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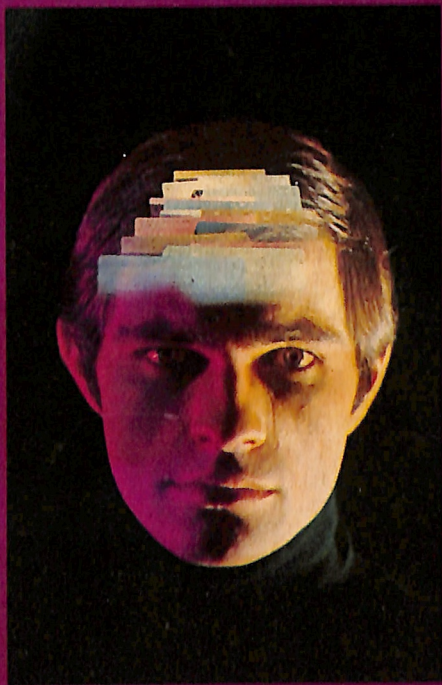
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SCIENCE-FANTASY

THEODORE TYLER

THE MAN WHOSE NAME WOULDN'T FIT

THE OUTRAGEOUS NOVEL
OF AN UNLIKELY HERO WHO
TOOK ON THE WORLD'S
BIGGEST, SMARTEST COMPUTER



THE MAN WHOSE NAME WOULDN'T FIT

He was just four paces into the lobby when the challenge rang out over the hard surfaces of polished stone. "Sir? May I help you?"

Albert recognized the voice, and decided to turn and be his most self-possessed self. He was quite unaware of the water pistol that he still forgetfully held in his right hand.

"Why Mr. Cartwright-Chickering!" the officious voice said. The face was ruddy and the manner that of a reserve Army sergeant Albert had once known.

"Hello."

"What are you doing here?"

"Leaving."

"And with a—it is a water pistol?"

"Of course. What did you think it was, a howitzer?"

THE
MAN
WHOSE
NAME
WOULDN'T
FIT

(Or, The Case of Cartwright-Chickering)

BY THEODORE TYLER



CURTIS
BOOKS

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for my sons
Andrew and Matthew

*with thanks for their help
in discovering this story*

The Man Whose Name Wouldn't Fit

□ Albert Duane Cartwright-Chickering had never been ashamed of his name—at least not the way someone with a real handicap is ashamed of his own shortcoming.

If you chanced to meet Albert at a party or even in his office, he would look you right in the eye, smile, and perhaps even wiggle his nose a bit if he liked you or if you said something that amused him.

Albert was sixty-two, silver-haired, a recent widower, and a senior market analyst for the United Metals Corporation of America. His cheeks were pink—bespