. If he relates Mr. Justice with Superman, we'd better start drilling some loyalty into—" Burgess broke off because Bailey was staring at him in an odd way. Maybe Burgess had intended that.

"I'll have your jobs," said Bailey. "I'll have your skins. Don't either of you ever say anything like that again. Don't even think it. You're treading on dangerous ground. Foul this up and I'll have your"—he raised his fist and slammed it down on the table and his expression didn't change as he said the last two words—"rotten lives."

Turner was a wilted thing feeling for his chair. Burgess got up and sedately paced. He kept his eyes on Bailey. "Give it to us in first-grade grammar. I thought this was a three-man project."

"This is a project without any men. There is only one boy. It's all his. We're staying out of it."

Turner opened his teeth and croaked, "Why?"

"This has nothing to do with country or creed. Try to cram that down his throat and he'll walk out."

"If we don't encourage him—" Burgess began mildly.

"As if anything you or I or God thinks will make any difference to him."

"He'll be so lonely," Turner muttered.

The fist of Bailey rose and fell on the table. His eyes seemed to dim, then they assumed their normal sterile brightness. "Impetus. That's all we're good for."

Burgess: "You hope."

Turner: "Why do we need him?"

Bailey's smile was a soundless snarl. "We planted a seed over a month ago. It's been sprouting since the first week."

"When he began to cry." Turner looked at the floor. "We told him why we wanted him and in a week he started to cry."

"What do we do now?" said Burgess. "Shall we bring him back?"

Bailey looked at neither of them. "We leave him alone."

"How long?" Burgess was frowning.

"Until he comes to us."

"What if he doesn't?"

"He will."

"He's so young," said Turner.

Bailey scratched his crotch and ignored both of them. He started to get up and changed his mind. "Goddammit, Mr. Justice won't be brought down accidentally. For five years every gun in the country, legal and illegal, has been hunting him and nobody has found him. Tell me

how many guns that is. How many brains? How many plots and plans? How many hours out of lives?"

"They won't catch him," said Burgess.

Turner looked at them and his eyes were wounded. "Why haven't they caught him?"

"Because he's Superman," said Bailey. "Only his own kind are a match for him."

"That isn't the answer," said Turner. "I don't know what the answer is, but that isn't it."

Bailey and Burgess stared at each other.

He was fourteen. His name was Daniel Jordan.

"I have to go away," he said to his father. They sat on a hill overlooking a river. Behind them, a field sent ripe smells onto the four winds. There were trees and bushes with berries on them, mice in holes, flowers existing like musical notes heard by no one, except that now and then someone heard and experienced the rapturous agony of the mind saying, "This belongs to me for now."

Love life because that's all there is? No, love it because death, nonexistence, pain, apathy, flight are not its opposites, because they do not present an alternative. Please, God, I don't know what to do.

"For how long?"

"I don't know. I'm not certain I want to go."

"It's for the country."

The young head turned. "Do you love me?"

"How can you ask that?" came the sharp whisper.

"It will be dangerous." *Putrid thing, whining in low levels. Somebody help me.*

"Without the strong, everyone dies," said Jordan, and his gaze was on the river. After a long silence, he said, "I love you."

Daniel heard with his ears, heard with his mind, banked the concept and tone, frequently referred to that isolated cache of memory in the years to come. It took all those years before he finally understood.

Two days later he walked into Bailey's office.

"I'm here."

He never came to like Bailey, but he met only one other man for whom he had more respect.

Bailey made him think of a diamond with skin on the outside. Scratch away the skin and there were timelessness and immunity, impenetrable non-surface and non-depth.

Bailey hadn't said anything right away that first day. Only after a long while had he spoken. Then he said, "Why?"

"I don't know yet."

"Yes, you do."

"Go to hell."

They sent him to SPAC. It was a school fifty miles from his home and he hadn't known it existed.

The school was free. All one had to do to get in was be a freak. Wasn't that what you called a person whose IQ could be matched or bettered by no more than one-tenth of one percent of the world's population?

You called him gifted? Oh.

Nobody told him what to do, nobody came around to see if he were alive. He found an empty room in a dormitory and moved in. To keep from starving he had to sit down with an unmarked map of the campus and figure out the most logical place for a cafeteria to be situated.

The school staff didn't do things like this as a game. They took it for granted that a student could find what he needed. Maps were unmarked. Where else would a building or a closet or a concept be located but in its logical orbit?

Somewhere, he supposed, his name was on a roster. He consulted his map and decided that most of the buildings contained classrooms, then he went on to guess that the buildings were not segregated as to subjects taught. For instance, all the math classes wouldn't be held in one building. Why make a thing simple when complicating it

was simple? It took him a month to visit every room on the campus.

There were fifty students in SPAC: six Americans, six Russians, one German, one Frenchman, one Puerto Rican, eight Israelis, two Africans, three Chinese, two Japanese, one Indian, two Eskimos, one Swiss, one Pole, one Brazilian, one Argentine, four Egyptians, two Mexicans, one Italian, three Australians, three British.

Twenty-six of the fifty were male, twenty-four were female. One of the females, the Swiss, was eleven years old. She cried a great deal. One of the Chinese was seventy-two. He had been at SPAC for thirty years.

The Africans had more energy than anybody. The Russians were the most reticent. The Americans—four Caucasians, one Indian, one Negro—were the most heterogeneous. The Australians were wry, the Mexicans amiable, the Israelis homogeneous, the Chinese patient, the Italian lonely, the Frenchman verbose, etcetera.

They lived in any dormitory they pleased. Sometimes the adults had intimate relations, but not often. The focused eye of the mind, it occurred to Daniel Jordan, bored too keenly for flesh to deflect it.

It was a healthy group. Except for the little Swiss girl, all were older than Daniel, though some were not much older. There was Pi Stavros, a seventeen-year-old Russian who sometimes struggled from his reticence long enough to be anxious. He gravitated toward Daniel and began following him.

"I do it because I'm afraid," he confessed one day.

"Of what?"

"How do we know they're right? Can anyone be infallible?"

"Explain," said Daniel.

"They give us no standards. Can a man live without them? Can he function alone? We are the only people in the world who live as we please. What if they're wrong?"

"Who are you afraid of disappointing?"

"That isn't it," Stavros said and sounded anxious. "I have no creed, no country, no root. I've been shoved from the boat and I suppose I'm swimming, but am I? Maybe I'm drowning."

"A dead or dying person doesn't eat as much as you do."

"That's partly why I follow you. In a place like this you can make a joke. You are an extrovert."

"I'm the worst introvert you ever saw."

Stavros leaned forward and peered intently at the young face, drew back and chuckled. "That doesn't compute."

"It wouldn't if you were a machine."

"But aren't we machines?"

"Not me. I'd rather wade in mud puddles than collect facts."

Stavros looked startled. "Then why are you here?"

"Mud puddles and SPAC represent the highest achievements man can realize. Both make him delirious."

"Are we talking about the same thing?"

"You'll stop following me when you know that we are."

"I believe you're a hedonist."

"Damn right."

There were no class schedules. The lowest levels of study were just barely within Daniel's span of comprehension. Often a classroom had only one student in it. At times there were none, in which case the instructor waited for someone to appear. When a student did come in, the instructor began his lesson, one of a series he had planned long before, and he proceeded from one to the next in the series whenever he had an audience. He never covered old material, never questioned his students' preparations or qualifications, never deviated from his lesson plan. A student who wished to study, say, physics, discovered which level fitted his present stage of learning and went off in search of a classroom where the in-

structor was on or near that level. He could always find one.

Daniel concentrated on mathematics and psychology for a while. He soon abandoned psychology and took up philosophy. He added a smattering of physics. There were no examinations, no field trips; there were plenty of films and the completely equipped laboratories were open at all times.

"You don't know any languages," Pi Stavros once pointed out to him. The Russian was in the final stage of his syndrome of following footsteps. Soon he would fade away and become someone Daniel occasionally passed in the halls.

"I speak eight."

"But you aren't expert in them."

"How many things can I be expert in?"

Stavros looked pained. He spoke condescendingly. "I'm older than you. I know the sciences demand too much memorizing. If you concentrate on the humanities, your mind will develop more quickly. You will receive a broader education all around."

"I don't care if I get a broad education. I just want to do the things I like."

"You had better learn to control that hedonistic bent of yours. What makes you think you're living to enjoy it?"

Daniel laughed. "You sound just like the Italian."

"You don't sound like anyone."

III

The little Swiss girl took to following him around. Her name was Pala.

"All those foreigners frighten me," she said one day.

She sat on his bed with her head on her knees. Her own room was on an upper level, but she was rarely in

it. Usually she roamed the halls or loitered in the cafeteria and ate peanut-butter sandwiches. If someone came near, she pretended to be annoyed and hurried away. If anyone spoke to her, she began to cry.

She was crying now, softly, absently, as other people breathed, with no conscious effort. Her companion was a box of Kleenex.

"I'm a foreigner," said Daniel.

"You're a human. Humans have no nationality."

He hadn't been doing anything important, not that it would have mattered to her. She always came in at a moment's notice without knocking and if he were in his underwear she didn't apologize or go away but took the handiest seat and proceeded to watch him with profound but sad interest. He thought about locking the door, yet he never did.

The room wasn't small. He had a bed, a desk, a bureau, a TV, a lounge and bathroom. Everything was neat except for the desk which was littered with paper and books. Now he sat in a swivel chair before the desk and doodled.

"What are you studying?" he said.

"Nothing."

He got up and went into the bathroom, ran some hot tap water into two cups, dumped teabags in them and carried them out. Pala laid her box of Kleenex aside and accepted a cup. She held it with the tips of her fingers. He thought she looked like a bleary-eyed swami examining a crystal ball.

"Nothing?" he said.

"Yes. The contradiction."

"Oh."

"I'm an orphan," she said, and when he admitted that this was news to him she actually began to talk. "That's why I cry all the time. I'm looking for the home hatchery. It's a fixation kind of thing that everyone has but eventually gives up as hopeless. It's part of that Noth-

ing, that contradiction, which I'm studying. There is no hatchery, there's no incubator. Man is alone and he can't bear to admit it. There's no nest to which he can return."

"Do you like your tea?"

She dipped her head and peered into the cup as if it had asked the question. "It's delicious. It's very human of you to—"

She burst into tears.

After a few minutes she quieted. "I have to go now." She crawled off the bed with care but still managed to slop tea on the cover. Taking the cup into the bathroom and putting it in the sink, she came out again and started for the door.

"Maybe you should choose another subject and leave Nothing alone," said Daniel.

She paused. "What did you have in mind?"

"Maybe you should study Something."

"It isn't abstract enough."

"Are you sure?"

She laid an arm on the edge of the open door, leaned her head against it and began to cry.

He said, "I live in Kenyon. It's about fifty miles away. Would you consider it abstract if I invited you to go home with me for a three-day holiday?"

She choked on a sob, blew her nose and looked at him with red eyes. "That would be very abstract."

"Do you want to go?"

Hiding her face in her arm, she peeped at him from under it. "Is your mother the clinging type?"

"Not with boys. I don't know how she'll behave with a girl."

He didn't know that his invitation meant he was acquiring a roommate. He took her home with him and she had her first taste of family life.

"I like them," she said on the train going back to SPAC. "Especially your mother."

"Ummm."

"Your father is—"

"Yes?"

"A contradiction there. A confusing type. Very warm and generous, but—"

"Really?"

As he slept that night, he dreamed of his dog. It had died years ago but his dreaming mind remembered its warm body.

He awoke in the morning to find a snoring Pala beside him.

She explained to him, with an expression of hopelessness, that it was another fixation.

Why her presence brought him grief he didn't know. He wanted to kick her out, but he didn't. Was it charity that made him take her into his bed every night as a child took a teddy bear, or was it because the warm lump beside him almost thawed a frozen spot in his mind? He reasoned that if it were the latter, he was accepting her for the same reason a person ate food or read a book: he was getting something out of it.

It wasn't embarrassing, which proved that logic wasn't the cut-and-dried thing it was supposed to be. Everybody in the dorm was perfectly aware that she walked into his room every night promptly at nine and emerged every morning at eight. He wondered if they wondered.

Eventually he stopped wondering. SPAC was an asylum of freaks and he was one of the inmates. Pala sleeping with him was no weirder than, say, the old Chinese who had nothing in his room but a coffin in which he slept because he wanted death to know he wasn't a coward. Or take the Japanese who always waited until the cafeteria was full in the morning before he came in with his quart bottle of milk and fish. Maybe he knew the sight of the fish floating in the yellow cream

upset occidental stomachs. Maybe he didn't, but he did the same thing every morning.

Poor Pala was a kitten whose psyche had been wounded because someone dumped her out to starve. Daniel seemed to have become her bowl of milk. More accurately, he was her mother. There were times when he thought she might be becoming his father. None of it was logical.

Holding the warm body against him at night, he would stare into the darkness and wonder. She snored and her toenails scratched his legs, she took more than her share of space, she wasn't friendly with him during the day. In fact, he rarely saw her. The few times he passed her in the halls, he noticed that she wasn't crying. He suspected that the whole thing impressed him far more than it did her, yet he knew the truth had to be exactly the opposite. Fear had driven her to him. Had it been hers or his?

Practically speaking, she was a pain in the neck. He was a young man and she was a girl, and there was such a thing as modesty. She had never heard of the word. He knew it would have been more sensible to kick her out and invite one of the women to be his roommate. That would earn him a horselaugh but at least there would be logic to it.

For Daniel growth came slowly; he was fifteen and in love with psychology and Pala. The instructor had something to do with the first.

One morning he took a good look at Golden Macklin and suddenly began to grin. A tailor and a barber could have done wonders for the character sitting behind the desk in the classroom. Even the eyebrows were shaggy. There didn't seem to be anything about Macklin that couldn't have used a little upkeep. The whole of him looked incongruous, something like an elegant dude

caught wearing a dirty cowboy hat. Somewhere along the line, Macklin had been meant to look elegant. Maybe it was his face that created such an impression. It would never be anything but aristocratic: broad forehead, thin nose, faintly hollowed cheeks, severe blue eyes, mouth at ease. The mind here was always hard at work; the eyes gave that fact away.

The man didn't return the grin. He sat with his chin on his hand and examined his pupil. There were the usual two arms and legs, etcetera, but the boy was a little too big, a little too pretty, a little too bright, a little . . . freakish?

Macklin gave a grunt. "No crackerbarrel philosophy was ever worth a dime. You know why?"

"No."

"Too tolerant."

"This is a psychology class."

"I never teach anything but philosophy."

"Can Kant do anything for a neurotic?"

"No, but I can," said Macklin.

Daniel sat back and stretched out his legs. "Okay, go ahead."

There were weeks when he never entered a classroom. He had a crush on the gym. Barbells, punching bags, parallel bars, rings, swimming, track—these he came to know intimately. Had anyone reminded him that he had a brain, his response would probably have been, "Who needs it?"

Golden Macklin's wife was dead and he had no children. He took Daniel with him to his mountain retreat for a vacation.

Like the backwoods of West Virginia, no one had set foot in the place since the dawn of man. On summer days it baked in the sun and in winter the snow piled up around it like cliffs. The walls of the cabin were made of logs a foot in diameter; so perfectly did they match that only the corners were patched. The roof was

tin. Inside was a frontier-style house. An alien or an amnesiac would have said the year was somewhere in the eighteenth century if it hadn't been for the food cache in the cellar and the magazines on the bookshelves.

"How did you ever find this place?" said Daniel.

It was early morning and they were fishing in a lake. The air was cold. The canoe bottom was wet and froze his feet. Through the trees he could see the sun coming up. A mist rose from the water and gave the area a ghostly quality. Nothing was real. Neither was anything threatening. The sounds of the rods rapping against the canoe fled across the lake surface and echoed on the trees. As he stared at the rising mist, terror came. His heart picked up its pace. It happened so fast that he shrank. A thought had flashed through his mind: a human life was like a person sitting in a canoe on a lake. The mist was the unknown, full of enemies and emotion, swirling up to engulf the sitter. How would he survive with so many unseen things threatening? What defenses could he develop against the threats? His ego was raw and open and there was no one to stand between him and the danger. He was alone and vulnerable in a cave of creatures who peered at him through savage eyes.

His own eyes were wild. All the menace of the cave seemed to have collected in front of him. Perhaps he would have stood up and thrown himself from the canoe if he hadn't jerked upright and suddenly met the gaze of the man seated facing him. Golden Macklin's eyes were all he saw. Between them passed one long glance that might have been carved in stone.

Panic beat in Daniel's throat like twin hammers. He was experiencing his first real fear of life. But it wasn't just that, was it? His life wouldn't be ordinary, but it couldn't be just that.

The eyes set in stone held his. He didn't speak but the

cry flashed from his mind and he saw the eyes receive the message and understand it.

Help me.

No.

The reply rocked him. There was no nest to which one could return, no haven, no hatchery. Each man was alone and who was there who could bear it? There were, after all, no choices to be made. One simply began walking and tried to understand everything which he passed.

He felt himself being transported back to Earth. His fear was gone. There was much here that was real. A man in tune with his environment was the realest thing in existence. Golden Macklin hadn't shaved in three days. Though he had bathed in the lake, he hadn't changed his clothes. He looked like a grizzled trapper, a tough-eyed prospector, a panhandler down on his luck, a genius who had stuck out his tongue at schoolbooks.

Daniel smiled faintly. Never again would he respect charity. Someone had helped him by refusing to help him. He had been hauled upright and planted on his own two feet where he belonged. He wasn't mud clinging to the boots of someone better, he wasn't a hitchhiker—because someone had listened to his fear, known where it led and turned a cold ear to it.

"I needed a home away from home," said Macklin. "We all do, so I scrounged and found this."

"Do you own all this land?"

"Been in my wife's family for years. Anytime you want to come here, don't hesitate."

"Why me?"

"There will be times when you'll want to get away. No matter if you do the most exciting or the dulllest work in the world, you'll need a vacation now and then."

They caught no fish but it didn't matter.

Pala seemed pleased to see him when he returned. "I didn't mind your going away. Did you think I would?"

"I forgot to think about it. Did you sleep here or in your room?"

"Here. You left your aura behind and it was thick enough to hold onto."

"This fixation of yours—"

Plastered on his back like an extra layer of skin, she said sleepily, "Don't worry about it, I'm working on a solution."

He wrote to Bailey and asked for the originals of all the photographs.

"My God, he might lose them," said Turner.

"I think he's at the voyeur stage," said Burgess.

"Why don't you bastards get out of my hair and go run down a lead?" said Bailey and mailed the photographs.

Daniel didn't open the package when it came. He put it on the top shelf in his closet and covered it with textbooks. A week went by before he visited the computer section of SPAC. It was the least-used section in the school. Most of the time he was the only one there. •

The section had no instructor. One of the machines had an "Information" label on it and he asked it where he could find material on the professions. It referred him to another machine which in turn referred him to another. This process continued until he found the one he wanted. Someday he would have to find better computers.

"List the names of the world's top photographers for the last twenty years."

The machine provided him with a list of forty names.

"Give me the names for the last fifteen years."

The list shortened to twenty.

"I want the top twelve names for the last ten years."

He compared the final list of twelve names with the other lists. Seven of the names appeared on all of them. He could have asked the machine for one name, the

best of all, but he didn't. The man he was after was the best, but the machine might not know it. People made mistakes and the computer would repeat them. Conceivably his man was not even one of the seven. He didn't really consider this as a possibility. The light was always there and sometimes the bushel was an afterthought that occurred too late.

He withdrew volumes of photography publications from the Records Library. Each page of the volumes was set into a plastic frame and he removed the pictures he wanted and made seven separate stacks. He didn't look for anything as elusive as degree of ability because he wasn't trained to recognize it. What he concentrated on was technique, and that was easy. The seven had contrasting styles that became obvious when one thought of theme.

The first photographer captured his subjects a moment after some action had taken place. His people experienced letdowns. Their eyelids were lowered, their bodies were twisted in relaxed angles and in a moment they would go to sleep.

Another liked to see things that were in retreat. His subjects drifted away with liquid motions. Everything in reality came and then passed onward. Only the passing was significant.

Flowers were popular with the third photographer. They were his symbol of life, and he saw their shapes and colors in buildings. Sunflowers clustered around boulevards, smokestacks in the shape of weeds threatened delicate violet-like cottages. The ecologist protested the destruction of his symbol.

Quo Vadis piqued the mind of the fourth. Always there were two travelers, on a road, in a boat, climbing a mountain, ascending stairs, two going somewhere. One deliberately stayed a brief distance behind the other. His expression was one of curiosity. He wondered which

way his companion would go when he reached the fork ahead.

Nihilism was evident in the work of the fifth. He saw the aged and marred. Skulls with burning eyes in them, imbeciles with drooling mouths, coffins filled with skeletons, and always in each picture was a slap in the face in the form of something newly born. Sometimes this was an infant, at other times it was the ghost of a smile on the dead.

The sixth was in love with love. Couples, joy, sadness, parting, reuniting, the pictures told and retold the oldest story in the world.

The seventh was the youngest. In plastic, from flesh, he reincarnated the work of Michelangelo, but where the ancient master had seen nobility, this modern artist beheld sensuality. His men and women were mighty in body but meek in spirit.

Daniel studied all the photographs before he had Pala study them.

"I like love," she said wistfully and handled the beautiful bodies with care.

"You are neurotic. That's sex, not love. Love is in the sixth stack."

"Holding hands?"

"The hand has more nerves in it than any other part of the body."

"Any?" she said in surprise.

Daniel swung around and looked at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Mind your own business. Why are you so nosy? What makes you think everything I say has a double meaning? Why can't I say something—"

"Look at this batch by Quo Vadis. See what an unearthly glow that haze puts on all his work?"

"What glow? What haze?"

He sat at his desk until midnight and looked at the

pictures taken by the man he thought of as Quo Vadis. Joe Gentry. Pala saw no cloudy mist over the pictures. She detected no softening of detail because of that clever cloak the photographer had hidden his subjects behind. But it was there and Daniel could see it with no trouble. Now and then he lost it if he stared at it too long, but all he had to do to find it again was shift his glance for a few seconds. It was subtle, almost an optical illusion, but Pala should have been able to see it.

Quo Vadis. He could be mistaken about that. The theme might be idle curiosity about the quirks of human personality. Which road will you choose? How much portent was there in that question?

"Move the lamp a bit more to the left so the light shines through your hair," said Pala. She lay under the blankets and watched him. He moved the lamp and looked at another picture.

"You shouldn't get a haircut so often," she said. "You'd look wonderful with a shaggy mop."

"Too hot."

"Beauty requires sacrifice."

"Why?"

"With a little sweat you could be a stuffed shirt. You should try to be more natural. You're developing defense mechanisms and practically all those things are ugly."

He looked around in surprise. "Since when am I getting any?"

"You're using them right now. Instead of looking straight at me, you're looking at the wall. Instead of coming to bed you're pretending to be interested in pictures. I know why you have them, but you already know all you're going to learn about them. The fact is you're stalling. You don't want to sleep with me anymore. You wish I'd scram."

"You're a little liar which means you may be guilty of what you're accusing me of."

She pushed the blanket down a bit in order to see him better. "Maybe so. I have problems."

"Anything I don't know about?"

"You don't know everything about me."

"For instance?"

"My physical needs, for instance. Right now I have to go to the bathroom."

He looked at the pictures and listened to her tumble out onto the floor, heard her go into the bathroom and come out again, waited for the sounds of her getting into bed.

"Sometimes I think—"

He didn't turn around. "Since when have you taken to sleeping nude?"

"Remember when I told you I was working on a solution to my fixation problem?"

"Yes."

"Notice anything different about me?"

He still didn't turn. "It's about time. You're twelve now."

"That isn't all. I jumped all the way into puberty last week."

"Fine."

"I figure in a couple of months I'll have a pretty good figure."

"It'll take at least that long." Slowly he swung the chair about. The lampshade cast a shadow across her face, but he knew she wasn't smiling.

"I'm for you and you're for me, right?"

"Yes," he said.

"Never mind all that stuff about fixations. It was love."

"Partly. Fear, too."

"I'm not afraid anymore."

"Neither am I," he said.

"I'm not convinced of that. What would you do if something happened to me?"

"Or vice versa?"

"I couldn't stand it for a while, but I think I could hold on somehow. Could you?"

"I never tried experiencing death."

She came over to him and touched him on the shoulder. "You see?"

"Of course."

"I know how you can be safe. Burn all those pictures, including the package in your closet. Don't write any more letters to that man Bailey. We'll go away from SPAC and get jobs washing dishes. We'll hide from our brains for the rest of our lives and that way you won't be afraid."

"And let him get away."

Her fingers tightened on his shoulder. "They say he's cleaning up the world, that he only kills lice. I wouldn't care if he killed them all. But one day he'll make a mistake and kill something that doesn't crawl."

"Me?"

"Tell Bailey to go to hell," she said.

He drew a deep breath, shuddered and sat up straight. "Go to bed."

She moved around the chair, stood between his knees and drew his face against her. As he touched his cheek to one small breast, he felt a sob gather in his throat.

"I usually don't care what people think of me," he said. "But I think I'd hate it if they thought I was a cradle robber."

She released him and stepped back. She walked to the bed and looked over her shoulder at him. "Can we at least neck a little? I want to know what a French kiss feels like."

There was one kiss that lasted three minutes and then they fell asleep.

She woke him up screaming.

"God, God," she gasped when he finally got her awake and she realized where she was.

"A nightmare?"

"A dilly."

"Want a cup of tea?"

"Please."

He lay on his side and watched her while she drank it.

"I can't scratch my toe without slopping this on the bed," she said.

"Which one?"

"Left foot, third."

He scratched for her.

"I read something interesting last week," she said.

"About the Ridleys."

"The name sounds familiar. Wasn't there something mysterious about them?"

"Charles Ridley performed illegal experiments on four babies, artificially increased their intelligence. He got sent to jail for it and his claim that the kids were geniuses was discounted. They were given a lot of tests and came out average. But they lied."

"They were geniuses?"

"The reporter who wrote the article says they were more than that." Pala had finished her tea and now she set the cup on the floor and slid under the covers. "You want to hear about my nightmare?"

He turned out the light.

"I was standing on a seesaw. Its fulcrum was the world. God, what a sensation. Over my head were black space and faraway stars and under me was Earth. That damned seesaw kept tipping. It didn't move fast, otherwise I'd have fallen off, but I kept sliding. First I'd be headed downward and then I was stuck up the other way, far out in space."

"This isn't the first time you've screamed in your sleep."

"You're kidding."

"Once a week on the average, sometimes more often."

"That settles it. I'll see a psychiatrist. I don't mind other people keeping secrets from me but I won't tolerate myself doing it."

He waited until long after she started snoring before he got out of bed. Taking the package from the closet shelf, he went into the bathroom, switched on the light and stood looking down at the brown wrapping. His feet froze and his head ached. He wanted to throw the package in the wastecan.

He untied the string with stiff fingers, tore the paper open and took a quick glance at the top picture. Swiftly he slapped the wrapping in place, returned the package to the closet and went back to bed. In a little while he got up again. He laid the pictures out on his desk. A few minutes passed and then he climbed in beside Pala and lay shivering. The pictures Bailey had sent him had a filmy pink haze across them.

IV

"Mr. John Ridley?"

The man in the doorway had looked ordinary and pleasant but his expression underwent a sudden change. Graying at the temples, he was still a young man, but he grew old in an instant. Defeat quickly overwhelmed him.

"Honest to God, my name is Rand."

"Ridley is the name the public gave you. You're one of the four."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Dan Jordan."

Rand stood away from the door. "Come in," he said. He walked into the living room with Daniel behind him. A young boy sat playing a piano; he got up and left the room.

"Your son?" said Daniel.

"Yes, I have two. Please sit down."

Daniel sat in a chair facing a large square of windows that overlooked a yard dotted with pine trees.

"I'm sorry to intrude."

The man looked at him wearily. "What do you want?"

"To ask some questions. Do you want to see my credentials?"

Blinking and frowning, Rand slowly shook his head. "I didn't know they gave such things to people your age. No, I don't want to see them."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Marine biology, Farber Research Plant." Rand stood stiffly. "You're wasting your time coming here. Ridley's trial proved that we weren't what he claimed we were."

"Please." That was all Daniel said.

Again defeat crept into Rand's expression. He shrugged and sat down. "I'm glad he's dead. I'm a goddamn freak."

"In what way?"

"I can read a book in thirty minutes. I can memorize it in two hours. My I.Q. is pretty startling."

"But you wish it weren't."

"He didn't do anything for us emotionally. If I'd never met him, I'd be working in some office. You see, I don't have the personality to fit my I.Q. All I've ever really wanted to do was make enough money to pay my bills. Basically I'm a plodder. My family is all I'm interested in. Ridley did me no favor. I ran out on him when I was sixteen. We all left him. None of us were what he hoped for."

"The others?" said Daniel.

"I haven't seen them for twenty years. Not any of them. I don't know where they went or what happened to them. I thought maybe one or two might do something unusual. I watched the papers for a long time to see if maybe I could pick them out by what they did." Rand shook his head. "Nothing. There hasn't been anything I could identify."

Daniel sat without moving. "Mr. Justice?"

Rand looked startled. A long moment went by before he spoke. "So that's it. No, you're headed in the wrong direction. Mr. Justice isn't just brilliant, he's dedicated. None of us ever followed a thing. We were mistakes, loose ends, castaways adrift in the stream. If one of the others is Mr. Justice I'll be incredulous."

"You say you ran out on Ridley when you were sixteen?"

"I was terrified that they'd put me in a hospital to study me. I wanted to be free and anonymous. Our pictures were all over the papers and I knew I'd be easily recognized. I lost myself in the New York slums. I nearly starved before a boy found me hiding in a cellar. He took me home with him. If it hadn't been for him I would have died."

"You stayed with him how long?"

"About four years." Rand seemed to shrink in his chair. "That's how long it took me to realize that despite what everyone said, I still had a right to live my own life." The sober face turned bleak. "You're barking up the wrong tree. We Ridleys are too neurotic to stand on our convictions. You'd do better to look elsewhere. Take that boy in the slums who helped me; his mind was like iron."

"Mr. Justice isn't a common person."

"There was nothing common about that boy. He was twelve years old when he found me. I was sixteen. Compared to him I was a baby."

"What was his name?"

"Joe. Just Joe. You know something, Mr. Jordan? I think Ridley was born too late. He did things artificially that nature may have been ready to do herself. I've heard of a special school they have in New York where all the students have I.Q.'s over two hundred. Mine is one-ninety-eight. I think Joe's was far above that. It wasn't measurable, I'm thinking, but if there are people

that unusual who are born naturally, it makes Ridley's experiments with us redundant. He tried to outrace nature and lost."

Daniel stood up.

"I'm not your Mr. Justice," said Rand. "I can't seem to give a damn about evil. I know I should but I don't have the stamina for it. I couldn't kill for the simple reason that I'm not emotionally involved. I don't care enough. I'm one of the boobs. The mobs and the politicians rake in the world while a billion of me stand around watching."

"Thank you."

"I hope you don't catch him," said Rand in a soft voice. "There's something there that I don't understand, but I have the feeling that he's fooling all of you. You're not capable of seeing."

"What about all those if's?"

"I know what you mean, but maybe you're one of the boobs too. A hundred years ago they lynched people who took the law into their own hands. Did you ever wonder if maybe we're not just living a hundred years ahead of the past, that we may be entering a totally different existence?"

"He'll have to prove it to me," said Daniel.

"Will you give him the chance?"

"I'd like you to write down that address for me."

Rand was at once wary. "Which address?"

"Joe's. Also write down everything you remember about him."

"No, I won't do that."

Daniel smiled. "I thought you weren't the dedicated kind. And remember, it's for the country."

Now Rand was perspiring. "He saved my life. He taught me how to be a man. He gave me half of what he had and he had barely enough for himself. No. I'm sorry I mentioned him. I won't tell you a thing about him."

Bailey smiled, Burgess frowned, Turner was obviously annoyed and spoke with a snarl in his voice.

"Why do we always have to wait for him? A snott-nosed brat. I'm for hauling him in by the ears and laying down the law."

Bailey's flat gray eyes flicked lazily over him. "Don't try it."

A week later Turner was still snarling. "We see you much too often," he said with sarcasm.

Daniel kept his eyes on Bailey and didn't reply to the remark. It didn't irritate him. He scarcely noticed the other two men.

Bailey sat in a swivel chair. It was tipped back and he seemed to be thinking hard on something. His hands were folded on his stomach and he twiddled his thumbs. Sunlight came through the window and made his cheeks rosy.

Laconically, nasally, he said, "Yes?"

"Those photographs were all taken by the same person."

"How do you know that?" snapped Turner. He started to say something else but fell silent as Bailey raised a lazy hand.

"You're right."

"He works methodically," said Daniel. "It's easy to spot the pattern."

"We found that out. It took us a bit longer than a week."

"Flattery?"

Bailey almost sneered. "Never touch it."

"I don't intend to come here everytime I pick up a hair. If you know what I know about those photographs, please say so."

"Wouldn't think of it. You're not expected to substantiate our information. You're on your own. What we think we know doesn't enter into it. If we have something you need, don't hesitate to ask."

Daniel experienced a moment of cold amusement. His dislike and respect for this chill-eyed man increased. "You know that all the photographs were taken with the same camera." It wasn't a question but he paused just the same. The three men watched him with blank expressions. He continued. "The camera is a Renz. It was first manufactured in twenty-thirty."

They made no comments, which meant that he was telling them nothing new. "The pictures are genuine."

So they knew that, too. But there was something else, something here besides plain old-fashioned fear. Someone in the room was more than a little afraid. Which one was it?

"How can it be possible?" said Turner.

Much too mildly, Bailey said, "Why, damn you, I was just then thinking how silly that question would sound. Why ask if it can be done if someone has done it? The question to ask Mr. Jordan is, can he find the time machine?"

"When I do I'll have Mr. Justice."

"Maybe he has partners," said Burgess.

Daniel shook his head. "His Nietzsche complex wouldn't permit that."

"Nietzsche?" Bailey said softly and Daniel looked at him.

"You disagree?"

"I'm an observer at this stage, as you are."

Burgess coughed, then spoke. "A time machine would have to be quite large, wouldn't it?"

"Gigantic," said Daniel. "He would have to have a hook-up, carry a device on him. It would tie in with the main unit."

"Jesus," said Turner.

"Surely we could have tracked him down," said Burgess. "A man like that must have left a trail a yard wide."

"He did," said Daniel. "Mostly red herrings."

Turner squirmed in his chair. "I think we're assum-

ing a lot. We're in an uproar because of some photographs. They could be phony."

"They aren't."

"So Justice has taken pictures of things that happened three and four decades ago with a camera invented eleven years ago?"

"Yes."

"He has a time machine?"

Daniel hesitated.

Turner persisted. "A big one that produces the power and a little hook-up that he carries around with him to go on his trips?"

Again Daniel didn't answer.

"You know how outlandish that sounds?"

Daniel shrugged.

"Who else do you know who can travel in time?"

"Nobody."

"Who else is near to cracking the barrier?"

"Nobody," said Daniel wearily.

"Yet you're confident Mr. Justice can do it."

"He can be anywhere. Once a moment is past it is completely open to him."

Resting his chin on his hand, Burgess murmured. "A madman with a power like that."

"There's another possibility," said Daniel, and they looked at him with angry eyes. "There may not be any machine."

Something intangible but powerful flared in the room. Like a lighted candle it flickered from a slow glow to an intense flame and Turner suddenly jerked his head around to stare at Bailey. Burgess sat still and watched without a change of expression. Bailey was staring at Daniel. His eyes were wide and round and bright with fear.

It was all there to see and Daniel saw it. Turner didn't know what had been meant by that last statement. Bur-

gess had an inkling and was curious. Bailey knew and was frightened.

How many computers had Bailey used and how many questions had he asked? In how many places in the world could a thing the size of a time machine, giving off awesome power, be secreted? The computers knew where the power was, and there weren't any that hadn't been thoroughly investigated by the various governments. Machines existed everywhere to detect power emissions of other machines. The machine couldn't be made that utilized one hundred percent power. Some part had to be lost and it was always detectable. If there was nothing to detect, there was no mechanical power being lost, which meant no mechanical action in the first place. Bailey knew this, and the inference scared him. How many times had he said Justice was Superman? He hadn't really believed it. Now he might have to. If Justice traveled in time, he had to have power, and if this didn't come from a machine, there was only one other place it could come from: his mind.

"Incidentally, his name is Joe Gentry."

Bailey closed his eyes for a second. "What did you say?"

"Or Joe Doe. Or anything. Gentry is a name he used at least once. Maybe you can track him down. I doubt it, so I won't try that way. New York slums, an orphan or a runaway, he'll be in his early thirties now. A hell of a photographer, won a couple of prizes."

"Goddam you, where do you find all this stuff?" yelled Turner.

Daniel kept his eyes on Bailey. "I keep thinking about that camera. He could have used an old one and we'd have been in the dark awhile longer."

"He wanted us to know."

"Maniacs usually want to get caught," said Daniel.

"I don't believe that any more than you do."

"Odd, isn't it? He wants pursuit. Why?"

Pi Stavros visited Daniel's room and announced that he was leaving SPAC.

"Why?" said Daniel.

The Russian gave a little smile. "I'm glad you asked that. I've cornered a dozen students and told them I was going, but not one of them gave me the satisfaction of answering questions. Do you remember a conversation we had about people and roots?"

"I remember."

"Perhaps I sounded casual that day. Probably I did. I'm a very casual person. But I'm also a person who must take root somewhere and SPAC is a home for transients. None of us will ever end here except for the old Chinese, and he's not right in his head. He pretends to be a philosopher but he's really a worshipper of the vampire cults."

"When are you leaving?" said Daniel.

"Soon, I expect. Guglielmo put me onto an agency that does nothing but interview SPAC alumni and find jobs for them. I've already been interviewed once and I'm going again tomorrow. They're very interested in my card-playing ability."

This information came as no surprise to Daniel, except for the fact that such an agency existed. SPAC was kept pretty much a secret for no other reason than that the students rarely mentioned it on the outside. As for the Russian's card playing, a new student had only to play one evening of poker with him to be warned off. Stavros seemed to know where everything was at all times.

"What kind of job will they find for you? It sounds as if you might wind up in some gambling casino."

Stavros looked pleased. "Of course I'll do no such thing. The cards are a hobby. I can do more than that. They have assured me that my work will be purely intellectual and challenging. I can hardly wait. This moldy old place has been getting on my nerves. I want to settle

down, marry some nice Russian girl and have one or two little geniuses. In case you hadn't noticed, I'm a bit of a stick in the mud."

Daniel laughed and Stavros went away to prepare his roots for planting.

Two boys were chasing a rabbit through a meadow in New Jersey when the one in the lead plowed into a soft area and sank to his knees. His friend tried to get him out but when this failed he went for help. He brought back a farmer and the two of them managed to get a rope around the trapped boy. The mud was thick and it took a great deal of tugging but eventually the boy's legs came free. He was hauled onto solid ground and attended to, and it soon became obvious that he wasn't harmed.

The three were making ready to leave when their attention was drawn back to the swamp. A huge bubble of air broke the muddy surface and a moment later a human hand emerged. The farmer snagged the hand with his rope and dragged the body of a young man out of the muck. It was Pi Stavros. He had been dead about a week. There were two bullets in his head.

As soon as Daniel heard about it, he went to find Guglielmo. He searched through SPAC for three days before he finally accepted the fact that the Italian was gone. Guglielmo's roommate knew nothing of his whereabouts, knew nothing of Stavros or the interviewing agency. No one seemed to have any information. Stavros had made no close friends and those who had associated with Guglielmo swore he hadn't confided in them.

Daniel went to Bailey.

"There is no such agency. The boy was pulling your leg."

"You're pulling mine. Where's Guglielmo? You know this smells to high heaven."

Bailey hemmed and hawed and tried to plead that the

situation didn't come under his jurisdiction, but all the time Daniel had the feeling that the man was edgy and worried.

"Why don't you do the investigating yourself?" said Bailey.

"I already have a job."

"You're certain the two aren't connected?"

After that Daniel went away. Of course he wasn't certain. It was only that he still had difficulty tying Mr. Justice in with every damned thing that went on in the country. But he was certain of one thing. Justice hadn't shot Stavros or thrown him into the swamp. It wasn't his style.

Burgess spoke in his dry and emotionless way. "The agency interviews every student in SPAC. Sooner or later they get around to everyone. Usually they go for the older ones but if a youngster is restless they tab him."

He waited for comments, received none, and continued.

"It's on Euclid Street, downtown, a nice little unprepossessing place like a thousand others. The sign says, 'Asa Pickman.' That's all. No blurbs. Pickman is a dum-dum who stands behind a counter and takes vital statistics and sets up appointments for somebody in the back named Eric Fortney. This one is no dum-dum. No background. He stepped out of a portrait, maybe."

"Quit speculating," said Bailey.

"He lives in the Cliffside Hotel. Six feet, good build, good clothes, light hair, blue eyes, middle twenties, looks like a ladies' man but never goes near them. He drives a new Dexter with a New York license and talks like an egghead. He says he doesn't want to interview secret agents and would we all please stay out of his territory. Tabbed me the second I walked in."

"You goofed," said Bailey.

"For the first time in my life? No one ever spotted me that fast before."

"What's the answer?"

"You tell me," said Burgess.

They were sitting in a restaurant booth. It was neither a luxurious establishment nor a dive. The lights were dim, smoke swirled like fog, the odors of beer and liquor were heavy, yet through it all drifted an aura of respectability.

Turner spoke for the first time and his manner was anxious. "Why waste time on that? It's nothing. They're hustling for brains, like everybody. That kid could have gotten killed a thousand miles away from that swamp. What we have to do is get onto the Ridleys. I say to the devil with everything else."

Bailey glared at him and said nothing.

"They're perfect. Never mind the trial, everyone lied their heads off. Ridley swore they were supermen and every sheet in the dossiers proves him right. Those four freaks—"

Bailey sighed.

Burgess leaned forward. "You know, I—" he began and then gave it up.

"What do you want?" said Turner to Bailey. "You told us to get Justice and you said you didn't care how. He's one of the Ridleys."

"Proof?"

"How can I prove it? If Justice were that dumb we wouldn't need Jordan. And what's he doing, anyway? Sitting on his ass lovestruck. Strolling through the flowers with his infant girlfriend."

"Proof," said Bailey.

"Ah, gad," said Burgess in quiet resignation.

Turner laid a fat brown folder on the table. "There are a dozen dossiers here. One of them has to be Justice. We believe he's American and we know he's in the

top bunch as far as brains are concerned, so there's a possibility that he's hiding at SPAC. Okay, four of the possibilities are too old. That leaves Golden Macklin who is a philosophy nut or a nut, period. I can't see him in the role. He's too sloppy and casual. The only other Americans who have the brains to build a time machine are Ridley's freaks."

"Maybe," said Bailey.

Turner looked angry. "I don't go for the mind-travel idea. It's a red herring and we'd be fools to consider it."

"What do I care what you think? I'm interested in what you can do."

"With my hands tied? What happens if I go it on my own?"

"Don't try it."

A flush sped up Turner's neck. "We're not getting our money's worth out of Jordan. It's a lucky break that he has good eyesight, but that's all he has."

"That's only the beginning," said Burgess. "His vision is better than most and he spotted that film across the photographs. To top that, he's already come up with a name."

"That's no big deal." Turner looked at Bailey. "What if the Ridleys were put out of action and Justice stopped operating?"

"What if he continued?"

Turner started to make a reply but broke off as a small man stopped beside the table and stared down into his startled face.

The Chinese seated himself beside Bailey and folded his hands on top of the table. His robe was long and dark and flowing and emphasized the paleness of his face. A white pigtail lay down his back. Small black eyes stared from a lined forehead. He had no eyebrows and his lips were thin.

"Please forgive me," he said softly.

"Who the hell are you?" said Burgess.

"You may call me Mr. Wu."

"Why did you stop at this booth?" Burgess' eyes were riveted in fascination on the white hair.

The answering voice was low, the English flawless. "I have been strolling among the flowers."

"For how long have you done so?" said Bailey.

The old man nodded, and without turning his head he said, "Since I was a boy. I am an observer."

"Then you must have seen a great deal." Bailey reached out with a napkin and dried a spot of spilled beer in front of the man. "Some human minds are like machines. They collected data and they never forget."

Mr. Wu smiled faintly. "If such minds cannot interpret the data, then they are indeed machines."

He fell silent and the three men sat and waited. Burgess relaxed against the seat and allowed his eyes to partially close, Turner wore a puzzled expression, Bailey sat without moving and kept his gaze on the delicate face of the man beside him.

"I am interested in clocks," said Wu. "Inside each of us one ticks. Something makes this happen." He turned his head and glanced at Bailey. "Wounds disturb the rhythm."

Turner squirmed in his seat and the Chinese gave him a blank stare.

"I am walking among the flowers. Their perfume promises me that man still has more heart than logic. My tears are nonexistent and I am far removed from the wrangling of unevolved people. I walk at my leisure and examine everything. The sky is cream, the sun is a red match. Beneath my feet the gardens come to an end and grass begins. I see a road ahead. I lean against a tree. My person is hidden from the child who approaches from the direction of a building."

One of Bailey's hands lay on the table, fingers clenched. Now the fingers uncurled and the hand slid away to disappear in his lap.

"The child does not see the automobile coming slowly from a distance. I have seen it. The child is singing and laying waste to flowers by plucking them and pulling them apart. I wait beside the tree. It is ill-formed, has unattractive growths low on its trunk and these possess heavy foliage so that I remain unseen."

Wu gave Bailey another glance. At once Bailey signaled the waiter and ordered straight whiskey. The drink was placed in the middle of the table and after a moment a tiny hand went out and picked up the glass.

"Thank you," said Wu and drank. He smiled at Turner and Burgess but when he looked at Bailey his expression was harsh.

"The auto passes the child, turns in the road, approaches her once again and stops. She is between me and the driver. A man's voice says a thing I cannot hear. I observe the child's hand which clutches a flower. Now I see the flower fall to the ground, watch her body which is no longer supple like the plants. Now it resembles the tree beside which I wait. She is startled."

"She is frightened?" said Bailey.

"This I did not say."

"Continue."

"Thank you. A man removes himself from the auto. He is very tall, very slender, very interesting because he does not seem like a human being. He extends a hand to the child who begins to move away. The man does not pursue her, but he speaks rapidly for a long time and I cannot tell you what he says because his voice is soft. The child listens and finally she again begins moving away. Still the man speaks. At last the head of the child moves, and she is staring at the buildings behind them. She looks at each one, as if she is savoring the view. Her eyes rest on the man before she raises her glance to the sky. A few moments later she climbs into the back seat of the auto. The man resumes his place behind the wheel. Two doors close, one with a slam, the other

with a whisper, like the closing of a coffin. The child is as if she goes to her death, yet she goes willingly and does not fear the man."

"And then they went away," said Bailey.

The Chinese merely touched his lips with a sleeve.

"Why didn't the man look like a human being?"

"His face is full of light."

"Thank you for coming here and telling us this."

"I do it because of wounds. Even now I hear his cries."

"He is young."

"Of course."

"It will pass."

Wu turned his head with a lazy motion. His face was calm but the eyes that touched Bailey were frozen and hard. "I beg your pardon." Gathering up the skirts of his robe, Wu stood and slowly walked away.

When he was out of earshot, Burgess said, "What I want to know is how that old bastard knew who were were and how to find us."

To Turner, Bailey said, "What did you think of him?"

"I don't believe it. He's so little and fragile-looking. Honest to God, his soul is made out of rock."

Bailey mailed an anonymous photograph.

"It must have been a white slaver," he said later. "I'm sorry."

"Why would they send a picture? Since when do they do that?"

"Maybe they do it as a matter of course to discourage relatives. This is their kiss-off. Look at it. Look good and hard and then forget it."

"I will. Maybe tomorrow. Will that be okay? This goddamn picture is very well done, I'll say that for it. But wouldn't you say she's a little out of place? I mean, she looks her age and so do these other bats. I'd guess

that the youngest is forty if she's a day. The competition is certainly nothing."

"Cut it out," said Bailey.

"The Chinese have a saying, you know. About people who carry bad news."

"I'm not the one who carried it. I merely came here to help you. But this picture is good news. She isn't dead. She wasn't picked up by some maniac. You know where she is. Anytime you want to find her, go ahead. Of course it might take a while since bordellos are legion, and when you finally do succeed in locating her she'll be in a slightly screwed condition, but what's the difference?"

Sometimes a human scream could cut like a knife, and Bailey hurried away with a pain in his chest. He went straightaway to a sleazy photographer's shop to pay the man who had done the job for him. The man was a drunken bum but he knew his business and not even Daniel's ferret eyes would be able to detect the fraud. Pala in a bordello surrounded by whores? The drunk had faked the background. The girl was gone and until the boy got over it he wouldn't be worth a damn. The process of forgetting had been speeded up. He wouldn't hunt for her because he wouldn't be able to think about what he would find, and since he couldn't think about it he would have to forget. That was only natural. He was young. He'd get over it.

Bailey had words with Turner and Burgess. "Now you have a nest to plunder."

"You want us to find her?" said Burgess.

"Hell no. I want to know what Mr. Wu does beside take up space at SPAC."

"But you know Justice took her."

"I don't know any damned such thing and neither do you."

"Just a minute," said Burgess. "We know he took her, but you want to pretend that we don't know. If we find

her, we'll find him, but you want us to go chasing after the Chinese. Why don't you let us in on what you have in mind?"

"I don't want to waste time. You think you can find her? Nuts. When he brings her out of the woodwork is when you'll see her and not before. It's about time you realized you aren't going to catch him. That's why I hauled Jordan from his cradle, to do a job we can't do."

"You have too much confidence in him."

Bailey grinned at Turner. "Have I too much confidence in Daniel?"

"He'll catch him. There's nothing standing in his way now."

Afternoon, a building, a room with the sun coming in the window, a chair beside a radio, and a man sat in the chair. No pipe, no spectacles, no drink sitting nearby, only an ordinary-looking man sat and read a newspaper.

An article caught his attention and he read for a few moments after which he laid aside the paper, stood and paced the room, finally crossed to the window to look down at the street, turned and paced some more. For a while he stood motionless and then he slowly walked out the door, took an elevator to the ground floor, went outside and waited on the curb until a bus came along.

Two hours of walking from the bus stop took him to the swamp. A crowd was there, detectives and neighborhood gapers, and these walked about or stood and stared at a large patch of soft mud in which a red stick had been imbedded as a marker.

The ordinary-looking man mingled with the crowd. Policemen looked past or over him without hesitating. They knew he was there because their conditioning made them know it, but he was only one more face in the crowd, another morbid onlooker who had heard about the murder and come to view the final resting place of an insignificant young man.

The stranger stood at the edge of the swamp and gazed at the red marker. A flicker of what might have been pain crossed his face. One slender hand moved at his side. An eyebrow trembled. The wind roused his hair. Finished with it, the wind laid the hair over his forehead and let a strand or two drape an eye. The man made no movement to unclutter his vision. With the one clear eye he looked long and hard at the red marker before he took a backward step. He brushed against a woman who promptly made room for him.

He stepped backward until he was at the edge of the crowd, and there he stopped. Glancing behind him, he found no one there. To his left was a boy who stared at the sky; to his right was a farm girl who watched some detectives standing beside a police van.

The man closed his eyes.

The girl lost interest in the detectives and decided to engage the man nearest her in conversation. He had looked sympathetic and she was growing bored. She thought it was too bad that they had taken the body away. Turning, she started to speak. Immediately she was annoyed. The man was gone.

Perhaps he actually was gone. Each time he did it, he felt as if he were the one who had moved, he and not space. It didn't matter that his feet touched the exact same portion of ground, didn't matter that the same piece of sky stretched overhead—nor was it of consequence that the time of day hadn't altered. It was approximately 4:30 P.M. and he was standing beside the same New Jersey swamp, and very little had changed, except that it was now seven days earlier than it had been a moment before, and he was alone.

There were other differences, though it took a while to notice them. For one thing, sounds were muted. A sick breeze blew here and though the sun was brightly visible there was no real heat, only a still and silent warmth. Leaves on trees seemed to be frozen, grass stood stiff

and petrified as if suddenly overwhelmed by a terrible coldness. But it wasn't cold, only warm and silent.

The man did a thing he could not refrain from doing. He stood and listened for his body to make some sound. Presently the gastric juices in his stomach stirred. The man relaxed. He was alive. Always in this place he had been alive and he knew he was alive now, but never had he failed to check. It was the human in him that made him do the checking. At times, another word for human was "fear."

The woods beside the swamp were veiled by a faint pink haze which the man didn't see. His vision was excellent yet he did not discern the haze. Only one person in ten thousand could have seen it because only that number possessed eyes able to differentiate between such subtle shades of color. Down through the ages there had been a few people with such good vision. It was a human trait that had yet to establish its permanence.

Maybe this place was death. Often the man had considered that it was. Life had passed it by. Substance had moved in another direction and left its shadow behind.

He raised a foot and stepped on a dandelion which yielded to the pressure and sprang back up again once the pressure was removed. Kneeling, he tried to pluck the plant. His strength wasn't enough to pull it out of the ground. It was fastened in its place forever. This phase of its existence had already happened and what had once taken place could never be changed.

The things around him were eternal. Didn't this mean they were the same as dead? Grass could be bent but not cut, trees could be climbed but no saw would ever knock them down, not in this place. A visitor had only to move through the space of seven days and everything here would be at his disposal and he could add or subtract at will.

The man stood up straight, brushing back his hair. He

checked his watch and looked off in the direction of the highway. Slowly he walked toward the patch of trees.

He didn't have long to wait. From far away came the sound of a cry. He moved behind a tree and hid himself.

They came from the direction of the road. The one in the rear was short, no more than five feet tall. He would never be mistaken for a child because he was too broad. The abnormal thickness of his body was evident even from a distance. His shoes were expensive and shiny. He wore a pin-striped suit, white shirt, little bowtie, and in his lapel was a rosebud. The neck about the taut collar was ten inches in diameter, the shoulders were yards broad, the arms were short and thick and the legs were like pipes. The face was not visible because a dark hood draped the head. Two holes had been cut for the eyes.

One arm raised and a beefy hand yanked at a rope it held. At the other end of the rope was a boy eighteen or nineteen years old. The rope was around his neck. As the rope went taut, the boy gagged. His head shot up and his eyes bulged as he fought for air. His fingers clawed at the rope. It was yanked again and his body stiffened. On the tips of his toes, he perched and trembled and tried to cry out. Suddenly his mouth opened and he vomited. As he bent forward, the man kicked him.

The boy staggered forward and as he went he clawed at the rope on his neck. His face was gray. On his temple was a black bruise. His clothes were torn and muddy. Once he fell and the man ran across his body, then skipped around behind him. Once he was dragged several yards over the ground.

They headed toward the swamp. A squirrel ran up a nearby tree and the squat man grabbed a gun from his pocket. He let go of the rope, stooped to take careful aim and shot the squirrel dead. The boy grabbed the

rope and began to run. The man turned, giving a great whoop of laughter. With quick little leaps he caught up to the trailing rope, grasped it, and with no effort he swung the boy into the air, swung him high, around and around like a ball on a string. Several times he whirled his toy before he laid it on the ground beside the swamp and took the rope away.

The man kicked the boy. He slapped the gray face. He slapped with force, first one cheek and then the other, and at last the boy opened his eyes, tried to sit up and finally managed to prop himself on one elbow. He began to cry. Slowly he raised his head and saw the man standing ten feet away with the gun pointed at him.

His body shuddered. His weight slipped from his elbow and one hand went plunging into the swamp. At the same time the gun fired. The boy followed his buried hand. He fell slowly. Soon his arm was submerged, then his shoulder, then his head. The rest of him went rapidly. The weight of his hips turned his body in the mud and the top of his head showed for a few moments. The gun fired again.

For a long time the man stayed beside the swamp and watched. In the meantime he cleaned his gun with his handkerchief. He picked up the discarded shells and put them in his pocket. The rope was rolled up and put in the same place. He tore up some grass and cleaned his shoes. Once he carefully raised the front of the hood and spat.

Finally he turned and headed back toward the road. When he was a good distance away from the swamp, he stopped and turned around to stare at the patch of trees. One arm raised in a wave.

"Good hunting, you bastard," he called, and at the same time he gave the hood on his head a jaunty flick with a finger. Turning, he hurried across the meadow.

The other man, the time traveler, had already burst

from the trees and now he was doing a curious thing. His hands were out in the air, and he was struggling as if an invisible barrier lay across his path.

Usually he didn't react like this. Almost always logic had been enough to keep him impassive, at least superficially, but he hadn't been able to tolerate this one. Logic hadn't helped him this time.

His fists rose and fell against the wall that kept him out of someone's present. Anyone's present, it didn't matter whose, he couldn't get through while he was in the past and he knew it, yet it was too much to bear and he had to smash at the barrier with all his strength. It was like fighting foam rubber.

He looked at the swamp and his imagination drew him a picture of what lay just beneath the surface of black mud. His face turned paler still and his eyes glowed with the fierceness of wild anger.

At last he stopped fighting the wall. Standing with his back to the trees, he stared down at the grass. For a few moments he stayed that way and then he straightened. His eyes felt hot and dry. He would go back to the present and get the shell of the bullet that had killed the squirrel. It wouldn't help, but he would get it anyway.

Turner picked himself up off the floor more bewildered than bruised. That anyone would hit him was amazing in itself, since he was as muscular and trim-looking as he had been fifteen years ago. But that Burgess would hit him, to think of skinny little old man Burgess doing such a thing . . .

His nose was bleeding and he still couldn't believe it. Going into the locker room lavatory, he looked in the mirror. Already his nose was swelling. It might even be broken. He stuffed the oozing nostril with toilet paper.

All of a sudden he felt sick. His body sagged against the sink and he thought he was going to faint. The sight of the blood hadn't done it nor was it because he was in

pain. It was the memory of Burgess's face just before he got hit.

Innocence be damned, he wasn't that way anymore. All it had taken was that one second, and then he hadn't been deluded any longer. Burgess either hated him or Burgess was insane. Well, what did he care if his best friend loathed his guts?

"Wait a minute, Bob," said Burgess. He was standing by the far window. He didn't look ruffled or apologetic and that enraged Turner further.

"You want to smack the other side, is that it? You want me to stand still so you can take another poke at me?"

"Of course not." Burgess came across the gym floor. As usual, he was in no hurry. "I apologize. I had no right. One thing you must remember is that everyone has emotions. For a second you had me by the short hairs and I went wild. I hate that kind of outburst. Right now I hate myself."

"Come off it. I said something that made you mad as hell and you busted me like I was a slob. Okay, I'm a slob. Now I'm going home."

"I'd like to talk this over. I'd like it if we went around the corner to the bar. I'll buy you a drink and we can sit and relax and then I'll talk to you. That's what I want."

Turner almost told him to go to hell. "All right," he said.

With a drink in his hand and a cozy atmosphere around him, he felt no better. "Talk," he said. "We can't afford wrangles unless we intend to split up. Do you want that?"

"That's the last thing I want." Burgess sipped his drink and looked pensive. "I'll start at the end and go backward. I hit you because I lost my temper. That was inexcusable. I'll spend the next year making it up to you. Now let me go on. You've busted your coconuts tracing the Riddleys, you gathered detailed dossiers on every one

of them and had the whole thing set up prettier than a picture. I know how much time you spent on it, and I know how tedious it was to scrounge in the woodwork for those freaks. Okay, fine. I was proud of you. I didn't interfere because I couldn't have done it half as well. I've no talent for scouting, all I'm good for is cleaning up. So you did all the work. Then why in hell were you ready to dump it in the garbage can?"

Turner went red. "Why shouldn't I if I thought that was the thing to do?"

"Since when is this a kind of deal where everybody is independent?"

"I don't follow you."

"But you do. That's why I hit you. Again, I'm sorry."

"It was my stuff," said Turner.

"It was ours. Yours and mine."

"It belonged in the garbage can. I worked for nothing. It was a dead end."

"Mr. Justice is one of the Riddleys." Burgess looked casual but his eyes were alert.

"Since when did you start believing that?" said Turner in surprise.

"Since the beginning. You only had to ask me."

"But I didn't know it."

"Now you do."

Turner grew restless. He squirmed in his seat and nearly dropped his glass. "Now I know it, but didn't anything I say reach you or sink in? The Riddleys are nobodies."

"Who says so?"

"Dammit, I just said—"

"Hold on and relax. You say so. My God, you're liable at any time to give the entire human race a clean bill of goods."

"Not this time," said Turner.

"Especially this time. I don't have to tell you what

you're relying on because you know it as well as I do. Your intuition is interfering again."

"No."

"Intuition. No facts, only feelings. Every time I turn around I run into your feelings. This time I'm paying no attention to them. I'm sorry I hit you, but I won't let you close up the best chance we've had in years."

"The Riddleys aren't our target. They're fleas. Paul Reese is a cripple living on welfare. He's been writing an opera for twenty years. Emma Stoker is a housewife who plays bridge. We know John Rand is a nothing. Then there's Robert Vine. You know how he makes his living? Washing windows. Okay, the woman is automatically crossed off. As for Reese, he's in no shape for acrobatics and we know Justice is in top condition. That leaves Vine and Rand. Well, Vine hasn't got the brains to go to high school, had encephalitis five years ago and came out of it a high-grade moron. Who's left? John Rand. A middle-class shmoo. I worked on him the longest because he fit better than the others. I tell you he isn't Justice. I know he isn't."

Burgess smiled. "I've waited while you got the information. I prayed you wouldn't flub it. Now you've got it. They're nailed down and we can pot them anytime we please."

Turner was suddenly on his feet. "Pot them? You're crazy."

"Sit down. Don't be emotional every goddamn minute of your life."

Later Turner tried to remember how Burgess talked him into listening. At that point in the conversation he had been angry and alarmed and all set to storm out of the bar. It was uncanny how Burgess had done it. Burgess could do almost anything. Burgess had kept him there for over an hour and in the end Turner hadn't been certain of the time of day, let alone anything else.

"Where does Daniel come in?"

"He doesn't for a while," said Bailey.

Turner persisted. "Why not?"

"He ran off," said Burgess.

"You mean we don't have him anymore?"

Bailey answered. "I know where he is. He's in the woods with Golden Macklin, trying to grow up. Leave him alone. Don't go near him. He'll come back to work when he's ready."

"In the meantime—" Turner began.

"You go down to the interviewing agency and get yourself a job."

"But they can spot us."

"They won't spot you. You carry innocence around with you like a shroud. Why else do you think you're working for me?"

Bailey was right. Turner wasn't spotted by Asa Pickman. When he phoned in to say he was on Eric Fortney's payroll and doing nothing but sitting on his ass in a city hotel, Bailey smiled a grim smile and wiped it from his face before he looked at Burgess. The little man was enraged. He looked casual, but Bailey knew better. Burgess was cooking something on the pot, he needed Turner because he never did anything alone, and now he was doing a slow burn. It was just as well. Lately Burgess had been sliding away from sanity and common sense. Now he'd have to cool his heels until his sidekick returned.

As for Bailey, his main concern was for an anonymous letter someone had sent him. It had been written in pencil:

The real name of Mr. Justice is Arthur Bingle. You can contact him through a man named Eric Fortney, New York City.

"Why would I believe it?" Bailey had said to himself. And he hadn't believed it. What he did believe was that

the person who had sent the letter was the man he had been hunting all these years.

V

Eric Fortney had all kinds of facial and bodily expressions ready to hand. These had been practiced over the years until they could be brought to the fore at a moment's notice. At this moment, he wore his hat-in-hand, I-am-respectful facade, but it wasn't all pretense, since he did respect the man who sat in the center of the papier-mâché replica of New York City. Arthur Bingle sat with one hand resting on the top spire of the Brant Building while around him stretched a panorama of tiny skyscrapers and tenement houses. The entire replica was twelve feet square and four feet high. The center square in which Bingle sat measured about three feet.

Bingle owned the city, just as he owned the state, and he was preparing to extend his tentacles of power into Jersey. At his disposal were fifty hand-picked men, each with an army of five hundred to one thousand members. The fifty were called Numbers. These resided over various business establishments, and usually they remained in the background as shadows behind people who had built or inherited the businesses.

Where Eric was tall and impressive-looking, Arthur Bingle was of medium height, medium complexion, medium build, and his face was bland and still. Only his eyes moved. They focused on the Brant Building, on Eric, on nothing at all. A quiet man, Bingle gave the impression that he never did anything impulsively. This was not the case, though the things which he did on impulse appeared to be deliberate acts. Bingle's body was

simply quiet and slow while his mind was exactly the opposite.

"I found a new feeler," said Eric. "He's the best one I ever saw. His name is Robert Turner. He's been an accountant for a New Jersey law firm for the past fifteen years, came to the agency looking for a client who had mentioned the place. The client was the Russian. The law firm wrote out his will. The thing about this Turner is that he has all the qualifications. There's no hostility in him. Asa says he's a babe. He has the talent plus the brains, and he isn't even aware of it."

Bingle's hand caressed the spire of the Brant Building. "If he has the brains, that puts him over Asa."

"Certainly, if that's what you want. Asa is stupid; he has the talent with nothing else, but I trust him."

"Do it your way. Always do it the way you see fit. I don't want anybody slipping past."

"Nobody has, nobody will. Turner will stay close until I know he's trustworthy."

Bingle changed the subject. "I want you to go and see Brant. He says we can kiss his ass till doomsday but he won't sign. How does that strike you?"

"It sounds bad for him. I rather liked him."

"Don't use Teuton for a while."

"Did he keep that hood down tight?"

"He took a spit."

Eric frowned and started to speak.

"It was nothing," said Bingle.

"What made you decide to check on him?"

"The Man is softhearted. You didn't know that, did you? That's why I'm sitting here and you're standing there. I know how the Man thinks. Without me, you wouldn't do well. He'd pick you up in twenty-four hours and either dump you on a lawn beside a police station with a rag in your mouth, or he'd kill you. The Russian was too young. The Man must have worked overtime trying to get a look at Teuton's face."

"I told Asa not to take any kids," said Eric.

"Yes, you did."

"He didn't tell me until it was too late. The kid heard about the gambling setup and started bellowing."

"No one is to be told anything until you meet them. Asa is answerable only to you. The Russian was your mistake. I want the mature people in that school. If they won't go along with us, that will be too bad for them."

Eric didn't say anything, just stood rigid and waiting.

"This is a new operation," said Bingle. "All of you had to make mistakes at first, and I anticipated them. When the biggest brains in the country began to disappear and when a certain number of them were found dead, there was bound to be a reaction. I want all processes tightened. You've had enough time. There will be no more mistakes."

"There won't be." Eric turned and started out of the room. He had his hand on the doorknob when Bingle spoke again.

"Leona wants to go shopping this evening, and I've some business to take care of."

"Be happy to take her. Tell her I'll pick her up at seven. And I won't keep her out too late."

He wore a smile as the elevator took him to the ground floor. He would enjoy taking the kid shopping. He felt like walking around doing dumb things with a little girl who knew how to laugh and who didn't ask nosy questions. Leona was fifteen and straight out of a picture book. More and more Bingle was depending on his right-hand man to chaperone her around. Only last week Eric had taken her to a ballgame, and he had promised to take her to a show tomorrow night. Come to think of it, he was seeing her at least twice weekly. For how long had he been seeing her that often? About six months. But she should be going out with boys her own age, not running around with a man ten years older than

she was. Only Arthur wouldn't let her go out with boys. He wouldn't let her go out with anyone but . . .

As Eric left the elevator, the smile on his face faded. He climbed into a car sitting by the curb, sat back and did some thinking while the driver maneuvered into traffic.

He went to see Jimmy Brant. Mr. Brant was too busy to see him just now. Could he come back later? Eric sat in the waiting room and watched the secretary. She was young and attractive and he admired her as he would have admired a good painting or a fine animal.

The woman didn't seem to appreciate his interest. After twenty minutes of enduring his scrutiny, she got up and hurried into Brant's office. A few minutes later she came back and ushered Eric through the gate.

Jimmy Brant was a shambles. A tough, muscular, middle-aged man, he looked as if he hadn't shaved for a week. His suit was wrinkled, his eyes were red and sore-looking, and he kept gripping his left arm as though it pained him. Standing beside one of the windows, he stared down at the gleaming sides of the building.

"This is mine," he said without turning. "Why should I give it to you? It took me forty years, since I was fifteen, to make this place what it is."

Eric sat down in a chair beside the desk and folded his hands on his lap. "Life isn't the same as it was forty years ago, or even ten."

Still Brant looked out the window. "What kind of country is this? What happened to it?" He swung around and his burning eyes were narrow. "Rather than give it to you, I'd burn the damned thing down."

"We've gone all through this. I explained the situation to you."

"You ordered me to turn eighty-five percent of my life over to you."

"That isn't exactly what I said."

Gripping the windowsill with one hand, Brant said,

"I can't transfer west, south or north. I've tried. I also tried to sell out. How odd it is that not a single fur man in the country is interested in buying the top company. Nobody wants my furs. Don't you think that's odd?"

"I told you it would be bad business to try to make deals at this time."

Brant swayed, caught his balance. "What happens now? I can't transfer, I have to stay here, you're going to take my business; I want to know how you think you're going to do that."

Eric gazed out the window and said nothing.

"What kind of threats should I expect? My wife is dead, I have no children nor any friend for whom I'd give my life's work." Brant straightened, went over and sat down at his desk. "What's hanging over my head?" he said softly. "Will I end up in prison accused of something I didn't do? If I don't sign your paper, will I be sent to jail?"

"No, Mr. Brant, you'll be dead and we'll get your business from the law firm that handles the estate."

The man behind the desk showed no reaction. His eyes focused on Eric with indifference. His large hands lay flat on the inkpad. "I've gone to the police. They promised to look into it. A week later I went back and they said they couldn't do anything because this wasn't really happening. They said I was imagining it, and that I should see a doctor. I made recordings of yours and my conversations, but the tapes were garbled when I listened to them later. I've installed hidden cameras, but the photographs don't come out. I don't know how you're preventing any records being made of our meetings, but I'm more interested in the why than in the how. It strikes me as being an uncommon lot of trouble for you to go to when the police are already on your side."

Brant had been staring at his hands as he talked. Now he looked up. "You see, I haven't just sat around sweat-

ing. I've been thinking, and I have the idea that I know why you're working so hard to make sure our pictures can't be taken or our voices recorded."

The folded hands in Eric's lap twitched.

A smile flickered across Brant's rugged features. "I don't believe I'll make you kill me. I'd rather give you my business. I want to be around when he catches you. I used to hope they'd get him. I thought he was a depraved maniac and deserved lynching, but since I met you I've learned what a maniac really is. He's a thing that lives in filthy corners, and he waits until something human comes by. Then he springs out, sinks his fangs in the human's neck and starts sucking. Mr. Justice exists because of you. I know that now. It wasn't the bumbling hoodlums and the penny-ante bums that started him on his crusade. It was your kind, the slick, cool bloodsuckers who have too many brains and no souls. He knew you were coming and he got ready."

Brant stood up and his chair crashed back on the floor. "Where's your paper? I want to sign it and get the hell out of here and away from you."

"You can't go," said Eric. "You're to stay where you are and run your business as usual."

For a moment, Brant stared, then he laughed. "You can't find anyone as good as I am. You want me to hand it all over and then work for you. That's a switch. All right, you've got yourself a deal. I'll be a very obedient peon. I want to be around to see you bleed."

"What makes you certain that I will?"

"Justice has a reason for what he does. You have only instinct, the same as any wolf."

Eric Fortney opened his eyes to a gray morning. The grayness was in himself, since the sun shone hotly and promised to become even hotter later in the day. The airconditioner functioned perfectly, but the apartment felt stuffy and damp. He made coffee, then he gathered

the garbage and carried it outside to where a long row of cans sat on the curb. He did the same thing every morning.

The street was empty. He glanced at his watch. It said seven. He had awakened earlier than he had intended and now he would have to find something to do to pass the time until the afternoon.

Savagely he grabbed a lid off a can and threw in the sack. After he slammed down the lid, he stood and scowled at the street. Sunlight bounced from the pavement and hit him in the eyes and he leaned against another can to balance himself. His weight fell on the lid, pressed against something inside, then he heard a low groan.

The sound startled him so badly that he leaped away several feet. A moment later he was tearing the lid off the can and looking inside.

Jesus Christ. He said it in his mind and he said it out loud, and at the same time his vision blurred until he couldn't see anything. Jesus Christ. He felt numb and full of agony. In what kind of world was he astray? Surely to God there was some place better. There had to be something closer to heaven somewhere in the universe. No one could stand to live in a world in which people stuffed their children inside garbage cans and then went away and left them to die.

She had been placed in the can upside down. Her skinny rear glowed like milk in the light of the sun. On one buttock was a dark bruise. Tears quickly sprang to Eric's eyes. He felt like crying, not quietly but at the top of his lungs, as he had done when he was little.

Lowering the can onto its side, he knelt and watched the legs sag to the walk. The feet were grimy. Reaching down, he started to touch the legs but hastily withdrew his hand. The thighs writhed, rolled, and Eric found himself staring at a small triangle of golden hair. She wasn't an infant and knowing it made him want to cry again.

The skinniest belly he had ever seen slowly scooted out of the can, then came a pair of new breasts followed by a long neck, and at last a face topped by yellow hair emerged. All he could see were her eyes, closed and puffy-lidded. One by one the lids opened to reveal eyes so blue they were almost purple.

The mouth worked, finally spoke. "It took you long enough to find me," said the girl. In another instant she had passed out.

He carried her into his apartment and laid her on his bed. Covering her with a blanket, he sat on the edge of the bed and watched her sleep. Something in the back of his mind spoke, but he couldn't hear the message, didn't make an attempt to hear. He thought of nothing at all as he sat and looked at the face of the child. Finally his mind functioned. She was twelve or thirteen. Maybe she had been starved; more likely she was naturally thin and hadn't missed too many meals. She may have been beaten. There were several bruises on her back, also some on her legs. One hand lay near him and he picked it up but quickly dropped it. He was suddenly terrified that she might have been raped.

An hour later she opened her eyes, stretched and looked around. "How did I get here?" Her voice was soft. She didn't sound surprised or alarmed.

"Who crammed you in that garbage can?"

She sat up. The sheet fell to her waist, but she didn't seem to notice. "Let me think. I was chased, I remember that. Someone big. He punched me a couple of times, and then the lights went out."

"Where was this?"

"In the park. I ran along a path, started climbing a fence and he grabbed my foot."

"Where are you from?"

"Noplace. I used to be at an orphanage in Philadelphia, but that was a long time ago."

"How have you gotten along by yourself?"

She leaned back on the pillow and closed her eyes. "I don't want to answer any more questions."

"One more. Are you hungry?"

Smiling, and without looking at him, she said, "Yes."

Her name was Paula. She was thirteen years old and ate like a truckdriver. Eric prepared a tray of food and sat beside the bed while she ate. She had no sense of modesty; she folded the cover in her lap and propped the tray on it, leaving her upper body exposed.

"Why are you feeding me?" she said between bites. "Why don't you call the police to come and get me? I'm a ward of the government, you know. Nobody wants me, which means I belong to everybody." When he made no reply, she returned her attention to the food. At last she said, "Ah, God," and sank back on the pillow. She groaned. "I think I ate too much. I think I'm going to throw up. Where's the bathroom?"

She got up, and Eric watched her run across the room. A little golden statue, she brightened a room that had been gray a short time before. He became aware of his heart. It seemed strange to him that he was suddenly aware of its throbbing.

He continued to watch the bathroom door until she came out and climbed back into bed. Incredibly, she began eating again. This time she did it slowly, burped a few times and did away with a quart of milk. Her appetite seemed endless. Eric sat and listened to his heart maintain its steady pace.

"Do you have any old clothes you could lend me?" she said. "I'll be arrested if I leave this way."

"Stay here."

She took her time answering. "I don't know if I want to. Everything here is so neat and expensive. I'm not used to fancy surroundings. Maybe I couldn't feel natural."

"Everyone should be indulged at least once in their lifetime. A person should walk on a mink rug with muddy feet just once."

Leaning over the side of the bed, she looked at the rug. "Is that mink?"

"No," he said, and laughed.

"I have to find a job. Is there an employment agency nearby?"

"Probably, but they don't hire people your age. What's your last name?"

"I don't have any. You'd be surprised how many jobs I've had. I have a good brain."

"Do you never smile?"

"Sometimes I do." Looking at him soberly, she added, "I want to work."

"What about school?"

"I don't need it."

"Stay here. There's another bedroom."

Again she took her time responding. "I don't know if I want to live here. I never had a father and I don't know much about men. You look like you have a bad temper."

"The choice is yours. You can stay or you can leave."

"I'll think about it."

He went out and bought her some clothes. A few articles were cheap, most were expensive. He was testing her. She examined them all and chose the expensive pieces to wear, a little ermine slack suit with shoes to match. The underwear was too big but she wore it anyway. The shoes were too small and he went out again and got the right size. He forgot the time, forgot that he had a business meeting that afternoon, and wouldn't have gone even if he had remembered. He wouldn't have been able to leave the apartment for any reason other than to do something for the girl. He knew he was behaving strangely, but he didn't think about it too

much. All he wanted was for her to stay near so that he could see her.

He gave her a typing job in his private office, not the one in the Brant Building but another one in a little building that not even Arthur Bingle knew of. He hoped. In a week she was bored and he started her on his disordered files. This took her another week, and he knew she wouldn't be satisfied until he gave her something more complicated to do. He let her be his bookkeeper. This seemed to please her. She was very good with figures, better than the man who had been doing it. That man had been admitted to the medical clinic for an annual checkup. Someone on the staff made a mistake and he died of an overdose of morphine.

A few members of the Army had a meeting. They were royalty, down to the chauffeur who drove Eric's cars. Each had been given a tentative number which would become permanent, depending upon how they performed. Five years in a rank usually guaranteed its permanence. Eric was Number 2 in the Army, a rank on a level with a prince. There was only one king, and of course this was Bingle, but only a few people in the Army knew about him. Not everyone knew the identity of Number 2. Those who met that afternoon in the bar at the top of the Brant Building knew Eric. They were his dukes and their numbers went from 25 to 29. The high numbers belonged to other people, none of whom were present.

A person who had no number was there that afternoon, and Eric was unnerved by her appearance. Godiva always had that effect on him, not that there was anything wrong with the way she looked and not that he had a talent for feeling. Godiva probably affected everybody the same way.

She walked into the room without knocking, kicked off her shoes as soon as she was inside, and then she

stood near a window and ran her feet through the rug. Her long toes playing in the deep tufts reminded Eric of white worms. Godiva seldom said anything, and he sometimes wondered if she were a moron. There had been moments when he felt tempted to find out, but he never proceeded beyond the temptation. She repelled him.

Godiva wore a purple slack suit. Her dimensions were perfect for her height, except for her bust, which was rather small. She stood six feet two in her bare feet. Her wide shoulders tapered to a flat stomach, then the hips swelled and the long, powerful legs began. She always wore long sleeves, even in August. Now and then her lower arms were exposed, and the skin was ripe-looking, rich and rosy and turgid with smooth muscles. Long straight black hair swirled around a firm neck. Godiva's features were delicate and beautiful. Dark eyes, heavily fringed with black lashes, flickered from object to object with interest or with indifference. It was difficult to tell which it was with Godiva. She never made small talk, never flirted, never laughed, though now and then her red mouth parted and big white teeth flashed. She was Arthur Bingle's private recruit, and Eric not only didn't know her rank, he was unaware of what she did for Bingle. He thought it might be sex, but each time he considered this possibility he became more and more certain that it was something else. He knew little about Bingle's private life other than that there was a crippled wife and, of course, the daughter, Leona. One thing was understood. Godiva was here for a purpose; she was to be left alone and she would do what she had been sent to do. Anyone who interfered would answer to Bingle.

Asa Pickman, Robert Turner, Joel Farnsworth and Eric's driver had arrived. Teuton was going to be late if he didn't show up in the next five minutes. Eric leaned against the bar and watched Turner, the new man, the feeler who had walked into the agency from nowhere

on the hunt for a little dead Russian. Maybe Turner would be an asset to the Army, maybe he would be dead in a week or a month; it depended upon how he worked out. Asa didn't like him. Asa was jealous.

The new man was watching Godiva from the corner of his eye. Eric noticed the pallor of Turner's face and smiled. The feeler was good. Anyone who didn't pick up the scent of death from Godiva was made of stone.

Joel Farnsworth also kept his eyes on Godiva. His face wasn't pale. He stood six feet four and was built like a monument. Prematurely bald except for a reddish horseshoe, Farnsworth had once been a miner but now he was a big businessman, Vice President of General Motors. He looked like a miner. His mind was quick, but in the company of Eric Fortney he belonged in the back seat. Farnsworth knew when a man was better than he, but he wasn't jealous. Fortney didn't pleasure women and was therefore a rung down on the ladder in at least one section of the ballpark. This was Farnsworth's opinion, and he watched Godiva with all the eyes of his body. He was tuned in, as usual, and he silently thanked God that he was always randy. The woman in purple who lounged on the windowseat was no fluff. She was meat. He had seen her a few times but always at a distance, and now she was so close that he could walk across the room and dip his face in the deep V at her throat. Her arms would slide around his back and grip him tight, those wonderful legs would leap off the floor and take him around the ass with one gulp. Christ, she could do anything she wanted to him; she had the kind of female stuff he could wallow in. Farnsworth stood leaning against the wall and allowed his thoughts to carry him to a point of near suffocation.

Bela Guffa was a driver. That was all he did. He drove Eric Fortney anywhere at any time. He didn't talk business, never entered into conversations, never intruded. He stood leaning against the door and waited for orders.

Asa Pickman complained about the drink Eric handed him. He went to the bar to strengthen it. Eric didn't mind. He was in a good mood and Asa knew it or he would have taken the drink as it came. Guffa, the driver, politely refused to drink anything. Godiva also drank nothing. Turner swiftly accepted his and gulped it down. Farnsworth had two straight shots.

At exactly five o'clock someone outside in the hall took hold of the doorknob and at the same time, the driver, who had been leaning on the door, shot forward as if he had been picked up and thrown. With a red face and a weak grin, Guffa caught his balance and then moved to an obscure position in the corner of the room.

Teuton walked in. He glanced toward the corner and winked, then he immediately went to the bar and made himself a drink. After he had swallowed half of it, he looked around and said, "Cheers." His voice was a deep croak.

"There are a couple of people I want you to meet," said Eric. "Asa, come on over here and say hello to Teuton."

"He new?" said Teuton.

"You just haven't met him. He's been too busy to be sociable."

Pickman reluctantly moved forward and stopped to stare down at the round face and abnormally small eyes of the short man. The eyes looked exactly like lead slugs. Teuton wore his wiry brown hair in a crew cut. His skin was a muddy color and was without a line or wrinkle. His head was big, not too big for his body, but both were large beyond normal proportions. Teuton stood no more than five feet and was nearly as wide as the doorway through which he had entered.

Briefly Pickman touched the thick hand. In a dry voice, he said, "Glad to know you," after which he moved away with an expression of relief.

"Come here, Bob," Eric said over his shoulder. "Teu-

ton, I want you to meet Bob Turner, a new man. I hope you like each other as you may be working together once in a while."

Turner stiffened as soon as his hand came in contact with Teuton's. His already pale face lost its last bit of color, then all of a sudden his eyes rolled up into his head and without a sound he dropped to the rug in a dead faint.

Teuton looked down and his lips split to reveal big gold-capped teeth. "Hey, he's a pretty good feeler. Takes one look at me and keels over. But I think you got yourself a bum, boss. The guy's a sissy."

"He's only untrained," said Eric.

Laying his glass aside, Teuton bent and picked up Turner. He carried him to the couch and dropped him.

"Let's get down to business," said Eric.

Farnsworth began to complain as soon as they were seated. "Discipline is too lax. Too many Numbers are showing up in the waterfront area. The damned place lures them. They can't resist the loose money floating around."

"Numbers don't interfere with each other," Eric said coldly. "They never do that. They have their own areas and they don't intrude upon someone else's. They abide by the rules."

"Then what was Torre doing over there Wednesday?"

"He wasn't. Wednesday he was out on the Island having lunch with Godot."

Farnsworth was Number 3 and all the Numbers from 10 to 30 took orders from him. He was the only ruling member in the Army whom they knew. The Numbers had been chosen by Arthur Bingle, though all but a few were unaware of it. As far as most members were concerned, Bingle was a smalltime gambling racketeer who would be wiped out whenever Farnsworth gave the order. They knew Farnsworth was backed by other people, but it wasn't in their best interests to find out who

the people were. Number 12, a man named Kusinski, was in charge of the waterfront. He had an army of a thousand men and women.

"Maybe I was mistaken," said Farnsworth. "But that isn't what I want to talk about, actually. I need a replacement for Kusinski."

Eric's head lifted slowly and he stared at his subordinate for a long moment. No one made replacements but Bingle.

"I know it isn't the usual procedure," said Farnsworth, and he sounded defensive. "You can't do everything, though, which is why I'm bringing up the subject. He needs to be replaced."

"Why?"

"He hasn't showed up. His people are beefing. He was supposed to report Friday, but he didn't show. Nobody has seen him. That's all I know."

"Why didn't you tell me this Friday?"

Farnsworth cast a quick glance around the room, then looked at the floor. "I tried to find him."

"You allowed one of our biggest businesses to go unattended for three days?"

"Wait a minute, I—"

"Where is he?"

"Honest to God, he just dropped out of sight. We can put a new Number in his spot and nothing will be changed. There are ten men ready and waiting for the job, and any one of them will be as good as Kusinski."

"Hold it," said Eric. He got out of his chair, went to the bar and made a drink while he thought about it. From the corner of his eye he watched Godiva, still perched on the windowsill and still playing in the carpet with her toes.

Even before he went back to his chair, he knew everything, or he thought he did. It all depended on who Farnsworth suggested as a replacement.

"Who do you have in mind to take over?" he said.

"Rick Needle."

"You've known him for a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes, but that has nothing to do—"

"It's all right," said Eric. "First we make sure of Kusinski's whereabouts."

Beads of sweat lined Farnsworth's forehead. "That's no problem. If he ran, we can trace him."

"He may be dead."

"You think so?"

"I don't know what to think."

"He has his nerve taking off like that." Farnsworth sat rigidly and looked at no one.

"These things happen," said Eric. He glanced at Teuton and found the short man busily staring at Godiva. So Teuton also knew. Eric turned his attention back to Farnsworth. The dumb bastard. He had killed Kusinski so that his friend, Rick Needle, could have the job. Bingle had found out. How? It didn't matter. Bingle couldn't stay in his position without having eyes in the back of his head. Something had happened to make him suspicious of Farnsworth.

No member of the Army was permitted to commit a crime without orders from his Number. No Number could do something illegal unless Number 3, Farnsworth, permitted him to do so. As for Farnsworth, he took his orders from Eric. Under no conditions would any Number be ordered to kill another Number. There were ways of handling undesirables in the top ranks, and they were Arthur Bingle's ways.

You stupid bastard, Eric thought as he smiled at Farnsworth. He regretted the loss. Up until now, Farnsworth had been an efficient 3. Now Kusinski's body lay somewhere, and if Bingle hadn't blanketed the killing, Farnsworth would be fair game for Mr. Justice. The Army couldn't afford to have its third Number hauled into court, nor could it afford a traitor. Very soon now Farnsworth would leave this room. Godiva would

follow him. Or they might go out together. Already she was giving him some pretty pointed stares. Now Eric knew what Godiva did for Arthur Bingle.

"But how?" he said later to Teuton when they were alone.

"Oh, boy, boss, that one's a black widow spider."

Turner sent a letter.

"The son of a bitch has cracked," said Burgess.

"Right now that son of a bitch is worth more to me than ten of you," said Bailey. "But I don't know what he means."

Burgess laughed. "He laid it on the line and you don't understand. It's plain enough."

"If one of us has cracked, it's you."

"I've got lead in my pants and you put it there. I don't need Turner tagging along to get things done. Stop sitting on me."

Bailey's light eyes glittered. "If I'd had to guess who would go emotional on me, I wouldn't have chosen you. And don't raise your eyebrows at me."

Burgess leaned forward, placed his elbows on the table, rested his chin on his hands and chuckled. "What about it? What do we do about this letter?"

"What he knew we'd do; think about it and worry."

Forget Justice. Target is a gang. World is headed for dictatorship. Expect I'm a dead man sooner or later; can't react to suit them. Tell Carol to divorce me. Won't risk seeing her. She'll probably be pleased.

Farnsworth was dying and there was nothing he could do to help himself. As a miner, he had worked like a slave. His body was hard as a rock, he was big and he was stronger than any female living, which meant that the woman under him wasn't female. But she was. He had just used her, and he had believed that she was the

best lay he'd ever had in his life. She had emptied his balloon, and her own, too, and then she gave him a hug to show him how much she had appreciated him. But, my God, the hug was killing him, and he knew it was being done deliberately. Eric had kissed him off. But still he couldn't believe a woman would ever be strong enough to take a man as big as he was and kill him with her bare hands.

Godiva was done with mating and what came after was, perhaps, instinctual. She didn't smile. Maybe she wasn't even thinking. Her legs were wrapped around Farnsworth's thighs and they felt to him like pillars of iron. He couldn't move. Her arms encircled his neck, her breath was heavy in his ear and all the while she slowly crushed the life out of him. He had the terrifying thought that she wasn't particularly absorbed in what she was doing, that it was simply a thing which she did as a matter of course, and he thought that if he could only reason with her . . . but then his throat was pressed against hers and it was his throat that was gradually giving way and he couldn't make a sound. The point of her chin pressed on the artery in his neck. His chest covered hers, but hers felt like stone. Her heels dug into the small of his back, and he wanted to scream in agony but there was no more air in the world, not for him.

Godiva inhaled. The body above hers elevated a fraction. Still Godiva inhaled. Her lungs filled, filled, filled with what Farnsworth needed so badly, then she suddenly stopped inhaling and gave a low, drawn-out grunt. Her arms changed from lead and became steel. Her legs took on new strength. Farnsworth sank deeper into her flesh and she broke his neck with a rapid flexing of her wrists.

VI

Arthur Bingle was three years old when he witnessed his first scene of carnage. He toddled out into the front

yard of his home and stepped off the curb just as a car came whizzing down the street and hit a cat. The driver of the car braked hard, stuck his head out the window and yelled, "Jesus," then continued driving down the street.

The little boy had been in the direct line of flying blood. It sprayed his white sailor suit, some of it even spattered his face. First he looked at himself and then he walked into the street and looked at the cat. Its hind parts jerked and shuddered, came up off the pavement in quick spasms, thudded flat only to leap high again. Its head looked crushed, and one eye dangled at the end of a two-inch white cord. The pool of blood which had formed beneath it began trickling toward the small blue sneakers.

A sob leaked from the boy's throat. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the cat. While its ruined head lay motionless, the rest of its body went through an insane little series of contortions.

The sob changed and became a shrill scream. A few moments later the boy fell unconscious beside the cat. The neighbor who found him lying there thought that he, too, had been run over. He had more blood on him than the animal.

He was in a coma for eight days and the medics did not expect him to live. X-rays showed no damage whatsoever, yet the coma would not release him. Finally, on the eighth day, he regained consciousness. His recovery was rapid and seemed to be complete.

The same thing happened another time, when he was fourteen. He was hiking along a highway and saw the body of a large dog lying on the yellow line. Without checking the traffic, he ran into the road with the intention of grabbing the corpse's tail and hauling it to the shoulder.

A truck with a cursing driver hanging halfway out of the window came hurtling up the highway, swerved

around the running figure, shot across the dog's body and screeched to a halt several yards beyond.

"Goddamn sonofabitch, get the goddamn hell out of the way, little bastard ought to get your neck broken," the driver screamed, added a few more invectives and then settled down into his seat and drove away.

Arthur Bingle took one look at the smashed dog and another look at the receding truck before he dropped unconscious on the road. This time the coma lasted four days.

At the age of sixteen he went on a pilgrimage. He traveled backward in time and visited the cat. It played in the grass at the edge of the road, and he cried because he couldn't pick it up and carry it to safety. Later he visited the dog, and watched as it loped along the highway in joyous chase after an imaginary rabbit. As he said good-bye to it, he cried again. It was the last time in his life that he shed a tear.

His faith, his hope, his will and his inspiration were not defeated by those two journeys into the past. What this meant was that he didn't carry out his plan to kill himself. He knew now that ugliness had shape and form; it was more real than beauty, and it waited in the wings like a bit player. Self-destruction was the fate of all mankind, but what a travesty of justice it would be to hold off that denouement. He had the desire to commit such a travesty. In the end he would decorate a hole, but the notion of kicking fate in the teeth was a satisfying one. Naturally he had been marked for an early hole. So had all men. Those who staggered into old age and arthritis were aberrants who had thumbed their noses at justice.

Arthur wasn't quite eighteen on the day he had his driver take him south to Jersey for a relaxing ride. The driver was a borderline moron. Arthur sat in the back seat of the long, silver-colored car and quietly mused over some new deals. It was a hot afternoon and the road was clear.

The driver was bored and cast occasional glances over his shoulder at his new employer. He had been on the job four weeks and he was thinking that it was beneath his dignity to work for a snot-nosed brat. It would be more to his liking to find a boss who looked like an up-and-coming businessman, somebody who ordered him around and kicked his tail when he didn't move fast enough or who kicked him simply because he felt like it. It was essential that an employee be treated like a man. The driver didn't want polite treatment. Manners were bullshit.

Ahead in the distance, a fat opossum lumbered up an incline and came to a halt on the shoulder of the road. It stood there and looked around before it extended one paw toward the pavement.

"Hot damn," said the driver. Twisting the wheel, he increased speed and drove along the shoulder. Both right wheels caught the animal, flattening it into the dirt. The car skidded on the soft earth, and the driver spent a few moments fighting to get back onto the road. Once they were running smoothly again, he grinned and turned his head to speak to his employer.

It was such a quiet face back there that he grinned again. The hair above the face was soft and brown, so were the eyes, and the cheeks were pink with no trace of a beard. Quiet. That was what the driver thought and he was still thinking it as the gun came up over the seat.

He had already said, "Sorry, boss, I—" when the gun went off. The insides of his head splashed against the windshield and he was a dead man behind the wheel of a vehicle that crossed the shoulder and dropped down a slight incline to come to rest in a field.

Arthur heard police sirens in the distance and knew he had to move quickly. The cruisers were headed his way and the car would be spotted at once. Even as he climbed into the front seat, he considered what he could do. He might abandon the car. It couldn't be traced to

him, as he always registered his property under phony names. But then it had cost a great deal of money and he liked it.

Taking the driver into his arms was nasty business, but he had to do it. With the body draped over his shoulder, he sat still and closed his eyes and went to yesterday.

He had made a mistake. He hadn't noticed that the field had been newly plowed. A man stood leaning on a hoe not twenty feet away from him. The car was gone now. There were just himself and the body and a man who stood with his back turned.

Arthur took his corpse to the next yesterday without being seen. Cursing, he hurled the body to the ground and began hauling it toward a patch of trees. Once it was concealed, he ran back to the spot where he had appeared and traveled the other way, not toward the future but to his present, and again he sat in the blood-spattered car.

He had the machine on the road and was going at a decent clip as the first police cruiser came into view. It passed him by and the officer didn't give him a glance. A few minutes later, a second cruiser passed him. After they were well out of sight, he turned the car around and headed back to the field.

Perspiration dampened his back and his blood raced. He was happy now. It would have been more intelligent to kill the driver later, but he had done it this way and it was all right because he was no moron and Mr. Justice would never catch him. The driver couldn't be left lying in the trees; he had to be gotten out of there and carried away to a secluded grave where no one would find him. Hopefully, he hadn't been found yet. After all, he had been lying there for more than two days, and if the farmer . . .

This was a close one. Perhaps he had made a serious mistake. The farmer certainly hadn't stuck to that one spot; this was his land and he probably wandered around; it was more than possible that he had gone into the patch of trees, maybe to cool off or eat his lunch.

New the perspiration on Arthur's back ran in rivulets. His blood was a thin tide. He was happy.

He parked the car in the same area in the field and quickly ran into the trees. The body was lying where he had left it. In twenty-four more hours he would have had nothing to worry about and could have forgotten about the body, but he couldn't be sure it would remain unseen that much longer. Impulsively he extended his hands toward the dead man and met an invisible wall. He was in the wrong time corridor. The driver was in a particular period and couldn't be touched by anyone who wasn't in the same period.

Arthur had sensed the presence of the barrier before his hands touched it. His fingers clutched heavy waves of air that shifted in and out of his grasp. The air seemed to have weight; it pressed against him and then dispersed, only to grow heavy again. His hands felt neither cold nor warm but there was an unrealness about them, as if he had lost them to the strange region.

This was a passage of non-time. He called it that: a corridor of no-time. For as long as he could remember, he had been able to travel into the past. After much experimenting he had discovered several things. His travel limitation was one hundred years. No matter how much force he used, he never went beyond the century barrier, and this barrier moved forward as he aged, day for day. He could take anything with him that he could carry, and it remained where he placed it until seventy-two hours had passed, and then it disappeared. He knew where the things had gone. They were in the corridor of no-time.

Once he, himself, had almost disappeared. When he was fourteen he stole a car from a supermarket parking lot. The police chased him and he panicked and crashed into a tree. That was when he realized he had been carrying a passenger. A small boy scrambled over the back seat and flung his arms around his neck. Arthur took him and traveled a century into the past. In those

early days he always went too far. He hadn't learned then that even an hour's difference was usually enough to ensure his safety.

He lost the boy. The city was a suburb that hadn't existed a hundred years before. There were thick woods and swamps and the boy ran away from him and hid in the trees and he didn't find him until it was too late. For three days he hunted until finally he saw him running along a low ridge. He stood below the ridge and shouted. Maybe the boy intended to come down. He stopped running, stood on the ledge of rock, crying, and then he sat and tested the stony incline with one foot. He was in a half-crouch, silhouetted against the horizon, when he disappeared. First he was a blurry outline and then he was completely gone. Arthur felt the same thing happening to himself. He looked at his hands and saw the bones through the skin. He was growing transparent. He wasted no more time. With as much force as he could muster, he swung his essence away from the woods and traveled to the present.

Experiments with rocks and plants taught him that seventy-two hours was the limit a traveler could remain in the past. After that the traveler drifted into the channel between time periods: no-time, non-time, an enigma. He didn't know where the objects actually went. Conceivably they drifted out of one time period and into the next. He had never again seen anyone or anything that had disappeared in that manner.

Another thing which he learned was that the time in his present, just before he traveled, didn't move forward if he stayed near his point of entry into the past. The farther he moved from this point, the faster time passed in his present. For instance, if he traveled on Tuesday at 1:00 P.M. and stayed in the past for twelve hours, within five hundred yards distance of his point of entry, he returned to the present on Tuesday at one or two seconds past 1:00 P.M. If he moved more than five hundred

yards after he traveled, he returned to find that his present had gone ahead. He had never been able to calculate his movements and never knew what time it would be when he returned, so he rarely moved far from his entry point. Once he went half a mile from it and found, when he returned to the present, that forty-four hours had been lost.

Now he had a body to dispose of, and he couldn't leave it in the woods for another twenty-four hours until it disappeared because there was too great a chance of someone finding it. If that happened, Mr. Justice might hear of it and go on the hunt for him. At age seventeen he wasn't ready to take on that kind of challenge. Later, surely, but not just now.

He traveled backward to the driver's time period, hauled him over his shoulder, returned to the present, climbed in the car and drove away with the body. He thought about the future and smiled. His mind was always reliable, continually opening up interesting vistas. For instance, what would happen if a man with a certain psi ability mated with an exceptional woman? The child would very likely have the father's ability. Might it also have something else? It might. How interesting it would be to see what kind of offspring he produced. Of course he had to find the woman, and this would be difficult because so far no one had gotten a rise out of him. It would be too bad if he never loved. But he wouldn't think about that. Somewhere was the woman for him.

Time was a series of corridors with each moment having its own corridor.

Or . . .

Time was the clocked motion of matter. As such, it became an abstract, not real and not there, merely a convenience created by minds.

Or . . .

Time was a portrait of whatever existed. Like an oil painting, time—reality, space, matter—lay sprawling everywhere, and each atom of pigment represented a minutia of thing, state, being. No change took place in the portrait for it was a still life, a great gob of paint hurled onto canvas. Change? Nonexistent, abstract. The atom which lay after the one before it had a different state of being. Reality was motionless. Everything on the painting was in a static condition. To comprehend change here, one had to have senses keen enough to perceive an atom and at the same time perceive the next atom and the next.

Perhaps time was more like a cartoon than a painting. The show was finished if the hand stopped drawing. Each slide died after its showing, or it was arrested and never moved again. A leg raised and stayed forever raised unless the next slide came to show it descending: a scattering of motion, blurred movement, nothing at all unless one happened to be the owner of the leg.

To travel in time, one had to walk across the portrait, tramp over the atoms representing yesterdays. Along the way, such a traveler would pass his selves or his replicas who had served to bring him to the present. The replicas were as real or as unreal as he. A sense of space wasn't needed if one wished to travel over the painting. What was necessary was the unusual ability to know where today was in relationship to yesterday. The normal person related tomorrow with today more easily than he did today with yesterday. What was gone must be let go of, while what was yet to come still had to be reckoned with. The time traveler first needed a piece of today in order to orient himself, then he fastened himself to the piece, and his mind moved, and now his body was in a different position in reality. The building of a hundred years ago still existed, the scream heard by someone a month before still rang, the past tide flowed without being per-

ceived. What had gone into stillness was real to the time traveler because he knew where it was. Not when, but where.

At one time, Microcom was as busy as the Stock Exchange. Now only an old man named Tidy Crawford roamed through the building and listened to the machines that never broke down. He was an on-the-wagon alcoholic who spent his days polishing the machines. At night he slept on a cot in the downstairs foyer. Tidy knew Arthur Bingle as a gentleman of means who rented Microcom from some fabulously wealthy swell. Bingle often came to use the machines but Tidy didn't know why, nor could he have cared less. The world had gone to hell in the last five years, really pitched over the edge into brimstone, so there was no use trying to figure out why people did anything. Besides, who gave a dang if a civilized fellow came to diddle with the dolls? At least this fellow was polite. He was soft-spoken and didn't shriek every word, as most people had a tendency to do nowadays. Also, he paid wages to have the dolls polished. This was a dang good thing, since no one else would hire a has-been. In fact, no one was hiring anyone. Money seemed to be going out of style.

During the first quarter of the century, and a little more, Tidy had been in a sodden stupor. When he finally dried out for good, he thought he had been transported to another world. God, but everything was built up. No grass anywhere in the whole city; rivers so covered with bridges you could scarcely see the water; too damn much business, no time for relaxing; not a speck of hooliganism, which was good, only people didn't seem to appreciate it, skulked around like shadows were chasing them. Maybe that wasn't so strange. The cops were tough-looking sons, all over the place with clubs in their mitts; made a man's head ache to see them.

Microcom might have sprung out of the ground for all

Tidy really knew. He had been told that it was built as a public service, and people once used it as they used libraries. The computers, one hundred of them, were exactly alike, six feet high, two feet across, and every one of them was a genius that could answer questions on any subject. It was astonishing to Tidy that the dolls had such big brains. Hell, they were better than humans.

"You know," he said to Arthur Bingle one day, "I can't figure out why hardly anybody comes in here. People walk up and down the street out there and I stand by the door watching them and they never come in. Once in a while someone takes hold of the doorknob and twists it, but they always change their minds and go away. Now, I know that door isn't locked. I go out three times a day to get something to eat and I never have any trouble getting back in."

"What do you mean, 'hardly anybody'?"

"Yeah, well, two fellows been coming in lately. Use the dolls. Haven't said anything to them, since it's none of my business, except that nobody ever came in before, and I figure since you rent the place you maybe don't want anyone cluttering it up. It's all for you to say. You never told me one way or the other."

"Did you see them at the door before they entered the first time?"

"They changed their minds after they twisted the knob. Went away and came back the next day and walked right in. Said, 'How do?' and then they went off to help themselves to the dolls. Use the same two every day. Knock those poor babies hard. Curious birds. They have a lot of questions, that's for sure."

"The doorknob has an electronic camera in it. It takes a picture of everyone who approaches within two feet of it."

"How does it do that?"

"You would have to go to school in order to understand. Do you want to do that?"

"Hell, no. As far as I'm concerned, the world croaked forty years ago. I'm just a working man. All I care about is these dolls."

"They must have forced a phony picture."

"Didn't see any picture," said Tidy.

"Did they stand one behind the other as they walked to the door?"

"One stood off to the side."

"The man who walked to the door wore a small piece of screen, probably on his shirt front, while the other man held a camera. This second man made a picture appear on the screen. Of course, the picture was magnified and was nothing more than the section of scenery behind the first man, the part which his body blocked from view. The camera in the doorknob activated, took a picture and relayed it to the computer inside. The computer decided it had made an error and reversed the camera film to the previous strip, which was of you entering the last time. This activated the unlocking mechanism."

"That's dang interesting, but not a whole lot."

Arthur Bingle laughed.

"Let me tell you something," said Tidy. "Those two gents, they aren't ordinary. One of them is a little Chink, the ugliest fellow I ever saw, while the other one is just over the hump from being a boy, no more than twenty-one. Both have something strange about them."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. They came in through the door and I almost fell over, like a mountain had toppled toward me. Only other person ever made that kind of impression on me was you."

"Which is why I hired you."

"Huh?"

"Please continue."

"See, they have a lot of aura. That's what I call it. I always could sort of pick out the weak ones from the strong ones, which is why I hate looking in mirrors, but

it isn't that I look for muscles or anything like that. The little chink could get clobbered by a girl. No, it isn't that. Say, what are we talking about? You never said ten words at a time to me before today."

"Tell me about the young one."

"He doesn't mind talking. His name is Daniel Jordan and he comes from something called SPAC, and he's out to nail Justice. See? Didn't I tell you he was strange? He wants to land something that doesn't exist. Mr. Justice is a fairytale. The newspapers are written by big liars. They make up whoppers to keep people from noticing that the world has gone nuts."

"How often do these two come in?"

"Every afternoon at two o'clock. Stay three hours, work two dolls, one apiece, then they leave. If I'm not around they don't look for me to say good-bye."

"Do you know for certain that they're after Justice?"

Tidy nodded his head and looked around for a place to spit, changed his mind and looked back at the quiet face of Arthur Bingle. "That's the only thing the young one is interested in. You couldn't get him off the track with anything but the final kiss-off. He uses oral query, never fools around with the coder or typing. The dolls don't store oral conversation, so he either remembers pretty damn good or he's hunting for bits and pieces. Probably he does both."

"What if Justice is real? Pretend for a moment that he is."

"Then those two'll catch the sonofabitch. They're going about it the right way."

"Explain."

"They're working on who he is, not where he is. Figure he's given himself away a hundred times already. The dolls know everything about him that was ever made public. See, these two think he's no nonentity, that he's made his marks all over the place, some recent and some long before he ever hit the newspapers. He has talents and

personalities and eccentricities and his trail is a mile wide, and the only thing that can put it together is a machine that never forgets."

"I imagine they're feds."

"Oh, sure," said Tidy. "Who else would go all out to nail Justice? The people? They're so damn miserable they're looking for a savior, and they wouldn't care if he climbed out of a dung heap."

"Is that what you think of him?"

"Haven't really thought it over. If he was real I'd be scared of him. Wouldn't want to meet him. Expect his aura would knock me down. Not sure the world can accommodate such different kinds of humans, not that he's all the way human. Takes another sort who can forget his culture and murder his fellow man in the same way he eats his breakfast. Don't want to believe he's real."

"I'm satisfied with your work here and I want you to continue it, but I think you're capable of more. If you don't mind, I'd like you to start taking a walk every day. Move around the area. Two hours every evening should be enough. You're to look for the strong, not the almost-strong but the mountains, and if you come across one, be sure and get a good description for me."

Tidy's eyes misted over. He hung his head. "I'll do anything you say. All my whole life nobody else ever believed I could tell how much a person cared. Are they up and running or are they crawling on their bellies? I can tell. I know. And I know most people are snakes."

Bingle went away and Tidy snorted off his momentary self-pity and began polishing the dolls. He ran a chamois cloth across the top of the machine his employer preferred to use. Damn strange bird, was Bingle. He liked to play with his doll and he sure wanted foolish information. What was the point in finding out how to take over the whole world? In the first place, that was the ambition of a nut. In the second, it couldn't be done without an army

of at least a million men. In the third, well, why would anyone want to go to the bother? Poor Bingle. He was kind and quiet and as nutty as a fruitcake. And therein lay his strength. The ambition of a psychotic could be awesome. Luckily Bingle was only playing games with the dolls. Those damn dolls. Maybe they weren't so holy and innocent, at that. They were a little bit like the apple; use them the wrong way and Pandora's box flew open.

"He's a good feeler," said Eric Fortney. "I wish I didn't have to lose him."

Arthur Bingle sat inside his papier-mâché kingdom, and no expression passed over his face. He looked bland and guileless and impotent. The mockup had grown to include the states of New York, New Jersey, Vermont, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Now the tiny buildings and artificial landscapes took up most of the room.

"The school has closed down," he said, and gave an idle glance about his property.

"We pretty well stripped it," said Eric. "Turner selected a good batch for us. The rest are gone, one way or another."

"Then why do you need him any longer?"

"I don't actually need him, but outsiders wander in and out, and some of them are top minds and we could make use of them. Of course, most people are lamebrains. Don't be annoyed. I know Turner's a fed. For five years he's been watched around the clock without letup. It's a wonder he isn't crazy. But it didn't matter before and it doesn't matter now. The agencies are ramming heads. They're accomplishing nothing and they'll disband any day now."

"To you all men are fools," said Bingle.

With a shrug, Eric said, "Not at all. I've thought ahead. They have a few good men, but what can they do? You don't like questions, I know, but what about your own feeler? Is he dead?"

"I want two. I should have used Turner in the beginning and left you to sift through SPAC with Asa's help. If I'd done that, we might have pinned Mr. Justice between them. Incidentally, I want an all-clear put on two men. Nobody is to touch them or interfere with them. A young one named Daniel Jordan and the Chinese he works with."

"He's a fed, an All-American, SPAC-nurtured adolescent who isn't quite right in his head. The Chinese thinks he's Fu Manchu."

"Be quiet and listen," said Bingle. "Turner and the other will follow the 'where.' Jordan and his friend are going for the 'who.' Let them. They're helping us. You realize what it means if we get him: everything we want, everything I've worked for. With everything, there's no nothing, and isn't that what people fear? Of course. But I don't do what I do because I'm afraid. You do, though, and it's a weakness. Work on it. Perfect yourself. I want no flaws."

"Yes, sir."

Blinking calm brown eyes, Bingle allowed his hands to touch the spire of the Brant Building. "Did you ever ask yourself why he opposes us, why he doesn't throw in with us? Our styles are exactly the same."

"No, they aren't," Eric blurted and immediately regretted it. Rarely did he ever see Bingle show emotion. There was emotion present now, and it was ugly rage. So quickly did it pass to blandness again that Eric couldn't be certain it had existed.

"Yes, I've asked myself, but I don't know the answer."

"Neither do I," said Bingle.

He's lying, Eric thought to himself. He knows, and so do I. We pretend that Justice is an egomaniac, that he's fighting us because he has a fat id and wants more glory than we can give him, but that isn't true. Justice is the man of tomorrow. He's going to clean out the rats from the nest because he can't stand rats. To hell with law, it isn't good enough. Wait around for the law to clean

house and everybody will wind up in chains. Nietzsche botched it, created a deformed hero, and that was because Nietzsche was human. Justice isn't human. He's more. He's Superman.

Jesus, no, no, he didn't believe that. It was only his mind rambling. Bingle was responsible. Bingle scared him. But what was Mr. Justice?

A few hours later, the two men stood in a room in the east wing of the Bingle mansion. There were other people in the room. None of the attention was focused on Turner, who stood wilted and sagging in front of Teuton.

"Please, please, no, don't do that to me," Turner kept saying, but if anyone heard him they gave no sign. He tried to lean forward. Teuton squeezed. Turner's wrists grated together and he screamed. With one hand the short man held him fast. Each time Turner tried to move, the pressure on his wrists grew intolerable.

The room was large. A male nurse tended a man in a bed. The man had little flesh on his bones. Though he was tall, he weighed no more than ninety pounds. His hair was long and stringy, his dark eyes huge and empty. His gaping mouth dribbled words, but they were meaningless, like fast-falling water-drops. At a signal from Bingle, the nurse lifted the man from the bed. The patient's arms flapped and needles yanked free from flaccid veins.

"Goddamn," said the nurse and laid his burden down again to reinsert the needles. Bottles of fluid hung from rails over the bed. The man was naked. He made no protest as the needles probed for blood. They entered his arms again. Others stabbed his groin. There were so many needles. He was placed in a metal chair beside the bed. The words dropped faster from the helpless mouth, staccato yelps like the sounds a chicken made when the hatchet descended.

Feet touched a steel pedal. Smaller needles shot out of the pedal and entered the soles. Manacles grew from the chair and turned the wandering arms into throbbing

white sticks. The legs were immobilized by other manacles.

"How much do you want him to have?" the nurse said to Arthur Bingle.

"Give him a strong dose. I want to see how he works out with the new man."

There was a loud crack and Turner screamed.

"He pulled too hard, boss," Teuton said to Eric. His arm broke."

"Get him in that other chair."

"You aren't gonna set the bone?"

"Do as I said."

Only one other time did Turner scream and that was when the manacles clamped around his arms. After that he sat quietly enough to keep the nurse from prodding his neck with a long fingernail. Turner looked down at his own muscular body, then he stared at the wreck sitting in the chair across the room. He stared for a long minute because the wreck looked familiar.

"Guglielmo?" he said at last. "Is that you, Guglielmo?"

The man in the other chair drooled. Suddenly his head came up and in a clear voice, he said, "Mama, I don't want to be born. Get out of that bed."

"Can I leave now?" said Teuton. "I got business to take care of."

"Go ahead," said Eric.

Turner's chair was a many-splendored contraption. Adrenalin injected into the bloodstream of the occupant caused a heavy flow of platelets to rush to the heart. Filtered blood coursed rapidly through the aorta and flooded the brain. This process wasn't allowed to let up. The brain was all-important in the experiment and must receive prime nourishment.

Large amounts of a paralysis drug were injected into a vein. This deadened the senses. The occupant became a brain imprisoned inside a chunk of unfeeling matter.

The mind sought reality or externals. Without the

senses as a guide, it was deaf, dumb and blind. Under such conditions, a living mind took reality where it found it. For Turner's mind, reality existed nowhere but inside itself. The needles in the chair quickly saturated his brain with LSD. The last real sensation he experienced was one of sound. Eric Fortney spoke to him.

"Where is Mr. Justice?"

Love, hate, indifference—all were the same to Turner, were his world, where no man walked but only emotions lived. Such were open to him and sometimes they were accompanied by coherent thoughts, in which instance even these were readable. It wasn't a simple case of, "I love," or, "I am indifferent." Surges of strength were directed by the mind and Turner's talent enabled him not only to identify the surge but also to locate its source, after which consequent surges were easily interpreted.

"I see him," shrieked Guglielmo.

"I see him," shrieked Turner.

They told what they saw and this was the way it went:

Fifth Avenue was deserted and Teuton strode down the middle of it. His short, powerful legs carried him swiftly along. His mind was occupied with a woman: one woman—Godiva. Bitches bred bitches and bastards, everything wrong with the world could be traced back to some woman, treat them rough because they were responsible. Luckily they were usually little and weak. Nature was an unrefined hag and had made people like cats. The tom was randy twenty-four hours a day, and that was a damned good thing for cats, otherwise there wouldn't be any. Same with people. Wait around for a woman to give the all-clear and the population growth would bomb at zero.

Fifth Avenue was littered with debris. The gutters overflowed with garbage. Windows in buildings had been used as targets by youths with BB guns, or dumb cops with real weapons. All the buildings were occupied,

business continued as usual, lunch counters had patrons, so did department stores. Only out in the open was activity sparse. No one hastened toward it. All lingered wherever they were, and then when there was no other recourse, they ran into the streets, ran to an automobile or a taxi, or they simply ran until they reached home or until they bumped into a policeman or a hustler or a huckster or a panhandler. It didn't matter which. Any one of these would have a gun or a bad temper or both.

Teuton crossed to the sidewalk, prepared to pass an alley entrance, then came to a sudden halt because of a curious sound that reached him.

Buildings cut off the sunlight, but he had good vision and saw well enough to know what was going on. Back in the crumbled bricks, back in the shade, away from eyes and minds, far from the street, a man was busy raping.

Teuton had excellent vision, and he saw. The girl was naked and blood came from lacerations in her body, not oozings but pourings. Bright red blood came from a place where there should be none, because she wasn't old enough to be bleeding from there, nor would she ever be old enough, not now.

The cop heard a sound above his own labored grunts and his head shot up and around. It took him an instant to see the button glinting on the short man's lapel, then he wasn't worried anymore because the short man was a pal, a compadre, one of the gang. Not that the cop would have worried, anyhow. The world was gutless and he had three guns lying right beside him. It was a good thing everybody in the Army had one of those fancy buttons.

Teuton stood above them, looked down. "She's dead."

"You want some?"

"Didn't you hear me? I told you she's dead."

"I'll be done in a minute. You can have it after me."

Leaning down, Teuton looked closely. Her insides must be ruptured. He had never seen anything like it in his life. The cop must be banging all the way up through her peanut uterus.

"Aw, shit," he said in a very low voice. One meaty hand made a fist. The fist raised about a foot over the cop's hairy head. The head descended, rose, descended, rose, on and on. All of a sudden the fist was the thing that descended.

It sounded like pressure escaping from a champagne bottle. Teuton wasn't certain as to what he did in the next few seconds. Maybe someone else had done it, only of course it had been he, because only he was strong enough to do such a thing. The cop croaked with his head busted and then somebody picked up his corpse and used it like a javelin so that it ended up across the alley with its head and neck rammed into a hole in the brick wall.

There were no clothes to cover the kid. Teuton felt like a brute as he stood over her. Never before had he felt that way. He had never experienced compassion or sorrow. Now he didn't recognize the emotions. Maybe they weren't really there.

It hadn't been a right thing. Lots of wrong things were right because a man decided in his cradle what was right and wrong for him. Those things applied to everyone else. No double standard; there wasn't any damned such thing. You could only respect people who were like yourself.

Except that this wasn't right. He was glad he had clobbered that creature who had pretended to be human. Everybody wanted the best, right? It was only natural. So okay, but don't be offensive.

He turned away and was brought up short by surprise. Sitting on an overturned garbage can, not fifteen feet away, was a genteel-looking man whose face never came into focus. He wore a gray suit, white shirt, tie

and hat. He had long sideburns and a bit of a mustache. A leg was propped on a knee. The shoes were shiny. In one hand was a gun.

Mute Teuton. Astonishment clogged his throat. No one could sneak up on him, not when he had such keen ears.

"Go ahead. Shoot."

"I don't think so." The man's voice was deep and soft.

"What do you want?"

"I came on a crusade." The gun waved, stilled. "This can't hurt you."

"It isn't loaded?"

"It is, but it won't function here."

Teuton stared at the gun. "Then why do you have it?"

"To show you that I can kill you when I decide to." The man glanced at the body protruding from the cracked wall. "I liked the way you did that. I wouldn't shoot you for any price. Not today."

"I don't understand."

"Go away now. I'll get you yesterday. Not your yesterday. One of mine."

"I'm not scared. I did it. I wouldn't tell you if I thought I could have hidden it. Only I know I can't. You'd find out. Either way I'm a dead man."

Teuton was speaking to his employer.

"Why didn't you try to run?"

"It wouldn't have done me any good," said the short man.

"You know the rules."

"Yeah. We aren't supposed to kill unless we're backed up by protection. It was an impulse. I busted his head open. He was screwing a gut. You know? Imagine doing that? It was an impulse. I never made any mistakes before."

"I don't intend to have you executed."

"What?"

"You did me a service. I want you to do me more. Be a little impulsive. Indulge yourself. Every time you see a soldier doing something really disgusting, I want you to do exactly what you did today."

"You mean bust his head?"

"Yes, bust his head. Do you know who that man with the gun was?"

"No."

"The feelers are fine. I'm pleased, except for one item. The feelers were so strong together that they were able to pick up a few of your thoughts. Forget Godiva. Put her completely out of your mind. Have anyone you want, but forget that particular woman."

"She's something, and she doesn't scare me."

"Forget her. That's an order."

VII

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is a recording. Those of you who are out of bed and trying to open the doors should stop wasting your time. They will not open until further notice and, besides, you won't want to miss hearing any part of this record. Everything I say is important to you.

"First of all, you must have guessed by now that you are in a hospital. Look about you. It is a large ward, the sixty-seven beds are occupied, or they should be if you ladies have decided to behave yourselves and have left off banging on the doors.

"All of you were brought here over the past week and have been kept anesthetized until this morning. No doubt some of you recognize each other. Be assured that everyone in the ward has practiced the same profession. The room contains every district attorney in the state of Pennsylvania. The bed occupant on either side of you is a judge, the same as yourself.

"Most of you are young, which makes my task easier. After you have heard me out, you will be eager to cooperate with me. In a week's time, my staff will blindfold you and take you from this hospital. You'll be released on a Pennsylvania street. After that you're on your own.

"You will continue to prosecute cases as before, with only a few exceptions, and you'll be notified about those exceptions prior to the hearings. Once you have received notification, it will be your duty to see that the case never comes to trial. How you accomplish this doesn't matter. Your task is to see that the suspect is not indicted. There won't be many of these exceptions for you to handle.

"If, in six months' time, you have conducted yourselves in a satisfactory manner, you will be returned to this hospital and the operations that have been performed upon you can be corrected. Choose to ignore what I say and you must face the consequences. I have no compunctions against killing each and every one of you, either now as you lie there in bed or later when you've showed me that you can't be trusted.

"First, a word to each of the ladies. An aging element has been introduced into your pituitary. Only my special staff knows how to remove this element without killing you. I want you to cast your mind back to the last time you saw an old woman, and I do mean old. Remember how her skin looked? Hideous, wasn't it? Remember her hair? But I don't have to remind you of these details. A few months from now, your appearance will be all the reminder you need. Nothing will stop the aging process unless you do what I say. If you wish to come back to this hospital and be renewed, you will deport yourself in such a manner that I'll feel you deserve it.

"Now, to the men. You know by this time that surgery has been performed upon you. Leave the bandages alone. Your manhood is no longer there. They lie safely in storage. They can be replaced, with no noticeable after-

effects, only by my special staff. Whether or not you get them back is up to you. I think you will do everything in your power to assure that no damage comes to the contents of the storage locker, which, incidentally, is nowhere near here, so don't waste your time hunting for it. Behave, and I guarantee that your own property will be returned to you.

"In closing, I would like to urge all of you to go to the police at the first opportunity. I give you one month to get your complaining out of the way. Anyone who contacts the authorities in regard to this matter after a month has passed will be deemed incorrigible and cannot return to have his cure.

"Good-bye, good luck."

Every day yellow-haired girls passed by the big front windows on the first floor of Microcom. In the beginning, Daniel chased them. He hurried across streets to catch up with them, and most of the time he turned away after a second or third glance. Legs were too heavy or thighs were too broad, hair not the exact shade told him he had made another mistake, but it didn't matter because those few moments of pursuing were essential to him. For that little while he was happy.

More and more, he found it necessary to have a look at their faces. It had been six years and she would have changed a great deal. She would be taller and heavier, her clothes . . . he didn't remember what kind she preferred . . . usually she had worn jeans and sloppy shirts, but her tastes must be different now. What would she look like in a long dress, or with her hair short or pinned up? What did she look like at nineteen?

He sat behind number three doll and rested his head on a bent arm. A girl with yellow hair passed the front windows at the bottom of the stairway. He wasn't interested, but he watched her from the corner of his eye. She came by every day, at the same time, but he had never

chased her because she couldn't be the one. She was too tall and her clothes were too expensive.

The girl stopped in front of the entrance and fumbled for something in her purse. Her back was turned and Daniel looked away.

"We waste time, young friend," said Wu who sat next to him before number four doll.

"Don't you ever get tired?"

"I came tired into the world so I cannot get that way."

Tidy Crawford came tramping down the aisle. "You shouldn't ought to put your feet on the dolls. They don't like to get scratched."

Daniel removed his feet from the panel on the bottom of his machine. Idly he glanced down at the windows just as the girl turned around. Suddenly rigid, he watched as she walked to the door and placed a hand on the knob. She hesitated, drew back, then turned and hurried away.

He chased her. Down the steps he went, three at a time, and raced outside. She was nowhere in sight. He checked the two corners on his side of the street, but the yellow-haired girl had disappeared.

"Did you see her?" he said when he came back inside.

"No," said Wu.

"I saw her," said Tidy. He scowled and ambled on down the aisle.

"How much would she have changed?" Daniel said to Wu.

"Sit down. Catch your breath."

"Would she be so tall? Could she grow that much in six years? Talk, dammit."

"For what purpose? To encourage you to hallucinate?"

"You must have seen her."

"I told you I didn't."

Daniel sat down beside his machine. "You tell me plenty of things, and sometimes I think they're all lies. But I have to agree with you. She was a mirage. It's

just that there was something familiar about her. What's wrong with me? Why do I do it?"

Wu sat like a little statue and smiled without moving a muscle of his face. "You are driven. We all are."

"Okay. Forget it. Ask me a question."

"How tall is Mr. Justice?"

"Six feet, one inch."

"Weight?"

"One hundred and seventy-two pounds."

"Tell me what he does in his spare time."

"Damn, I want questions I can answer."

"What does he think of the world and the men who inhabit it? Does he have nightmares about utopia? Why does he kill? Is he Satan in disguise? Can one call him a vigilante? Robin Hood? A maniac? Is Mr. Justice Superman?"

"Go to hell," said Daniel. "Why don't you leave me alone? Go back to your coffin and dream about vampires."

Wu said, "I have been commissioned to assist you, and I tell you truthfully, as I have told you many times, that the man who gave me the commission was the very man whom you seek. He is my lifelong friend."

"That's a new one. The last time we had a conversation like this, you said Pala sent you to keep an eye on me. And the time before that, you said you were Bailey's spy. Your Manchu costume is getting shaggy."

"Men who wear costumes are trying to project a piece of their personality. I'll keep mine unprojected, if you don't mind. Now, where were we? Oh, yes, the just man, the man, Justice. Why do you think he chose that name for himself?"

"Ego."

"Justice is vain?"

"Of course."

"He no longer leaves his seal sticking to his victims. Does his vanity wane at this late date?"

"Where did you get this recording?" Daniel said to Bailey.

"Someone mailed it to me. Anonymous."

"Interesting."

"Is that all you can say? Do you know that every one of those judges is now a crook? They're back to normal again and they're breaking their necks to make sure they don't earn another trip to that hospital. Do you know what that means?"

"Justice is lousy in Pennsylvania."

Bailey glared at the wall. "I've created a monster." He looked at Daniel. "No such thing as switching horses in midstream, eh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I believe that, but it doesn't help. That's the monster I'm talking about. The world is toppling over your head but you can't be bothered to look up. Where's Turner?"

"Maybe he's dead."

"Where's Tom Burgess?"

"Sniffing out the Ridleys."

"For all you care, they might have gone fishing." Bailey sat back in his chair and gripped its rickety arms. The room was part of a shack, the shack sat in the rear of an alley, the alley was in a slum. Bailey leaned forward and stared into the eyes of the young man seated on the other side of the scarred table. The eyes were smoke-colored, weird, the same as the whole person. This kid had been weird all his life.

"Let me make some idle conversation for a few minutes. If you have the time to spare from your computers, I'd like to pass on to you a state-of-the-union message. Four words. There ain't no union."

The smoky eyes didn't drift. They stayed motionless, fixed, without surface.

Bailey continued. "How about what used to be laughingly known as my organization? It's gone downhill a bit. From a thousand trusted agents I now have three and a

half: myself, Tom Burgess and, somewhere, Turner. You're the half, and I don't know if that means you're half on my side or only half present. The thousand trusted agents are now a thousand hooligans. One by one they've taken over the spots. It took them about three months to do it. Oh, I could complain. Let's see, there's Senator Thurston, only he's a hooligan, too. Then there's the Washington bunch, except that a funny situation has been boiling there, seems as if they're all down with laryngitis all of a sudden and nobody gets to talk to them or see them. Who does that leave? The cops. Everyone knows how much help they are these days. What they're especially good at is caving in heads; hit it if it wiggles."

Bailey ran a palm over his forehead. "Dan, Danny, Daniel, come out of the woodwork and open your mind. It was a routine, a job. In the beginning it seemed to be an isolated case, but this isn't the beginning now. It's so close to being the end that I have nightmares when I close my eyes."

"Probably Turner will show up," said Daniel. He stood and walked to the door. Behind him, Bailey spoke again.

"Go back to your computers, zombie. When you decide to quit stalling, remember something of what I've said. Civilization is shot if we can't stop him. His was the hand that started the snowball rolling. He knew what he was doing, every step of the way."

His hand on the knob, Daniel turned. "You sound so sure of yourself."

"I am; just as I'm certain you can name him right now."

"I see him," shrieked Turner.

"I see him," shrieked Guglielmo.

In nightmare or fancy, Mr. Justice created from the depths of his subconscious, and that part of his mind was read like a map by two searching tendrils of free thought; they were free because they were bodiless.

In the beginning they had fumbled. In spite of the drugs, it was difficult for them to forget the body. Especially had it been difficult for Turner. And then it became easy. His body grew accustomed to hurtling away into limbo, after which there was only his unencumbered mind that focused with terrible accuracy, penetrated distance without effort, seized upon the prey and inhabited his soul as if it were open to occupancy.

It had been bad timing. The prey slept.

Said two voices together, "He dreams of a child. It wears a white gown and upon its head sits a crown. It has no sex because it is not yet born. There is dark mist all around it. It moves, and wherever it goes, light breaks forth to scatter the mist."

Eric Fortney watched Leona from the window. For a brief instant he wished that he loved her. How simple things would be if he loved this girl.

She was with Cass again. The boy would never become a Number. He was too stupid. His I.Q. made him a borderline normal, but this wouldn't be the deciding factor in regard to his future. Because of his gentleness, he would never be anything but a chore boy. All his life Cass was destined to prune gardens, wash cars, shop for groceries, fetch and carry. He hadn't a tough core. Right now he was lathering Leona's back with suntan lotion. The pool was built into the balcony and the boy and girl lay on a small stretch of grass bordering it.

Eric walked through the glass door and stopped beside them. "Hello, Leona."

"Eric. Come and enjoy the sun."

Cass looked up with a grin. "Hey, boss, the water's fine." He was nineteen with a body that was sturdy and smooth. His sandy hair always hung in his eyes. Curly tufts of it hid the tops of his ears. One brown hand stroked Leona's back while his eyes traced the move-

ments of the man who stood over them. Something like envy crept into his expression.

Arthur will deball you if he sees you," Eric said.

"You're so rotten crude." Leona sat up and gave her dark head an angry shake. "He only does what I tell him to. Poor Cass. He never has a minute to himself."

The wedding night would be impossible. That was what Eric was thinking. He tried to imagine how it would go. No doubt he would say something defensive, such as: "Sorry, old girl, I'm afraid I won't be making a woman of you. You see, I'm not like other men, can't rise to the situation at the drop of a hat." She would complain to Arthur, but maybe Arthur wouldn't care. All he wanted was for his little girl to be looked after. Wasn't that it? Hadn't he chosen Eric because he trusted him? Surely to God Arthur wouldn't mind that the bride and groom didn't love each other.

Leona lay down on the grass and the boy named Cass piled lotion on her back and patiently rubbed it in.

His mouth was dry, terror made him tremble, joy was a coward hiding behind old rage, all the things that made him human and aware tried to surface at the same time. He felt jammed inside.

He stood at the mouth of an alley and looked into the shadows. If there were an exit back there, she was gone and he had lost her. The coward in him flickered out like weak flames and old rage grew strong.

"I'm sick of chasing girls," he called in an unsteady voice.

The alley was empty. For as far back as he could see, nothing moved.

"Damn you. I know. I always knew. Bailey was lying. Nobody stole you. You in a whorehouse? Do you think I believed that? All I believed was that you left willingly. You went away and I drowned."

A rustling in the shadows made his heart work too hard.

His blood rushed so rapidly that he couldn't breathe. Pala. But if he said the name to himself, thought of it one more time, he would be lost. He'd end up on his knees on the filthy bricks, probably he'd cry and he had sworn never to cry again, over her or anything or anyone else. Tears were human dams. Once they were broken, there were no defenses for the soul.

"I'm not coming in there. This is it. I'm going to be stronger than you. I intend to turn around and walk away. It's either that or die, and you aren't worth that much."

It wasn't horrifying to discover that his legs refused to obey. One step forward he went, then the next foot moved. It was uncanny. How many feet did he have? Two had never covered distance so quickly.

Stop. His legs obeyed. He hated them and he hated his mind for telling him that he wasn't sane.

"I don't care anymore," he said. "I'm not coming in."

Three more steps into the alley meant that he was incoherent, but the shadows were an overwhelming lure. Was there a living heart within those shadows, and if there were, did that heart pound with the same ferocity as his own?

If there were an exit in the alley, if she were gone, another piece of death waited for him. Why go on? Why hurry to one's own dying?

Split-second timing; the shadows burst open and the living heart indeed existed, and it was encased in a form that was at once familiar, yet unfamiliar.

"I didn't think you would be so tall," she said.

Somebody's kept girl, else how could she dress in autumn fur? There was such a thing as autumn fur, for the very rich, for the very evil. Inside him a young voice cried, *Pala, Pala, help me. Everything I think I see is a lie. I know you. Take away my rage.*

"I did it deliberately," she said, and he was wounded by the calmness of her voice. How coldly she stood

staring at him. "I knew you worked with the computers. I wanted you to follow me. Look around and see. There's no other way out of this alley, and I know these slums like I know the back of my hand."

He had moved without being aware of it and now he stopped a foot away from her.

"I came to ask you something," she said. "An old question. Nothing new. Will you give it all up and go away with me? Right now? Will you do that?"

"Pala," he said, and his hands took her shoulders.

She closed her eyes for a moment. When they opened they were narrowed and glistening. "God bless you, Daniel, I love you," she said, and her arms went around his neck. She pulled his head down and her mouth shattered his with a kiss.

He knew what he was doing, but he didn't stop. Many times he had fantasized his meeting with Pala, and this hadn't been the way it was supposed to go. He was more in need of love than sex; neither could be sustained without the other. First would come a renewal of love: learning to know her, talking, touching, understanding, talking, seeing, talking, talking. There was a need for much talk. Who was she and where did she stand in relation to his reality? By finding the answer to this question, he might find himself.

Now he betrayed reason. His voice was stopped and he couldn't talk, could think of nothing to say with calmness. While his mind rebelled at himself, his hands stripped her of her clothing. This was a kind of communication, and it was the wrong kind. He wished she would hit him. He loved her and he was lowering her naked body onto the filthy bricks of an alley. All the promises he had made to her in her absence were meaningless because he couldn't wait. He wondered if he had been lying to himself. Maybe revenge had always been his intention: pay her back, mess it up, make it ugly, choose the worst

possible surroundings, make love in a sewer, show her what he really thought of her.

Later he hunched in the shadows and cried into his hands. The last thing he remembered her saying was that she would never ask him to go away with her, never again ask him to be sane.

He had awakened with the night breeze chilling him and the bricks gouging his back. He cursed because he had fallen asleep and then he reached out to find her. She wasn't there beside him. He was alone. She was gone. He had received nothing, had given her nothing. She had left him to finish the drowning process.

Dawn broke over the skyscrapers and unveiled a thing that had not existed a day earlier. During the night or the predawn, someone had strung a huge red banner between two buildings. High above Fifth Avenue, it flapped in the weak wind. Large white letters on both sides spelled a message.

The waking city prepared to go abroad, and eventually the banner was noticed. A few people cheered as they read the message, though they couldn't have said why. It was just something to do, like coming into the world or leaving it.

One person screamed when he read it. A lackey mentioned the fact of the banner's existence and then watched in surprise as his master tore open a window and draped himself on the sill in order to get a clear view of the sky. The message on the banner said: TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: MR. JUSTICE HAS A DAUGHTER.

The scream Arthur Bingle gave was heard on every floor of the Brant Building, the acoustics being poor and Bingle's emotions being utterly intense.

Livid and trembling, he sought assistance from his two zombies.

"Find her. Track her down. Bring her to me. I want to

see her. I want to get my hands on her. I want to kill that bastard's whelp."

"I see him!"

"I see him!"

He was very near. Where? It was impossible to get the zombies to answer specific questions. They couldn't hear. All they could do was see with their inner eyes. Bingle wasted no time. Within the hour he had a hundred men busy picking up every man on the streets.

The girl and the name didn't fit. At least Eric thought not. Somehow, "Paula" made him think of dark hair and eyes. Not that it mattered. Most likely, some fool in an orphanage had stuck the name on her.

She did a good job on his books, never made mistakes, never asked questions, never presumed or assumed too much, didn't laugh or smile and wore a grave expression always. He was bewildered. How did a girl so young get like that? In all the years he had known her, he had heard her laugh only a few times. Was she happy or sad? He didn't know. Was she just dull? Whenever he thought the question, he winced. She wasn't dull, he knew she wasn't, though others thought so. He had taken her to parties, only a few, and then he gave that up. She wouldn't talk to people except to answer direct questions, and no one like that could get along at a party. She enjoyed riding horses so he took her to a stable, but she wasn't satisfied to trot around in a corral; she had to be out on open ground where she galloped so swiftly that he couldn't bear to stay and watch. She could talk on any subject, though she had to be coaxed. He took her to plays now and then. These she never commented upon unless he initiated the conversation. Did she enjoy them? Not very much, otherwise she would surely have displayed some enthusiasm.

That was the word he had been searching for: enthusiasm. Paula had none. Long ago she had gotten her

own apartment, and that was the last time she had really been insistent about anything. No matter what he suggested, she was agreeable. She refused to argue with him. She had no other friends. How could anyone be so agreeable without being full of life? Paula had no life, had no one, expressed no aspirations, seemed to desire nothing, spoke not a word about the future which appeared to hold no challenge for her. And what of himself? He had the feeling that if he disappeared she wouldn't notice—not right away. He was fighting fog. Paula was the fog. She looked substantial but the realness of her had either been abandoned along the way or it had never existed. Was she vain? Not at all. In her apartment was a single mirror, a small one in the bathroom. Did she dress lavishly? Once he had picked her up to take her to a party, and he had been forced to wait while she changed from jeans to a dress. One or the other, she didn't care, and if he was annoyed over her choice of styles and confessed it, she seemed mildly surprised. What did it matter what a person wore? People had to wear clothes, but why use them to enhance the appearance? One was either attractive or one wasn't. Everybody had eyes with which they saw past the illusions of clothes and cosmetics.

He wondered if her attitude would have been different had she been ugly. At nineteen she was all he had known she would be. The little golden candle had become a solar flare, the details of which he had long since ceased to see. She wasn't a pair of eyes, a nose and mouth; she wasn't even a human body. She was an effect. He saw her as a splash of color that gave off heat as she drew near. Vivid yellow became warm gold. Skin, hair, mouth, the whole of her struck him first between the eyes, then in the throat, then in the stomach. He wanted to cling, yet never had. He had never kissed her, rarely touched her hand, had yet to feel the texture of her hair. His little Paula might have been a painting. A talented artist had

created an illusion and the dazzled patron stood and stared and tried to see the reality behind it.

Now he sat in a restaurant with her, and he was both happy and miserable. "Did you ever have psychiatric treatment?"

"No, did you?"

He laughed because the question disturbed him. "You're an ungrateful wretch."

The restaurant was in a slum. She had wanted to come here. The dregs of society loitered in corners or hung over the bar rail; they badgered the bartender and each other. These dregs were unusual. Their clothes were clean, their jaws shaved, their whined words were pronounced correctly. The cops present were not so clean or shaven or educated. They lounged by the entrance and eyed the tall blond man and his girlfriend. The stares they gave were greedy, but they made no move toward the couple's table. Occasionally the greedy eyes flicked to another table where five men sat playing cards. These five were a warning to the cops. The blond man and his lady were under protection and were to be left alone.

A tramp leaned over Paula's shoulder and mumbled something.

"Give him fifty dollars," she said to Eric.

"So much?"

"You can afford it."

The tramp accepted the money and headed for the bar.

Paula rested her chin in one hand. "Why did you say I was ungrateful?"

"I retrieved you from a garbage can, remember?"

"You didn't do it for nothing. You never do anything for nothing."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," she said.

"You look very beautiful tonight."

"Yes. Don't you think this silver dress makes a nice

contrast to the other clothes here? Take that man over there by the window. He has a big hole in his coat. He looks hungry. He's wearing a Mickey Mouse watch. Mine is diamond-studded. He's wearing sandals. So am I, but mine cost two hundred dollars. Did you notice the look of desperation on his face? Look at my face. What do you see?"

"As usual, it is without a trace of emotion."

"Isn't that a contrast? Do you notice contrasts as much as I do?"

"Eat your spaghetti," he said.

"The cop who runs this place has an unusually good cook for a relative. We're lucky to have found it."

"You found it."

"I have a sixth sense. Like when I crawled into that garbage can six years ago. I knew you'd find me."

"You never told me that."

She laughed.

"Stop teasing," he said.

"I'm not."

"You're half right. I seldom do anything for nothing. I took you out of that can for nothing but I didn't take care of you for the same reason."

"Of course not. You're prepping me to be your wife."

He felt himself growing rigid. "If you knew that all along, why did you pretend the matter didn't interest you?"

"You're a good-looking man. Turn your head a fraction toward the light. A perfect profile. Nature was generous with you."

"Are you saying you're attracted to me?"

"I'm saying you're attractive."

"That's not the same thing."

Her eyebrows lowered. "No."

"Damn it, Paula, somewhere inside you is a human being. Won't anyone ever bring her to the surface?"

"You've been trying for years."

He dropped his fork, snatched it up again. "Meaning I've failed."

"You aren't sure of that. I wonder what you would do with me if you were?"

He swore under his breath.

"You can buy a hundred women. That kind of love isn't out of style yet. It's still a thriving concern."

"Are you advising me to peddle myself elsewhere?"

Heads turned as she laughed.

"I love you," he said. "And you love me. I know you do."

She reached across the table and touched his hand. "You've taught me more than anyone else ever has. Without you I'd never have been certain what the world was like. I'd have muddled about in confusion and been utterly useless."

"When will you marry me?"

Her hand on his trembled. "It's traditional for the man to ask that question. In this case, though, it will have to be the other way around. I'm sorry. You should have found a garbage can with a common, ordinary girl in it. You'll have to wait for me to do the asking."

Now it was his turn to tremble. "Don't I stir you at all? Don't I have any effect on you? You make me feel as if my head is screwed on sideways while I affect you like a stone."

"You said it, not I."

For a long minute he looked at her. "You're changing. Lately I've noticed a mellowing in you. You're laughing a great deal. You're getting softer. Maybe that's a good sign. Even your body seems different. It seems fuller. Is it my imagination or have you gained a little weight? I hope so. You were too thin. What's wrong? Are you cold?"

"Yes, I'm cold all of a sudden."

"Oh, my golly, that one was a giant," said Tidy Crawford. He wiped his forehead with a big red handkerchief. "I expect he wasn't the biggest one I ever saw, but I can't be certain since I don't remember when's the last time I saw a big one that was a stranger. Teach a fella not to take walks. The world is odd, ain't it? I got a feeling for people, you know. Look at 'em once and know how persuasive they are. Most people's minds are like fog. Blow at 'em and they're empty. Anyhow, the world is odd. One day I see that gal walking by the windows, like Cleopatra floating down the Nile, then next time I see her she has a wet face and is leaning on a giant. For a minute I think she's the big one, that's how tough she is, only she's wishy-washy at that particular moment, so I get' a whiff of the man with her. No, sir, don't ever want to see him again. Humans ain't that tough, which means he's either inhuman or I'm crazy."

Again Tidy worked at his face with the handkerchief. "Don't know why a young fella like you would chase a gal like that yellow-haired statue. She's the kind to eat out your guts. Did I say something to startle you? It don't matter. She's gone. That's a funny thing, too, and if you fellas don't mind, I'll talk about it, and that way I can forget it and sleep nights. Know you been chasing gals, though can't see why, since there ain't nothing ugly about you. But that's off the subject. This giant I mentioned, he was one tough gent, and I ran off not long after I spotted him.

"He's standing on the streetcorner like he owns it, and I can tell he's waiting for someone, only he isn't impatient, stands easy and pays no attention to them varmint cops who are everywhere these days. Next thing I see is the yellow-hair and I know she's in a hurry even if she doesn't run or walk fast. She's in a hell of a dither. Her mind is skipping between ideas of bawling and sticking to her guns, whatever they happen to be. She

passes the man and stops. About three yards beyond him, she stands and looks at the ground, but all the time she's talking to the man. He's—well, he ain't mad. He's—hell, I don't know. Upset. Yeah. He doesn't say much, lets her do most of the talking. Finally he gets tired of listening to her, holds out his hand and tells her to get over there beisde him. She turns wishy-washy and balks. He speaks some more and she says she understands. She goes over to him. That's when the funny thing happens. He takes her in his arms and holds her real close, and the two of them step right out of this world. I'm not bullshitting you. They went out like candles in a breeze, there one second and absent the next. What the hell. Know I won't sleep, though can't recollect there was anything else out of sorts about that scene. Man loves his kid. Refreshing to know family feeling is still around in some folks. She was in some kind of a fix and her old man took her out of it. What more can you ask?"

Tidy swabbed his face with vigor. To Wu, he said, "Would you mind telling me what the hell this young fella is bawling about? I mean, don't he ever do anything else?"

Arthur Bingle stepped out onto the balcony and stood stock-still. It was early evening and the wind was brisk and warm. Heat still rose from the street far below. Within seconds Bingle's face was suffused with red, but the external temperature wasn't responsible for his color. The sight of the two figures in the grass beside the swimming pool had done it. That one of the figures was his daughter he had no doubt, nor was the identity of the second figure a mystery. He had excellent vision. A delivery boy, a dumdummy, a nothing—with his daughter.

A half-minute went by during which Bingle stood still and listened to his heart race. The glittering pool water made flashes of light dance across the grass. The light

bathed Leona's arms as she raised up and took Cass by the neck, drew him down to her, tasted his mouth, his cheek, his shoulder.

Without making a sound, Bingle turned and stepped back into the apartment.

VIII

The dolls had done away with reference books. These were microfilmed and thrown away. Rarely did anyone pull a film and study it. The dolls were there; they could answer oral questions in any language and they also responded to queries typed on tape and fed into them.

It may have sounded strange to say that one machine could be more intelligent than another, but such was the case. Fact was finite while creative invention knew no bounds. All the dolls contained identical original knowledge. What had been added upon by the users determined the individual machine's present state of intellect. A moron, using a doll, couldn't add to the knowledge. Someone else could.

Number three doll was the Mr. Justice machine. Daniel had made it so. Was the machine a detective, a psychologist or a philosopher? Sometimes Daniel thought it might be a maniac, but if it were, then so was he. How did it feel to create a mechanical personality or an alter ego? He had molded the doll's mind until it thought like he did. When he grew excited, the doll responded faster. When he was lethargic, the machine dropped back into what he called secondary-thinking responses.

Primary thinking: the rapid, almost spontaneous process that yielded the best and the worst results. The human brain was most like a computer when it utilized this type of thought. Memories were tapped with so much energy that answers came at astonishing speed.

Secondary thinking: caution always lay behind this.

Am I right? Better check the facts. How does X relate with Y? Use your common sense.

Primary mind at work: a man ought to be able to fly. Why not? Exhilaration, desire. Click. Secondary mind suddenly dominates: but a man has no wings.

After experimentation, the airplane is born. What would have happened if that click hadn't sounded? Try it again.

A man ought to be able to fly. See? Not inward, or not exactly, but it's a different kind of world you're in now, and it isn't an unfamiliar one, merely a little strange. A virgin forest in the head. A man can fly; make him do it. Stay in the swift part of the brain. Don't abandon the exhilaration, because a happy mind is a kind of idiot, and the behavior of such is unpredictable, and we don't want predictables here. Keep at it, don't lose the trend, your man may yet end up flying.

It wasn't easy. The clicks were nearly automatic. The fire was responsible. Once burned . . . did one really own one's mind? How could the clicks be intercepted? Secondary thought, get lost.

Mr. Justice is six feet one inch in height, weighs one-seventy pounds, has dark hair, blue eyes, medium build, prefers casual clothes . . . where did I get that last . . . no, don't stop; go on.

Mr. Justice prefers casual clothes, which means his body image is such and such. He's satisfied with the way he looks, no hangups about a big nose, flapping ears or sunken chest; doesn't substitute clothes for defects, isn't trying to muffle features, though body image shown to the public is very important to him. He's a man who uses physical disguises. Why? No, don't stop; go on.

Mr. Justice wears disguises so he won't be recognized. Someone knows him. Everyone knows him. Somebody important mustn't see him. Importance, importance, the world is a shambles, spies are unimportant, there is no authority, government is unimportant, the only people who

are making an effort to catch Mr. Justice are Arthur Bingle and myself. . . .

Witnesses mustn't be able to give an accurate description of him, because if they did, Arthur Bingle and I would know who he was. We've seen him before, know him well enough to . . .who, who, who? Which one is Mr. Justice?

Click. Oh, hell. Try again. You're doing great. You hope.

I know Mr. Justice. He's a mutant with a psi ability. He can visit the past and return to the present. With a camera he collects evidence against criminals. If the law won't deal out justice to these criminals, he will. There is no law now, only mob rule, and Arthur Bingle sits on the throne. What does Justice think of Bingle? He wants to kill him. He doesn't, so that means he won't. Bingle is holed up in the Brant Building. He's hiding, waiting.

Never mind that. Consider the mind and personality of Justice. Megalomania doesn't spring from an inferiority complex. The true megalomaniac has reason to be confident because he has proved himself a dozen times over. Overconfident? Of course, but he has a great deal more talent than ordinary people. What is a megalomaniac? First of all, he thinks he's pretty good. At what? Brains. An I.Q. of 100 wouldn't fit a time traveler. The brain of Justice is different. He thinks he's pretty good, and he is; has an I.Q. in the top level. But many people have high I.Q.'s, and they don't kill in the name of an abstract. They don't know how to travel through time, either. Is that significant? Is the psi ability waiting at the top of the intellectual spectrum? Are all men headed for it?

Click. Well, are we? Digression: why kill in the name of justice? Some people did that, but they were usually apprehended and dumped in a padded cell. Did they and Justice have anything in common? Both were outraged, dedicated to righting wrong . . . wait . . . Justice isn't

like that, wouldn't fall for such a line. Wrongs too often can't be righted. Justice knows that.

Well, then, revenge? But . . . yes, but. Dead end. The victims couldn't all have been known personally, and the desire for revenge requires that personal sense of loss, doesn't it? Justice might be mad, in which case any victim could be a close relative because his mind would tell him they were. But . . . Justice isn't mad. Hold on. How could a megalomaniac be anything but mad? Damn, why does he kill? Why does he do what he does? What in the world does he think he's up to?

Hello, doll, alter ego, or whatever. Let's continue this conversation. I'll mumble something to you and you respond. It'll be another weird discussion. No one but us could understand a word of it. Ready? Fine.

Religion? Somehow I can't see him on his knees. Rather, I picture him thumbing his nose at God. Not that he isn't a crusader. Glory and gold are left, but none of those seem to fit him. The three G's. Down through the ages they've impelled men to herosim or degradation. What other motives have I failed to consider? No man does something for nothing. What compels a brilliant man to make a holocaust of his life? What makes him continue along his own way while the world crumbles? How can he ignore the carnage?

How can you?

Damn you, you're a machine, how dare you . . . but, of course, it wasn't you at all. That question had to come from me. You said it, but I made you say it.

Back to the soul of Justice, back to the beginning, to the world of ideas. Behind every act is an idea. Damn, I'm back to motive again. Well, what is motive? Reason. What is reason? According to an old philosophy teacher of mine . . .

Hey, what happened to the conversation? Let's get on with it. Where were we? What's wrong? Why are you dummifying up on me? I'm doing it? You're crazy. Answer

my question. But you haven't answered it. I keep asking you where we left off, you keep refusing to answer, yet you swear you are answering. How can we get anywhere this way?

Golden Macklin.

My God, I haven't thought of him in years. He was my teacher a long time ago. Is that where we left off? Why didn't you say so, but it's a little irrelevant, don't you think? Let's run through a few familiar items.

Justice is hell on wheels with a camera. Did you know that another name of his is Quo Vadis? Oh, yes, he's worried about directions. Whithers. He's in good physical condition. How do I know? He's good at everything. He likes himself. He has to keep one step ahead of me; he knows I'm after him. It would be easy for him to trap me and kill me but he won't because it wouldn't be in character. I wonder if he'd kill me to save himself? What a stupid thought. Of course he would. He isn't a little Jesus.

I don't like that trend. We'll try another. Let's make a list of all the men we know. Okay. Now for the criteria. Physical data eliminates how many? Fifty. Are you sure? Fifty. Next, his I.Q., and be careful with this one. Brains can be hidden. But you have backgrounds on most of them, all the way to kindergarten. How many are eliminated? Fourteen. Okay. Camera nuts. Cross off some names, and how many do we have left? An even dozen. Terrific. After we eliminate all of them we'll be right back where we started, staring at a blank wall. You see, but naturally you do see, we need a candidate who matches the criteria perfectly. Not one item can be ignored.

Personality, and now we're on shaky ground. Needs plenty of discussion. Can a man pretend to go after money all his life without really caring about it? I say he can't. Justice isn't after money or he would have cleaned out a few banks. If we know one of these twelve really loves to

make a green profit, he's automatically eliminated. How many does that leave? Ten.

Another item: sharpshooting. Careful, now. Our man is a true dead-eye. Go ahead, lop off names and tell me how many are left. One. That can't be right. You've made a mistake. We'll have to do it over again. Don't argue with me. He isn't Justice. I don't want him to be.

The man held the girl by the elbow and guided her along the path which she couldn't see because of the tears streaming from her eyes.

"I don't know who you are. Where are you taking me? Cass wouldn't be here. He would never come out here in these woods. Please tell me where he is."

"Just a little more walking and you'll see him."

After a few minutes they paused. "I have to do something now that will seem strange to you," said the man. "Please don't be alarmed. I'm not going to hurt you." Reaching out, he drew the girl to him and lifted her from the ground.

Immediately she drew back. "Don't."

"It's all right. We're there."

The girl looked about and shrank as if in fear. With an instinctive motion she leaned toward her companion. "Where are we? Why do I feel so strange all of a sudden? Why did you put your arms around me? It wasn't necessary. Nothing makes sense anymore."

"We're in a different place now. I had to bring you here. You have the right to know what happened. I hope you can bear it."

"I don't understand."

"You ought to brace yourself."

"What does that mean? You said you'd take me to Cass. That's why I got into your car. Where is he? Who are you?"

"Stand very still. Don't move or make a sound. Look over there, between those two big trees. Do you see?"

Leona looked, saw:

Cass tried to run but Godiva knocked him to the ground with a long swipe of her arm. He was naked except for his undershirt which she tore off with savage yanks. He fought her but it was only a matter of moments before she had him on his back and pinned to the grass. Laying her body on top of his, she rammed her hands beneath his buttocks and shoved the slender tube up inside him. While he screamed she probed for the gland, found it, prodded it with the tube. Cass erected spontaneously and Godiva lunged onto him with fierce abandon.

He lay in a shallow grave. Leona brushed the dirt from his face, straightened his hair, kissed his mouth.

"Thank you for bringing me to him," she said to the man who stood nearby. "Now I'll lay down with him. Will you please cover both of us? There's plenty of loose dirt. It won't take long."

"Don't talk like that. You can't stay here. Help me bury him or stand aside while I do it."

"Do you know how cold it gets in these woods at night? He was crazy about the sun and could never stand being cold. You've been very kind, but please don't bother me any longer. Go away."

"Get up. You don't know what you're doing. He's dead. We'll bury him and you'll come away with me."

Leona handled the corpse with gentleness. "Don't be afraid," she whispered into the dead ear. "He won't take me away from you. We'll be together always. I'll never leave you."

She grasped the body under its arms, clasped the cold form tightly, breathed on the still face, smothered the white lips with kisses. All of a sudden she raised her head and gave a shrill scream.

The man drew in a quick breath and took a backward step. The grave was empty. Two people had been in

the hole at his feet but now there was no one. Leona had fled, and she had taken her dead lover with her.

Turner opened his eyes and wished for death. Such an old wish it was. Every day he did the same thing, woke up and hoped his heart would stop or his brain would fry, or he hoped the nurse would lose his temper and break a bottle over his skull.

Seen through crusted, leaky eyes the room looked like a chamber of horrors. It would have appeared the same through any eyes. For a change the nurse was gone. Maybe he had sneaked out to replenish his booze supply.

"Guglielmo," said Turner. His voice sounded rusty and weak.

The Italian was dead. No, he wasn't. A leg twitched, an arm went into spasm, the mouth opened to eject a stream of spittle.

Turner's broken elbow was the size of a grapefruit. Four times it had seemed to want to heal, four times it had started swelling again, and now deadly colored striations were beginning to creep toward the wrist and shoulder. The steel band which held the arm fast to the chair was a bloody bracelet set into the flesh.

Someone suddenly opened the door and came into the room, and Turner decided he was mad. It wasn't the nurse nor was it anyone he had ever seen before. She was so delicate and pretty, and she cried as if she were a little girl who had found her favorite pet crushed and ruined.

"I don't want to believe this," said the woman. She cried big tears. To Guglielmo she whimpered, "Help me not to believe."

"Don't look at him," said Turner in a croak. "Look at me. I'm better-looking than he is. He'll send you right out of your mind." He couldn't be certain but he thought she screamed and kept on screaming. Such a pretty little thing she was, and it was pathetic the way she hunched down in her wheelchair and shivered. The blanket across

her legs had fallen away to reveal white, paralyzed limbs.

"What mind?" she said. "It's like my legs: empty." She continued staring at Guglielmo. "I've never been allowed in this wing. How funny. The first time he leaves me alone in the building, I immediately go against his wishes."

"I told you not to look at Guey. He's not human anymore. He thinks he's a snake. Why don't you come over here to me?"

She wouldn't look at Turner, kept her face turned to the Italian. "How much does a snake weigh?"

"About sixty-five pounds. Come here to me. I need you."

"Why?"

"I want to ask you if you can mainline."

The woman shrank in her chair and cried louder.

"Shut up. See the needle on the table over there? It's full. He leaves it where I can see it. That way I don't make too much of a racket. If I scream he makes me wait. Get the damned thing and then get over here and shoot me with it."

The woman shook her head with desperate little jerks.

"It's hero," said Turner, his tone wheedling. "It'll do me good. I'm supposed to have it regularly. Be a good girl and get it. A lousy hophead has to have it."

"No."

"Get the hell over here with it. Don't just sit there. Move."

"Arthur is a good man."

"Arthur stinks."

"He doesn't mean any of it. He's sick."

"So am I." Turner groaned. "As you can see, I'm out of action at the moment. Get the needle. Damn, turn your head and look at it." When the woman jerked her head around, Turner said, "Did you know your husband was a medical genius? He's like Frankenstein. He made Guey from another body and he made me from another body. He's a maker. Like God. He likes it when people worship him. For instance, he waves that needle

under my nose and I want to lick his ass. My reaction pleased him. Isn't that like God?"

Her hands dropped to the chair wheels. "I have to do two things. Wait a second, which two things are they? I'm having trouble unscrambling. Oh, yes, first I'll set that poor man free and then I'm going to say my prayers."

"No, first the needle and then set me free. Leave the snake alone. He's a menace to society."

"Go to hell." The woman started to wheel her chair toward Guglielmo.

Turner groaned again, made sobbing sounds. "I'll die, I swear it. Do you want that to happen?"

"Very well, if you insist." Wheeling herself to the table a few yards away, the woman snatched up a piece of rubber tubing. She tied it around her upper arm and while Turner sat and howled in anger she watched her vein stand out. When it was good and fat, she jammed in the needle and gave herself a dose.

A moment passed. She said, "I don't feel a damned thing."

"You goddamn hog. Rotten thief."

"That was my first time."

"Liar, you did it like a pro."

"I read a lot."

It was Turner's moment for weeping and he did it without restraint. "It serves you right. That dose was too much for a beginner. You're going to croak."

"I knew I was going to die as soon as I came in here." She wheeled herself on over to Guglielmo, stopped and examined the chair mechanisms, finally yanked the releases that freed the Italian's wrists. Guglielmo's arms fell and some of his flesh went with the steel bands. He screeched. His eyes flew open. With a happy cackle he lunged forward and took the woman's throat in his hands.

Turner struggled in his chair. "Goddamn you, you're not a snake, you're a wop," he yelled. "Gugey, look at me. Let her go."

Guglielmo didn't let her go.

"Fight him," yelled Turner. "You're stronger than he is."

She gasped. "I can't. The hands on her throat looked so loose, so lax, so without strength. "Something's wrong with me. Everything's going to sleep."

"It's the hero. Fight it."

"What for?"

"So you can get me loose."

"I don't care about you."

The Italian screamed. He seemed enraged because he was too weak to choke the neck he held. His wild eyes flashed around the room and he grabbed up the empty syringe on the table. Holding it in an underhand position he began driving the spike into the throat—in, out, in, out, and eventually blood showed and spurted and spattered his face.

Turner took a nap. There was nothing to worry about. Gugey's leg bands were still in place and that miserable snake hadn't enough brains to unfasten them. Nobody was going to get away today, nobody would get a beautiful fix, nobody wanted to stay awake when they lived in a chamber of horrors. The last thing Turner saw before he closed his eyes was the woman stretched out on the floor. She wasn't dead yet. The spike was stuck in her carotid and the blood hissed out of her like air from a punctured tire. It made a tiny shower, a thin spray that rose and hovered in the air like floating red dust.

By and by Turner's face began to hurt. He swam out of tortured sleep and the pain was still there. His head flew back. He heard a loud crack. Someone was slapping him. From side to side went his head and at the same time his pain intensified.

"Goddamn," he screamed, infuriated because he was waking up. He felt as if he had been doing cold turkey for three days. His guts were running down his legs, his stomach had already dumped its load onto his chest, he ejaculated once, twice, three times. He was a draining

organism, brainless and full of agony. His shuddering belly squeezed into a knot of iron.

"I want a shot," he yelled.

"I gave you a shot, but not the kind you asked for."

Voices. No, a single voice. Where it came from, Turner neither knew nor cared. All he thought of was the fire in his belly.

"I've been waiting for you to get good and desperate. I believe people should learn important lessons thoroughly, don't you?"

Turner was aware of his chair being turned around. Somebody was strong. Not even the nurse had been able to push that chair.

"So you can see me better," said the voice. "It might take your mind off your misery."

"I want to die."

The wrists bands fell away and something pressed into his good hand. He looked down and saw a gun.

"A way out," said the voice.

His eyes filling with tears, Turner gripped the gun. "For you."

"You intend to murder me?"

Turner hesitated, shook his head. "No, myself."

"Then turn that thing around. Stick the muzzle against your navel and pull the trigger."

"Stand still."

"I haven't moved. Shoot yourself or give me back the gun."

"Lean down. I want to see you."

A face appeared in front of Turner. Covering it was a shiny, glittering mask.

"Take it off."

Fingers grasped the skin at the tops of the cheeks and a layer of the face seemed to peel away.

"Not you," said Turner. He wanted to laugh. Instead, he sobbed.

"You can stay here and die, or you can come with me."

"To do what?"

"That's up to you."

"My arm is killing me."

"I can fix that like new."

"I'm a dope fiend."

"You can fix that."

"I'm supposed to kill you."

"Who said so?"

Turner sagged in the chair. Fresh tears welled in his eyes. He felt limp and old and useless. "Help me," he whispered.

"Stand up and put your good arm around my neck. We're taking a trip."

The junk dealer had a name, but it wasn't important. He ran a Nod parlor and that was important to a number of people.

The dealer had received an anonymous letter: "I like children, I even like fools and drunks, occasionally. God had been lynched by public opinion, which means there is now no one to take care of those aforementioned. In my humble manner I shall do what I can. The contents of the carton are for you and yours."

Inside the carton rested twelve fine coffins, and so heavy were they that the delivery crew simply shoved them inside the door at the back of the Nod joint and refused to handle them further. The coffins had been paid for by an unnamed sender, so there was no tab to be collected, nor was any signature required. The crew would not consider taking away the merchandise and dumping it in the river. It had been delivered to the correct address, and there the matter ended.

This left the junk dealer hopping mad and confused beyond good sense. It might have helped if he had related the number of coffins to the number of his employees. It would have helped if he had packed his bags and left the country. What he did was give the massive carton a

kick, after which he shoved the matter out of his mind and proceeded with his plans for the night's business. Besides dealing in junk he indulged in thievery. He stole money, secrets, innocence, anything at all. At eight o'clock he opened for work by placing a box in the front window of the building. The window was made of shatterproof plastic and in the box were junk makings, easily clear to the view of interested passers-by. Beside the box was a sign: **HIGHS—ADMISSION \$1.00—UNDER 12 FREE.**

Customers began trickling in and by 9:30 the place was a seething, buzzing mass of shapes of all sizes, colors and ages. The noise was added upon by blaring recordings. No neighbor would complain, as the junk dealer had solid connections with the police.

Only the very young customers got uncut smack. It was easier for the dealer to do it that way. Pure stuff knocked the kids into heaven damned fast and got them out from underfoot. They paid at least seventy-five cents for their share, otherwise they went out the front door on their asses. Quickly high, they found an empty space on the mattresses at the back of the joint, and there they nodded until the ground began to catch up with them. They didn't have to return to the tables for a second jolt since they had been given an extra spike when they entered. The next fix put them back on the clouds, and then at approximately 2:00 A.M. they were worked over by a strange class of clientele.

As for the older customers, they roamed and rambled, gabbed and babbled, fought, bickered, discussed highs and lows and crashes, sought out sympathetic companions; some watched a porno film which was being showed in a corner. There was no food served, nor any booze, only pills and powder. All pockets were systematically picked by ten of the dealer's employees. Once a person's money had been ripped off, he was allowed a final jolt of his favorite stuff, and when his high became genuine he was

dumped into the street. The eleventh employee stayed busy cutting bags of smack. He diluted them with strychnine and sugar.

By midnight the junk dealer was high and happy. He was a mature junkie. That is, he kept his own habit under control, never let his tolerance level climb to the point where a shot became necessary simply to prevent sickness and brought no desirable rush. Now he wandered through his establishment and checked the quality of the highs that had been induced by his merchandise. Was a substantial percentage of the clientele throwing up into paper bags provided for emergencies? Back to the eleventh employee went the boss with a word of caution regarding the strychnine. One thing the dealer wanted was a satisfied customer. On with the checking. Had any neophytes lied about their tolerance level, or had any idiots decided to shoot the moon after swiping a little bit too much extra powder? Pick up the limp baggage and deposit it in the alley four blocks away, and to hell with salt shots; they hadn't paid for resuscitation and if they were that dumb it was their tough luck and they would be dead before dawn.

If there happened to be a corpse found, a real gone shmoo, already stiffening, the dealer wasted not a minute of time, hauled the joker's pants down and plugged his rear with a special-made cork, because when a hop-head abandoned the world he left the contents of his guts behind, a quart in every geyser, and the whole damned business was enough to turn a man toward another line of work. But, then, the dealer was aware that every human endeavor had its drawbacks.

At half-past one the situation altered somewhat. Customers began looking at their watches. Their eyes often strayed toward the entrance, uneasiness crept into facial expressions, legs began twitching as if in preparation for a hasty departure. Conversation grew agitated and no longer were friendly advances made toward the junk dealer who had provided the essential escape. The eleven

employees were shunned and the mattresses at the back of the joint were strictly avoided.

There was the last-minute haggling over purchases made at the tables by cunning foxes who had remembered to stash a fiver in their socks before entering. Others who were broke had to be bounced out the door. A few couples who hadn't been convinced that smack and Cupid meant a dry run got dressed in a hurry or flew naked.

By 1:45 the joint was quiet and dragging. Only the dealer, his eleven workers and the kids were left. And one strange little Oriental, but he wasn't continually present, only in flashes and during instants, and the dealer believed that what he saw was a mirage or a spook conjured by dope. The dealer spied the little man once, twice, then the stranger was gone only to show up minutes later in another spot, this time in the company of a tall, slender man. Then they were both gone. It was bewildering to the dealer. He, like most dopers, was an individual who never trusted himself; he hesitated to swear that the two intruders were real, though they looked amply real. Denial was the easiest thing in the world to commit. Now you saw it, now you didn't, and no matter how much you knew about dope, there were all those rumors and written articles describing the bad effects of smack, and who were you to challenge the word of your betters? You were a creep to begin with or you wouldn't have taken the first shot. Everyone who knew nothing about dope said so. Ergo, a creep could never be certain of anything, particularly that which he observed. Thus, there may have been two odd and unwelcome visitors in the joint that night, or there may not have been. To be sure, there wasn't a clear-headed judge present.

At five minutes before two o'clock the eleventh employee turned up missing. The dealer was hopping mad about it because he needed the man to help collect at the door when the new customers showed up.

In the back of the joint, in the raftered, closed-off section adjoining an alley, the dealer stood stock-still and stared about him with baffled rage. The huge carton had been unwrapped and now the coffins were lined up side by side. Somebody had done a neat job. The eleventh employee? Only a fried brain would go to the trouble of unpacking unwanted merchandise. Someone was going to catch hell in the morning.

The dealer walked alongside the row of coffins and finally headed toward the door. Passing the last box, he paused, went back and yanked up the lid. The eleventh employee lay there with his hands folded on his chest. A dumb place to take a nap. Scared and furious, the dealer grabbed the man's shirt front and hauled him upright. Something about the utter laxness of the body and the way the head lolled made the dealer quickly release his grip. The body plunked down on the satin cushion. O.D., obviously. But how could a cutting expert give himself an accidental overdose? The stupid fool.

Walking back to the front of his joint, the dealer stood indecisively. The creeps would be here any minute. His own nerves wre jangling. What a rotten night. He needed a shot of bliss. As soon as there was time . . .

A mile away from the Nod parlor stood the gutted remains of a hospital for the criminally insane. The occupants had set it on fire after they killed the attendants. There hadn't been enough food, attention, caution, and there had also existed the never-ending urge to get out, get away, find the sources of good and evil and serve, serve, serve.

Twice a week the former patients emerged from a subway tunnel where they had taken up residence. They had the entire area all to themselves. No one ever went there anymore.

Twice a week they frequented the Nod parlor. It hadn't taken them long to secure the dealer's permission

to come in. All they needed was money, all they had to remember was to keep the noise down; no screaming or scuffling was permitted. They had lots of money because frightening people into turning out their pockets was the simplest of tricks.

At the moment, the dealer was angry again. For one thing, he was spotting the two strangers, the Oriental and his tall friend, more frequently. For another, three more of his employees were missing. That left seven to collect at the door when the creeps came. Damned creeps, always trying to cheat. Weird trash. Of late they had taken to wearing long black cloaks which made them look like a pack of vampires. The thought made the dealer shiver. Conceivably the creeps could take up sucking blood. Nothing made them squeamish.

One machine gun was all the dealer needed, and it was always ready at hand when the hour of the creeps came around. A man had to be prepared if he expected to get ahead in the world. The dealer had guts; he was ready to slice up the creeps any time they decided to get hostile. Only they never got hostile. Each time they came into the joint, some on all fours, they looked wild and explosive, but they quieted as soon as they got their first look at the mattresses in the back.

The dealer never watched the creeps approach the mattresses. He hadn't that kind of stomach. Why didn't people keep better track of their children?

One old creep did the same thing every time he came to the Nod parlor. On his belly like a snake, he writhed and wormed his way onto the nearest mattress and proceeded to look for a dying one. Always there was one near the brink. The old creep had a good inner sense and knew the difference between a minor crisis and the pause that came before the headlong plunge into the final hole. He didn't want a kid who was going to wake up to daylight. What the old creep did was gather the soon-to-be

corpse into his arms and grieve over it. For hours he would whimper and sob as he relived some real or imagined sorrow.

He was the only adult to survive the night.

No invitations were sent out for the lynching. Or was it a party? Came three, four, five o'clock in the morning, came the dawn, came a fresh start for bugged little boys and torpedoed little girls, but nobody else had a voice to tell about it.

Sometime during the night the neighbors in the surrounding areas had grabbed their belongings and fled. Those who possessed ears had taken to the alleys at frantic and furtive lopes. Strange. There had been no noise after two in the morning, not a sound, not at the Nod joint. Plenty of sound had been created elsewhere, but the junk dealer's habitat had known the silence of the grave once the witching hour arrived. Maybe the neighbors' ears were like those of dogs. Conditioned by the hazardous times, they may have developed an extra defense mechanism. Who needed ordinary hearing to know when the ghost with the scythe was howling down the street? Anyway, by dawn everybody had been taken care of.

In the rear of the Nod joint twelve coffins lay side by side. All it had taken to fill them was some careless junking. Junk was a little pile of powder. A bit of strychnine, a touch of milk sugar, a miniature hilltop of Equus and the fourth dimension could be had. There a person could find no place and no thing. It was the blessed land of High. Too much of either of two of the ingredients could land a soul in a coffin. The dealer and his disciples had gone out low; too much of the first ingredient; diabolic executioner; odd sense of humor.

The same executioner held a party in an abandoned subway tunnel. Small but mighty, he borrowed the junk dealer's machine gun and set it up between a pair of train tracks. Then he waited for the return of the people who lived there. Upon their arrival, he sliced

them six ways to Sunday, all except one old man whose vice had been to grieve over suffering children.

IX

"The Ridleys were potted last week; two in New York, one in Chicago and the other in Nevada."

Bailey winced as Burgess said it. His mind had already flashed backward to the time when he had met and talked with John Rand: a quietly frantic man living a quietly frantic existence. Now, after having spent two-thirds of his life trying to escape attention Rand had been picked off like a sitting duck. That proved something. Maybe if a man wanted to be anonymous, the thing for him to do was live in the blind spot of the public eye, like Justice or Arthur Bingle. Those two were everywhere but no one saw them.

Bailey felt like screaming. He wanted to overturn the table, break the man sitting across from him. "If Justice doesn't retire, it will mean you made a mistake. In any case, you ought to be prosecuted."

"For what?" Burgess looked and sounded annoyed.

"You killed four people."

"Come off it. There's no law anymore. Desperate measures are needed now."

"You mean vigilante stuff? We already have that in Justice. He, at least, seems to know what he's doing."

They sat in a bar and drank beer. It was the first time in a year that Bailey had seen or talked with Burgess. The dry little man looked haggard. His usually natty suit had made way for the uniform of the day, the outfit of a bum. Cops didn't harass bums. A man down on his luck had no energy to complain or fight back, and there was no sport in needling a sniveler. On the other hand, the well-dressed made interesting targets. They could be depended upon to have money in their pockets or booze in

the glove compartments of their cars or drugs concealed in their underwear.

No one would have bothered Burgess. He looked his part, even wore the dead-white pallor and sunken eyes of the near-starving. His eyes slid around without landing on anything and his hands trembled as they gripped the beer can. Occasionally one hand went up to scratch a stubbled chin.

"You look lousy," said Bailey.

"So would you if you'd been panhandling for a year. There's no such thing as a job to be had. The cops make sure their relatives or friends get them. All across the country I've seen bread lines, only there isn't any bread and there isn't anything else. I'm surprised so many people are still alive."

"It got out of hand."

Burgess snarled the word. "What?"

"Bingle botched it. He planned to create a utopia."

"How the hell do you know what he planned?"

"Starve men or kill them and they fade away. Who do you have left? The people who are loyal to you are those who are afraid not to be, and they spend their spare time fighting over the carcass. All the cops are Bingle's dregs. He didn't care what they did at first. The more terror they created the better he liked it, because it made his job of taking over that much easier. Now he and the big people ride on clouds while down below sit two empty-headed monsters: the masses and his police force. Neither gives a damn about him, and together they represent the major chunk of humanity. His guts must be curdling."

"You're wrong," said Burgess. "He knew what he was doing."

"I think he planned on his Numbers having better control over their armies. He made a mistake in letting them recruit so many slobs. He'll have to correct that right

away, get rid of the slobs and let in the hungry humans. Probably he's already busy doing that."

"Did you ever stop to think that this is the way he wanted it from the beginning?"

"What do you mean?" said Bailey.

"I don't believe in the utopia idea. I think the situation will go from bad to worse."

"How can it get any worse?"

"Think about it. Everyone is standing around with their fingers up their asses and saying things will get better. Three-fourths of those people haven't the vaguest idea of what happened or why, yet they're sure that whoever did it will get around to pulling all the chestnuts out of the fire. I call that stupid thinking. What if Bingle likes ugliness? What if he planned it this way?"

"Shut up," said Bailey and set down his beer with a thud.

Burgess smiled. "If I did it, that's how it would be done. To hell with everything. I'd sit on top and after the fiesta was over I'd still be on top, and I'd stay there for as long as I lived. And, oh yeah, I'd make sure I had an heir to leave it all to. Somebody special. The world isn't the same anymore. People are different. Evolution is rearing its head and weirdos are popping up everywhere. Guys like you and me are obsolescent."

"Don't you hate the idea?"

"As much as you do. The two of us started out on an equal par as far as our main objectives were concerned. Justice had to be potted because he was someone special. The fact that he was killing assholes wasn't our prime reason for going after him. His talents represented a tomorrow we wanted to hold off as long as we could. Now other specials are crawling out of the woodwork. We can't pot them all so what we do is knock out the big ones wherever we find them. When you look at it that way, it isn't such a bad life."

All at once the lights in the bar flickered. They went off and on several times. A voice said, "Good evening,

gentlemen." The lights stayed on. A bum stood beside the table where the two men sat.

"Get lost," said Burgess. "Find yourself another booth."

"You don't want company tonight?" The bum slid a chair under the table and sat down.

"No. Go away."

"I have a message for you, but if you don't want to hear it—" The quiet voice trailed off.

"What message?" said Burgess.

The bum took off his punched-in hat and his shaggy hair fell over his forehead and ears. It was dark and slightly damp. The eyebrows twitched. The mouth beneath the thick mustache made a smile. "I was supposed to tell you that you goofed."

With a scowl, Burgess said, "What does that mean?"

The bum turned his smile on Bailey. "The Ridleys."

Bailey became aware that Burgess's beer can had tipped and that the contents were dripping off the table onto his knees. "Wait a second," he said and leaned forward and stared into the bum's face. There was something familiar about it. "Say that again."

"The Ridleys."

With an angry swipe of his hand, Burgess knocked the beer cans from the table. "What have we to do with them?"

"You already said that, but I don't know what you're talking about."

"Last week you took some plane flights. You flew to Chicago and killed Robert Vine, and then you flew to Las Vegas and killed Paul Reese. You returned to New York and killed John Rand and Emma Stoker."

"Get him," muttered Burgess between his teeth. He was glaring at Bailey. "Get him, get him, don't just sit there."

The bum spoke. "He can't get me. He's startled out of his wits. Why don't you get me?"

"But I didn't goof."

"None of those four persons was Mr. Justice. Four innocent people are dead."

Burgess gave a desperate little shriek. "They were. One of them was Justice. I wasn't wrong. I knew I was right."

"You shouldn't have gone off on your own. You should have listened to your friends. They warned you not to do it, cautioned you to wait. You ought to have listened to them."

"Goddamn you, Bailey, why don't you do something?"

Bailey did nothing but lean on the table and stare intently at the bearded face.

"Go ahead and say it," said the bum.

"Bob Turner."

Burgess grabbed at the bum's sleeve. "Bob, listen to me. Stop acting like this. I'm your partner. We've been in this together since the beginning. Where have you been? We thought you were dead. Don't do this, don't come in here and look at me as if I'm a criminal."

Turner pulled his arm free. "Ask me how I know about it, how I know you murdered four people for no reason."

"Get him," mumbled Burgess.

Turner reached into his hat and retrieved a small seal from the inside lining. Slowly he dropped it in the puddle of beer and they all sat and watched it float and swirl. Bailey and Burgess were too stunned to see Turner reach into his pocket. When they looked up he was holding a gun.

"I have a new employer." Turner stood on his feet. "This is the way he operates. He makes no exceptions and he makes no mistakes."

"Bob, Bob, Bob," babbled Burgess.

The finger snuggled against the trigger. There was a tiny flash of fire. Heat existed for a second. There was no sound as Burgess died. Turner dropped the gun in his pocket and looked at Bailey who sat rigidly in his seat.

"Watching a friend die is like dying yourself. He was a mean son of a bitch but I liked him. Good-bye Bailey. I wish you rotten luck."

Bailey sat and watched the hole between Burgess' eyes flow.

Eric Fortney sat in his private office and stared at an open ledger lying on his desk. He didn't want to look anymore but the printed pages held a morbid kind of attraction.

Page 4: three names, three addresses, three places of business. Those establishments had been raided two nights ago by vigilantes.

Page 7: six names and addresses. A week ago all had been put out of business. Five were killed, one was tarred and feathered and chased from the city.

Page 11: the names of the junior Numbers; forty-eight good brains; Bingle's officers; powerhouses with private armies of thousands. Since Thursday morning Fifth Avenue had been called the Appian Way. On Thursday morning somebody had strung up the Numbers on the forty-eight lampposts on Fifth Avenue, strung them up by their own neckties. They hung there still. Bingle's Army was an animal with no head, a decapitated rooster. Now it was running amok, but not for long. The world was full of vigilantes, and the decapitated rooster was being felled on every street corner, in every doorway and alley, in buses and buildings and airplanes. Even bums were hauling out clubs.

Eric Fortney laid his head on his arm and rested on the desk. Paula had done this. Only three people were aware of the information in the books: himself, Arthur Bingle, and a girl who had become a part of the association so that she could betray it.

Arthur had made a mistake. Instead of telling Eric everything about Leona, Bingle had let his right-hand man stumble about in ignorance.

Things would be different now if Arthur hadn't taken so many things for granted. For instance, if Eric had known why he was to become Leona's husband, he would have gotten rid of Paula that first day when he pulled her from the garbage can. He never would have let her tangle up his life. He simply wouldn't have been able

to afford keeping her around. Fear would have forced him to do the safe thing.

Leona was a botched-up mutant. Instead of just inheriting her father's ability to travel through time into the past, she also had the latent ability to travel into the future. But between the two talents lay an obstacle that prevented her from really moving either way. She was like a reed bending in the wind, first one way and then the other. If she began to sweep toward the past, the obstacle or interference gathered her up and swept her in the opposite direction; then she was brought back again by the same interference.

Leona was useless to Arthur, except in that she might produce an heir who had all the talent and none of the interference. Bingle knew it would be a matter of chance. But if the child had a father with a keen intellect . . . Leona was bright and Eric Fortney was bright. The chances couldn't be made any better. It was essential that Bingle beat Justice to the punch. Their talent, magnified in their grandchildren, could mean world conquest.

A man had to do something with his life, and if Bingle wanted to make the world a clod of mud on his boot heel, Eric didn't care. All Eric wanted was to be comfortable, live in a fine house, ride in excellent machines, eat good food and love a superior woman.

Leona hadn't been fully aware of her crippled talent. Bingle never discussed it with her. He soon realized that the only time she ever tried to time travel was when she slept. Awake, her conscious mind avoided the danger of becoming stuck in a period other than the present.

Godiva had gotten Cass out of the way, and now Leona was gone and no one could find her. Bingle was upset about it.

But Eric didn't care about Leona. So she screamed in her sleep because her subconscious mind longed to try its wings. Eric knew another who screamed in her sleep: the rotten little traitor, his little golden candle, a botched-

up mutant sired by old man Justice; had to be; nothing else made sense; and Justice had been able to dump her into the center of his enemies because she was so innocent-looking. Her name wasn't Paula; she had been a student at SPAC, and lived right under their noses until Justice pulled her out, which would have been proved with a little careful checking. Eric had contacted the orphanage in Pennsylvania. Paula . . . Pala . . . had never been there; but there was a shelter in Switzerland that had taken care of a child by that name. Eric's spies had quickly found that out. Pala had been left at the shelter almost twenty years ago by an American named Joe Gentry. When she was eleven she was sent to SPAC.

Eric was thankful that he didn't have to worry about Bingle. Not that Arthur wasn't disturbed. Arthur would always be disturbed about something, but he had a one-track mind where business was concerned. Leona would come back, Pala would be found, Justice would be smeared, the oyster of the world would be opened, everything had to turn out the way Arthur planned.

Eric's thoughts slowed, suddenly halted. Someone had come into his office. Without raising his head, he said, "Who's that?"

"Me, boss."

"Teuton. I have a job for you. The girl, Pala. Find her for me. Bring her out of hiding."

"What are you going to do with her?"

"I'll decide that when I see her."

Teuton moved around the desk so that Eric could see him. "A man ought to keep his mind on his work no matter how many dames he's chasing. You, boss, you never chased the dames. You settled for one, and that was no good. A girl can be a dangerous asset. It's better to try out the lot of them. Then, if one turns on you, there're the rest to comfort you."

"Don't lecture me, you lamebrained mule, just do as you're told."

"Look at you. You let a single dame get to you and now the whole setup is sour. Justice sowed the revolution and your little girl opened the door for his troops."

"How do you know that?" Eric said wearily.

"Mr. Bingle knows it. You can't hide anything from him."

"He has it a little bit twisted. I'll talk to him later. I know how to reason with him. Right now, I'm interested in finding Pala."

"Mr. Bingle is interested in the same thing."

This time Eric's head came up. "Who is he sending after her?"

"Me."

"You don't take orders from him."

Teuton frowned and shrugged.

Both of Eric's hands came down flat on the desk. A bit hoarsely, he said, "You're not planning to change horses in midstream?"

"I never took orders but from one boss, not since the beginning, and I don't aim to change now."

Relaxing, Eric sat up, closed the heavy ledger and slipped it into a drawer. He went over to a wall safe, opened it, removed stacks of bills and placed them in a briefcase. "The trouble with Arthur is that he doesn't want to retreat to lick his wounds. He'll always be on top because he doesn't have to order the Army to get them to do what he wants. Those lice kill and destroy because they like it. But Arthur should withdraw and figure out a new strategy. He ought to start looking for some new Numbers."

"You going somewhere?" said Teuton.

"Temporary retreat. I'll come back when you wire me that you've found the girl."

"What about your job?"

"I haven't one now. Arthur doesn't need me to cover up crimes. You could line up every person in the city and shoot them in broad daylight, and the only people who would object would be the vigilantes."

"We need to identify those bums," said Teuton.

"Find Pala for me and I'll have the name of Justice for you, and I'll have the names of every vigilante who ever worked for him." Locking the briefcase, Eric picked up his hat and coat and started toward the door. "I'll let you know where I am."

"So long," said Teuton and shot him in the left leg, shot him in the right leg, in both arms, in both knees. Then the short man went out and quietly shut the door.

Turner had been stolen, Guglielmo was softly singing to himself and on the floor lay Bingle's dead wife. In a rage Bingle beat the Italian with the metal clasps from the other chair. It didn't take long before the singing ceased.

He looked at the woman at his feet and cursed. He had no daughter and no wife. Now there was nobody for him. No more love. He didn't have to think about inhibitions any longer.

"I hate pain," he cried. She had loved him. He never wanted her to do that because it made him feel responsible for her and that hobbled him. At first he lusted, then he loved. How could one turn to the other? Why hadn't he simply lusted and gotten rid of her when it faded? She had wormed her way behind his left ribs. Like strep throat, she gnawed away pieces of his pump. Was it normal to regard love as an infection? Why not? Wasn't he suffering?

Tears streaking his face, he picked her up and aimlessly roamed through the apartment. There was no one to kill, no one to blame for her dying. Except Turner and the man who had taken him away.

"No matter," mumbled Bingle. "They'll get theirs. It isn't important."

The woman in his arms wasn't important, either. She was dead because she had been stupid.

He could still hear her shy little voice saying, "I love you, Arthur, but you're not a good man."

"What's good?" he had replied, and they'd had a philosophical discussion about mankind's relentless quest. She believed people hunted for truth out of their desire to be moral. Bingle knew better. Even atheists were engaged in the search. What can I get away with? That was the purpose of it all. Find the threshold, barrier, limit, standard; anything this side of it was permissible. But who drew the line? No one, someone, everyone?

Somewhere in his roaming, Bingle dropped the body. He passed it in the hall and stared down at it with curiosity. The legs were bent in awkward positions, so he knelt and straightened them. The second time he passed the body he covered it with a blanket.

He spoke aloud to his dead love. "In the eyes of the world I'm a no-good bastard. I see virtue in the end of the human race. No, that isn't exactly correct. What I really believe is that the end or the continuation of any species is inconsequential. There is no God and I make my own standards. If every man believed the same and acted accordingly, the race might have found a common reasoning ground. It didn't. It was easier to have someone to blame."

The tears on Bingle's face flowed freely. "In my own way I, too, am on the hunt. If I slaughter, will they let me get away with it? Are they that far gone? Yes, indeed. I say 'die' and they lay down dead. The world deserves me."

Onward Bingle wandered through the building. In the west wing, along the corridor between the guest rooms he walked, and by and by he came to the final door. He opened it and entered the room.

"Ah, you stupid, foolish idiots. I warntd you both."

On the bed lay a pair of bodies. The sight was more than enough to enrage Bingle, as he had depended upon them and intended to use their strength.

He wanted them to be alive but they weren't. It was impossible to tell which had died first. There was Godiva

with her long dark hair spreading above her head like a fan. Her face was of marble whiteness, her eyes stared, her mouth gaped, and on her neck were raised red weals and black bruises. Teuton's face lay between her breasts. His spine was crooked. The two fine arms encircling him had done that. There was no mark on him, only that noticeable unevenness of backbone. Such a small imperfection it was, but it had been enough to take him where he had sent Godiva. They had loved and died and no witness could say which of the two had begun the struggle or which had ended it.

Bingle went out of the room and closed the door. He returned to the kitchen and picked up the newspaper which he had been reading earlier. He smiled. This was all that was important. Never mind what else had happened in the building today.

Again he read the ad. Such bold print. The bastard wasn't pinched for money.

To whom it may concern: Mr. Justice
will be available Friday the 13th, at
eight P.M., address below.

Later in the day Bingle prepared for the rendezvous in the backwoods of West Virginia. Teuton and the Numbers were dead, but the preparations would not be futile. There was a world full of lice for hire. Probably there would always be.

The other ad went unnoticed by Bingle. It was a small one at the bottom of the page.

I don't want the job. Today I quit.
I'll be at the north corner of the
park at six on Sunday. Will you?

She was standing beside a baby carriage, and the first thing he did was look around for the owner of the carriage. There was no one else in the vicinity. He thought this was alarmingly odd. Baby carriages held babies and

parents didn't wander too far away from them, particularly these days. In fact, nobody took their babies out anymore.

His mind was locked in and he couldn't make it function upon another subject. The baby carriage was very much there, on the curb, and beside it was a woman. Ergo, the two went together.

Fresh alarm and shock, and some rage, tipped him off balance. The baby in the carriage was hers, which meant that she had made love. Inviolable Pala had done the forbidden. Goddamn her. Somebody had held her breasts in his two hands, squeezed their softness, weighed, measured, kissed . . . wasn't that the worst part of the whole idea, knowing someone had possessed that part of her body? Maybe he was insane. He felt insane. She hadn't gotten the baby because someone fondled her breasts, but somehow the idea of her dropping her pants didn't seem as bad as her having offered the other. Could it be that he was mammary-oriented? Were all men?

The desire to commit murder and suicide took control of him. Suddenly his mind swept onward to the truth. Oh, Jesus.

"I wanted to kill you," he said.

"I could see it in your face. Maybe you thought it required more than once?"

He came to a stop just short of her. She wore blue jeans, sneakers and a checkered flannel shirt. Her hair was in a ponytail. She looked about fifteen.

"I ought to be put in jail for defiling the innocent," he said.

"Then why do you look so happy?"

He experienced another shock. "I am happy."

"For the first time in your life," she said and extended a hand.

He took it. "Is it a nice baby?"

"I'm satisfied."

"So am I: with it, with you, with me, with everything."

Smiling, she almost whispered, "Poor Daniel, all you ever wanted to do was live in peace."

"We will. I'm out of it now. I don't belong in it. I wasn't sure. I probably never will be. Until I am sure, I can't do anything about it."

She looked at him intently. "It's a special kind of baby."

"Certainly, since it's ours."

She hesitated, finally said, "Kiss me."

He did, hugged her close. "Where will we go?"

"Far and fast."

"We'll merge with the crowds and never be heard of again."

Nothing new had been added to the cabin site on Golden Macklin's property. The place sat and baked in the sun as it had for millennia. Only birds disturbed the peace of the sky, only rabbits moved up and down the hills. This was no man's land where once upon a time engineers cursed and sweated over plans for a road that would sweep from the valley to the summit of one of the most rugged ridges ever to feel the touch of a bulldozer. A great deal of dynamite had been needed to blast through the mountain. The road itself was a corkscrew of hairpin curves, awesome drops and steep inclines. There was just the one road, and anyone who wanted to reach the cabin by another route must conquer the ridges on foot. This was possible but arduous and time-consuming, and the hiker had to be an experienced climber.

On Thursday a dozen trucks filled with armed men plowed up the valley and entered the beginning of the corkscrew road. Two hours later the lead truck reentered the valley and came to a halt. The driver got out and stood staring about with a baffled expression. He was at the bottom of the ridge again and he couldn't understand how it had happened. To his right was the entrance to the corkscrew, and it should have led to the mountain-

top and Golden Macklin's hideaway. Instead, he had traveled in a circle.

The nearest phone was twenty miles away. When the driver finally contacted Arthur Bingle, it was early evening. No, there were no blueprints of the corkscrew. Someone had destroyed them, long ago. No, the whereabouts of the original builders were unknown.

Somewhere along a twenty-mile stretch of the road, a camouflage had been erected. The drivers hadn't noticed anything unusual the first time they took the route.

All but the lead truck were driven onto the grass of the valley. The first driver took his truck and headed into the corkscrew. He stayed alert, but he couldn't spot the camouflage. More time had been wasted and they were still nowhere near their destination. This time the driver had a radio with him, and he used it to talk to Arthur Bingle.

At eight o'clock a group of fifty armed men began climbing the ridge.

At midnight a lone automobile drove into the valley. The driver saw no trucks, as they had been hidden by brush. The car entered the corkscrew. Five minutes later a truck followed.

The truckdriver stayed well behind the car. Somewhere within a two-mile stretch of the corkscrew, the car disappeared. Obviously the camouflage was easy to move out of and back into place. The car had been admitted onto the genuine route while the truck was detoured.

At two o'clock another automobile entered the valley. A truck followed it into the corkscrew and stayed close behind. A short time later the truckdriver rounded a bend and pulled to a halt. An iron fence barred his way. In the time it took him to get out and shove the fence aside, he lost sight of the car. He hurried after it, but it was too late. The camouflage had done its work and he was detoured down to the valley.

At four o'clock a car attempted to enter the corkscrew. It was stopped and its occupant was hauled out and

questioned. He was just a man who had come out of curiosity. He wanted to see if Mr. Justice was really up on that mountain.

The man was allowed to continue on his journey into the corkscrew. Two hours later he came out again, detoured by the camouflage.

Bingle's man reported. Justice was either going to let only a few people in or only particular people.

The next car to try the corkscrew carried five of Bingle's men in the back seat. They got nowhere and simply traversed the detour to the valley.

At seven in the morning a man named Tidy Crawford drove up. He complained because he didn't want any passengers. Someone hit him lightly on the head with a sockful of sand, and he changed his mind. An hour after the car entered the corkscrew, Crawford slowed to a near-stop and prepared to take a bad turn. Two men sprang out of the shrubbery, trained machine guns on the passengers and ordered them from the car. Crawford was told to drive on. He watched through the rearview mirror as the group disappeared into the forest. He was the last person to be admitted to the mountaintop.

In the clearing beside the cabin were four chairs, three of which formed a partial circle around the fourth. The center chair and two of the outside ones were occupied. Several yards beyond the chair, standing at regular intervals about the clearing, were a dozen men armed with rifles.

Tidy Crawford stopped his car and got out. He looked at the guns and stayed. Nobody aimed a weapon at him, though all were looking at him. He started walking toward the chairs and suddenly flinched as two guards moved aside and then closed in behind him.

Tidy's back itched and his throat hungered for an old comforter. He wished he had stayed with the dolls and not let his inner urges conquer him. A man could get killed in this place.

When he was a few feet away from the seated men, he paused and scratched his jaw. What the hell did he think he was doing here, and why were they all staring at him?

The man seated in the central chair spoke. "How do you do, Mr. Crawford?"

"How do?"

"I don't think you know Mr. James Brant."

The man nearest Tidy nodded. He didn't smile and Tidy studied him in silence for a moment. Brant looked like a tough customer.

"I've seen him around," said Tidy. "He made a pile of money selling coats."

"And do you know Mr. Bailey?"

Bailey sat with his chin in his hand and his legs crossed. His eyes were mere slits and Tidy couldn't tell which way he was looking.

"I know him. Saw his picture plenty. He's a gang-buster."

Again the man in the center chair spoke. "I'm glad you could make the trip. I'm Mr. Justice."

"Knew that already," said Tidy.

"Would you please be seated? We've been waiting for you."

Tidy sat and tried not to look bewildered.

Justice sat back and seemed to relax. "The twelve men behind us are here to see that no one jumps the gun. By no one, I mean any of you three. Each of you will have your say, and each of you will be free to do whatever you decide to do."

Tidy Crawford stirred uneasily; he was aware of it when his coat brushed against the wooden chair arm. The gun in his pocket was very heavy, as if the thing had suddenly grown in size. He felt the sweat popping out on him. That weapon he'd brought along was important. He knew now that he hadn't hauled it up here just to protect himself. But what was it for? That, he didn't know.

"I could talk all day," said Justice. "I could spend hours telling you about myself. It wouldn't be very interesting. You would be bored. It's all old hat. So why are you here today? I decided to bring you. What are you supposed to do? The same thing you've been doing all along. You've been judging me, and now you're going to judge me again. Since the beginning this day has loomed in my future because I believed it was necessary. I still believe it. You will judge me and you will sentence me, and neither I nor the twelve guards will interfere."

Bailey stood up.

"Sit down," said Justice, and Bailey did so. "Your turn isn't yet. You'll be second." Justice looked at Tidy Crawford. "If you don't get a turn, I apologize. Right now it's time for Mr. Brant to stand up and be counted."

Jimmy Brant slowly got to his feet.

"You're your own man," said Justice. "You're free. Pay no attention to the guns."

"This is a courtroom?"

"Consider it as such."

"Why was I chosen?"

"Nobody chose you. You volunteered by getting into your car and driving up the mountain."

Brant turned his back on Justice and faced Bailey and Tidy Crawford. Quietly he said, "I passed a hundred cars heading in this direction, yet we three are all that got in. Do you wonder about that? I do. I think we're here because we really cared. He knew we cared and he eliminated everybody else. That ought to make us wonder a hell of a lot. Are there only three people in the whole country who are qualified to be up here right now? Oh, don't be mistaken, that's why we made it: three qualified people. That means this jury is biased. It's too small. We can't do it. There aren't enough of us."

Brant turned and stood looking down at Justice. "These two men are total strangers to me. I know nothing about

how they think. If I stay here I'll be bound by their decision, and I'm damned if I'll be their hatchet man. If there were more of us and the majority decided to hang you, I'd argue until I had no voice left. I'd harass and needle and make them consider every single aspect of the situation, but in the end I would abide by the final decision. The way it is now, with just the three of us, the whole thing is meaningless. If we let you go free, or hanged you, it would be irrelevant. Nothing would be proved or solved. Three people can't represent the country."

"You've made your judgment," said Justice. "You are excused."

His face pale, Jimmy Brant started to walk away.

"Wait," said Justice. "You're out of it now. If you try to interfere in any way you'll be stopped by the guards." Turning his gaze on Bailey, Justice said, "The human race is changing. You can't hold back its progress."

"Or its descent."

"Your view is personal."

"So is everyone's." Bailey slipped a gun from his pocket.

Justice rested his chin in one hand. "Reason has just walked out on us and now we confront Creed."

"Call me anything you like." Bailey stood up. "It's my turn now. I'm not a groping philosopher and if you were the world's finest promise, it wouldn't stop me."

"You intend to execute me?"

"The law gives me the power."

"What law? There's no longer a Federal Bureau of Investigation or a Central Intelligence Agency."

"There is while I'm still mobile. Why do you think I'm here?"

"Wait a minute," said Tidy Crawford. "If you shoot him I don't get my turn."

Bailey didn't look around. "I know you, Crawford. You soaked up gin so long your brain is pickled. Stay out of this."

"Won't. Mr. Brant is Reason and you're Creed. I don't know what I am, but I'm something."

"Tell him why you want to execute me," said Justice to Bailey.

"For the country."

Tidy shook his head vigorously. "You lie. If you aren't sure, and you aren't, then what you say is a lie."

"Would it make me right if I were sure?" said Bailey with a snarl in his voice.

"No, but you can't give him an honest judgment if you don't know why you're giving it."

"Keep quiet, you old fool."

Tidy got to his feet. "You're the last of the old law enforcers. Are you going to shoot him because he murdered, because he's a vigilante who murdered or because he's a murderer who has different ideas than yours?"

His face gray with anger, Bailey said through his teeth, "Any one of those reasons would be sufficient."

"Don't see how. If you judge him, you become Mr. Justice, the man who decides and acts. There has to be a reason for your decision, and I don't mind if it's a personal one, just so it's logical and just. But your prejudices can't be my logic or what I call just, if you follow me."

"What are you saying?" said Bailey.

A gun appeared in Tidy's hand. "I didn't know I was going to sit on a jury today, only I am. I'm not afraid. Always do the best I can. Hard to fool. Take it easy on that trigger, Mr. Bailey. I'm only disagreeing with you. Shoot me and you'll die at the hands of the boys all around us. I intend to speak my piece. You aren't going to shoot him. I won't let you. What I say is if there's somebody else wants to judge him, they can go ahead and do it. But not you."

"You?" sneered Bailey.

"Already judged him. He's sure of what he's doing. That's all I know."

"Is he guilty?" Bailey screamed.

"I don't know. In a way he is and in a way he isn't. I'm not a sure person in anything I do, so I won't condemn him or give him a clean bill of goods. All I'll do is make sure he gets a fair hearing at this time, and I say you aren't the person to do it."

"Thank you, Mr. Crawford," said Justice.

"You shouldn't thank me," Tidy said easily. "You never know when somebody like me will change his mind."

"But when you do, you'll be sure."

Bailey threw his gun on the ground. "You son of a bitch. You ought to be strung up."

"Who says so?" said Justice.

"Every civilized human in the world."

"For whom you speak? Mr. Crawford understands better than you do."

"The whole world will sit in judgment of him one day," said Tidy.

Bailey glared at Justice. "And you'll accept their judgment?"

"Maybe. Now if you don't mind, we'll get ready for war. The hills are crawling with the enemy. Of course if you can't make up your minds whether or not you ought to fight, you can always stand still and get killed."

Bailey started to walk away. Suddenly he stopped and looked back. "This isn't the end of it," he said.

Justice shook his head. "Of course not. We're old enemies, you and I. We're people who hate, are intolerant, become outraged, we want to do and not be spectators. There will never be an end to us. And that's a pity because as long as we exist it means utopia hasn't arrived."

A sneer on his lips, Bailey said, "Utopia?"

"My sentiments, exactly."

Arthur Bingle was on the run from a dead cat that seemed to be everywhere. It hung from the small tree that

grew on the balcony outside the living room, and it dangled from the chandelier in the hallway between the east and west wings of the Brant Building. The same cat met him as he hurried to the elevator. It brushed against his legs and clawed him when he kicked at it. As the elevator hurtled toward the ground, Bingle glanced up and saw a black-and-white cat inside the small wired section of the ceiling. A rope around its neck, the animal's dead eyes stared down at Bingle and transfixed him against the back of the car.

He rushed into the street. The city, country, world—what had ruined his reality? There were no gangs abroad, no mobs, no crowds to hide his running figure. There were, however, several dead cats, in doorways, on the sidewalk, in the street, and some live ones climbed in and out of overturned garbage cans.

Bingle's mind labored as he ran. He had made the same mistake made by every dictator throughout history. The world simply couldn't be made to drop dead by instituting chaos because that was man's natural state. Defense mechanisms hummed like live wires and man managed to survive. Chaos had been the wrong weapon. Given another chance, Bingle knew he could do the job. Never mind chaos. Order was the way; learn a lesson from a wallpaper hanger who once lived: line up the enemy and shove it into an oven or a gas chamber or a ditch. Christ, how simple.

Traveling into the past had always been Bingle's way of getting around threatening obstacles, and he took the familiar route now, got away from the New York street by skipping backward in time for the space of seven days. He immediately sped upward to the present again. The past was saturated with cats.

Justice was so damned clever. Number 7 was a favorite in man's mind. No doubt Bingle would find felines in all the combinations of number 7: in seconds, minutes, hours, days or years. How about number 6?

Bingle tried it. He traveled six days into the past. The first thing he saw was a black-and-white cat walking a tightrope strung between two buildings.

The enemy knew him, had always known him. How much could you learn about the habits of a man if you used psychology, philosophy or voodoo? Justice could anticipate him because Justice had studied him.

Don't think; travel blindly back to the past and go damned fast.

The shattered body of a cat lay twitching in the street. Beside it stood a tiny boy dressed in a sailor suit. Arthur Bingle recognized himself and went careening toward the present. He materialized on the abandoned street of New York. Sweat soaked his body and he shuddered. Something had gone haywire. Instead of just traveling into the past, he had also changed position in space. He'd never done that before, had never dreamed he could do it. Oh, God, what power he possessed. Never was another man born like him. Except Justice.

"Goddamn you," he screamed. "Look what I can do. You think I'm nothing but you're wrong."

His breath coming in fast pants, he made himself think. He had talents unheard of. They needed developing. But not now. It would be dangerous to try something new when he was frightened.

But what should he do? There was nowhere to go and no one to help him. Wait, Wasn't that a kind of answer to an old question? Did safety, after all, lay behind someone who was willing to stand between you and the world? My God, was that the secret of survival? A man with enemies on all sides of him couldn't stand alone. Who would guard his back?

He stood still and thought it out. To this was he born? Why not? Who said he was wrong? Somebody had. He remembered. They said a dozen rotten apples didn't mean the whole barrel should be thrown away. They were always talking about evil minorities. All bad things

were minorities. But a bad majority would protect itself with claims like that. Man was a rational animal. The word "rational" was short for "rationalizing". Damn, they were all so rotten. Piss ants. Their world was a speck in the spectrum of substance. If the speck were emptied, who would care? Eternity was a trek in which every walker dropped out before the end was reached. What did it matter where you dropped out?

"I had to exist for a purpose, and mine was to see you all dead," he yelled at the sky. "I had more guts than the rest of you. Don't judge? Bullshit. I was judge and jury, and my sentence was three billion graves. Pffft. How did I arrive at my decision? Simple. DON'T TURN THE OTHER CHEEK."

He knew another who followed that rule. One of them was wrong. Funny. He and Justice had started with the same promise.

"Where are you?" he yelled. "Show yourself."

At the end of the block a man appeared. Bingle second-hopped into the past: two, three, four seconds. The man stayed standing on the corner, which meant that he was also traveling backward in time. At long last, Justice was in sight.

Bingle didn't like the alternate meanings in that last thought. "You have no proof that you're right," he yelled. "In infinity there are no judges. We can do anything we want."

He knew. After the initial decisions were made, it didn't matter who was right, not to the doers. What mattered was who won. The rightness or wrongness of things accomplished by doers was the concern of spectators who forever sat on their asses and made mouth noises.

With a surge of confidence, Bingle hauled the gun from his shoulder holster. It was an uncanny experience, seeing the fired bullets pause ten feet away before they slid to the left in slow motion like small bobsleds rounding a

curve. One after the other the slugs took the arc in stride and continued on into the distance, none of them drawing near to the man on the corner. Justice had time-hopped through one or two seconds, and though both men were standing in the same positions on the street each occupied a different time zone.

His finger steadily pumping the trigger, Bingle time-hopped backward and forward through a period of four seconds. He continued until the gun was nearly empty. He hadn't found the proper zone. Putting the gun in his pocket, he raced along the sidewalk toward Justice. Suddenly he stopped. Justice hadn't taken flight. Instead of moving, Justice stood braced and waiting.

Bingle slipped on the curb, cursed, caught his balance, went across the street as fast as he was able. He had an entire century of time into which he could escape, and he intended to use that exit, if necessary. If he were lucky he wouldn't have to.

Justice still stood on the corner. Bingle kept him in sight while he looked around. Straight ahead, across another street, was a sporting goods store. From the corner of his eye, he saw Justice disappear. Not hesitating, he ran toward the store. Feet pounded the pavement behind him. The gun was in his hand as he whirled. Again Justice faded. Again Bingle ran.

Inside the store, he leaped over the counter and crouched down. The enemy had to come through the door in solid time. Justice couldn't take a chance on trying anything fancy, like moving through space, not unless he had the trick down to a science, and Bingle doubted that he had. They were evenly matched, he and Justice. They ought to have been brothers.

Bingle laughed. His eye on the entrance, he slowly backed to the rear of the store. There was a rack of guns on the wall beside him, but they were empty and he gave them no more than a glance. He couldn't afford to be loading a weapon as Justice came bursting in on

him. Besides, he didn't want a rifle. He wanted a fishing pole.

He started to grab a pole that hung on a nail and then his eye lit on the thing hanging next to it. A grin turned his mouth from a taut slit to a relaxed bow. The speargun was small and powerful with a hooked arrow five inches long and a length of cord made of unbreakable nylon. This was better than a fishing pole.

The back door beckoned and Bingle headed for it. A stack of small boxes made him pause. Again he smiled. These were bird rufflers and one of them might be helpful. An expensive little gadget made exclusively for hunters who didn't mind paying for their sport, the bird ruffler had an elastic band that could be wound around a tree branch or bit of brush. The hunter set the small timer and secreted himself until the powder inside the box ignited.

He grabbed a box and ran. Once outside, he was seized by a sense of exhilaration. He needed a spot relatively open so that he couldn't be sneaked up on from behind, but it had to be a place with a few barriers. What about the park? It wasn't far away.

He wished that he were in better shape. Instead of sitting and admiring his conquests he ought to have been swimming and lifting weights. But he was a good runner and speed was an ability a man came into the world with. Maybe Justice had strong legs, but he had to put one in front of the other, the same as any man, and Bingle already had the jump on him. The pursued chose the destination.

"I'm going to love killing you," he yelled over his shoulder. How much he loved Justice: the one man in the world who was worth killing. None of the others had been worthy. Eric Fortney might have been, if it weren't for his hedonistic streak.

Justice was like himself. Everybody loved the land of High, but the trouble with most people was that they

thought it came from external sources. What fools they were. Everything good came from the mind. Justice and himself—they tripped out with ideas.

Something moved near his right shoulder. He saw it from the corner of his eye, sensed a presence, and his High intensified to fever pitch. With a shriek of pure pleasure he lashed out with his arm, felt solid substance, fortified his position by lashing once again with the same arm. He felt powerful; he felt indefatigable. Without wasting motion, he was all over the shadow. So fast did he move that he didn't even see his opponent until the man was sprawling backward onto the ground.

Was this the first time anyone had caught Justice unaware? Close-quarter combat, and Bingle was a wild man because he loved what he was doing. His fists were weapons that struck the enemy almost independently. Justice was flat on his back with blood oozing from his cut mouth and with alarm a bright bloom in his expression.

"My God, you look ordinary," Bingle panted. Slick as grease, he picked up the speargun that had fallen, extended his arm and with no fear whatsoever nor with any sense of haste, he shot Justice in the shoulder.

He stood over his fallen foe and casually examined him. "Mistake number one," he said. "When you're tracking Arthur Bingle don't make too many presumptions. In fact, don't make any."

"I'm making one now. You didn't want to kill me with that shot."

Bingle kicked the other in the leg. "Collected, I behave brilliantly. I've fixed you so you can't go anywhere. You're tied to this time zone."

Justice looked haggard. The lines under his eyes and on his cheeks were deep. He wore the clothing of a bum. His hair was long and shaggy. The tip of the spear had gone through his body and penetrated the ground. He was indeed tied to the present.

"You could work that spear free," said Bingle. "I'm going to tie you to the tree behind you. How we get over there is up to you. You can have it rough or sweet."

"I take it you're leaving me?"

"For a few minutes."

Justice moved and pain flashed across his face. "It's in deep. You'll have to pull it."

Closing his hand around the back section of the spear, Bingle gently pulled and the tip came out of the ground. He stood back and kept a firm hand on the gun. The nylon cord stretching between him and Justice was taut.

"Get up," he said.

Justice raised to one knee, took a deep breath and stood. The back of his coat was soaked with blood. He staggered over to the tree and stumbled to his knees.

It was a small tree and Bingle had no trouble securing his victim to it. Justice sat with his back against the trunk and Bingle ran the nylon cord around the trunk and tied the speargun to Justice's wounded arm. Justice drew up his knees, then Bingle used a belt to tie the other man's free hand and feet together.

"If you think you can time-hop strongly enough to pull those tree roots with you, I recommend that you give it a try."

Justice looked up. "I may."

Bingle laughed and went away. He was gone a long time.

When he returned, he was driving a truck. He sent the machine hurtling through the park gates and screeched to a halt beside the tree.

"You're still here?" he said with a grin.

Justice gave a grin of his own. "If you aren't careful I'll bleed to death and then you won't have any fun."

Bingle untied him and made him walk deeper into the park. At last they stopped and Justice was again tied to a tree.

Well away from the tree were eight concrete flowerbeds that formed a large circle. Bingle left his prisoner and walked back to the truck. He returned with digging tools and cans of gasoline. First he tore the flowers from the beds, then scooped out the dirt and dumped in gasoline. When this was finished, he stood outside the circle and tossed eight burning matches. The gas ignited with a roar and a fiery ring was created.

Justice was dragged through two beds into the ring and a shovel was dropped beside him. With swift movements, Bingle tied the bird ruffler to Justice's left knee.

"Dig," he said.

The flames in the concrete pits blew in the wind and spread until the circle was complete and there were no clear passages.

"You've trapped yourself," said Justice. He started to fall and caught his balance by holding onto a shovel.

"It won't burn long, just enough to see you in a deep hole with your leg shattered and your head leaking. You have fifteen minutes before that bird ruffler goes off. It won't be much of an explosion; in fact it'll make the most pitiful little pop you ever heard, but that little pop will take out your knee. I have one bullet remaining in my gun and it's for your head. I left one can of gasoline for your grave. Doesn't it all sound nice?"

Justice began to dig.

Behind him, Bingle smiled. "I'll find the baby in good time. There's no hurry. The parents will have to be killed, too. I can't take a chance on their reproducing again, besides which I don't intend leaving any old enemies around. They'll all go, one by one—everybody who opposed me."

"Your life style," grunted Justice. "It's just something to do to fill up your spare time, eh?"

"More or less, but it certainly isn't boring. Tell me something. Why did you wait until now to come after me?"

"First I had to give the good citizens of this country a

chance to pot me. I figured if they were going to do it, they'd do it before I picked you off for them."

His face darkening, Bingle said, "You're digging too slowly. Hurry up. Do it faster."

Leaning on the shovel and breathing hard, Justice said, "Why should I? I die if I work and I die if I loaf."

"Hope and the human breast. You can only see the past. You'll have to keep digging if you want to stay alive to find out what the future holds for you." Bingle's voice lowered. "You're a great one for making decisions. I don't care which out you opt for. Either way you end up in a hole."

"So will you one day."

"Shut up and dig."

Perspiration made Justice's shirt dark with sweat. It leaked down his neck, glistened on his face. "Don't you have any curiosity about what humanity will be like ten thousand years from now?"

"I'm mildly curious about what the abandoned world will be like. I'm going to empty it. Ten thousand years from now the animals will rule."

"You think people won't fight you?"

"I hope they will," said Bingle. His face glowed with rage. "I wish there were a few more like you. It would make the battle worthwhile. But it won't be worth a damned. I'll be an exterminator getting rid of bugs."

Justice glanced over his shoulder. "That makes you a bug."

"Do you think something better than a bug has the right to judge bugs? What outsider really knows and understands a species?" Bingle's foot lashed out and Justice stumbled to his knees. "No more talk. Work."

The outline of the grave was finished before Justice paused to rest. He leaned his good arm on the shovel and groaned.

"Keep digging," said Bingle.

"I'm bleeding too much. I don't think I'm going to make it."

"Suit yourself, but it'll be a shame if it doesn't work out the way I planned. Imagine Superman bleeding to death like a common thug? What will your fans say?"

Justice lifted his face and let the hot wind bathe it. "There isn't enough air. Are you sure you haven't cooked your own goose?"

"I stopped being nervous about you the moment that spear put you out of business, so don't try and rattle me. Those flames are already weakening."

Staring at the sky for a long moment, Justice said, "There's something out there."

"I don't see anything."

"To my left, straight ahead of you, about thirty feet up."

"There's nothing. You've rested enough. Get to work."

Instead of obeying, Justice continued to stare at the sky. All of a sudden the shovel fell from his hand. "My God. Look."

A figure dressed in white hovered in the air above the flames. Her long dark hair accentuating the pallor of her face, Leona drifted without support. She moved through space and time and came closer to the highest tongues of fire.

Arthur Bingle shrieked and shrank until his thighs touched the ground.

The mouth of Leona was wide open, and her eyes were stark and staring. Her stiff arms and outstretched palms seemed to plead.

Was she dead or alive? Bingle didn't know. Was she in limbo, the space between time channels, or had her mass penetrated into a solid period? Bingle didn't know that, either.

Leona suddenly disappeared. She seemed to have dropped behind the wall of fire. Bingle shrieked again as

ACE SCIENCE FICTION DOUBLES

Two books back-to-back

Just 95c each

009902 **Against Arcturus** Putney
Time Thieves Rackham

102939 **The Chariots of Ra** Bulmer
Earth Strings Rackham

116509 **Computer War**
Code Duello Reynolds

156976 **The Unteleported Man**
Dr. Futurity Dick

317552 **The Hard Way Up** Chandler
Veiled World Lory

370627 **The Inheritors**
The Gateway to Never Chandler

534156 **Mr. Justice Piserchia**
Heirarchies Phillifent

665257 **Pirates of Zan**
Mutant Weapon Leinster

763805 **Silent Invaders** Silverberg
Battle of Venus Temple

769604 **The Sky is Falling**
Badge of Infamy del Rey

775254 **Son of the Tree**
House of Iszm Vance

799759 **Technos**
A Scatter of Sardust Tubb

939009 **A Yank at Valhalla** Hamilton
The Sun Destroyers Rocklynn

Available wherever paperbacks are sold or use this coupon.

ace books, (Dept. MM) Box 576, Times Square Station
New York, N.Y. 10036

Please send me titles checked above.

I enclose \$.....Add 15¢ handling fee per copy.

Name

Address

City..... State..... Zip.....

Please allow 4 weeks for delivery.

12-72-8D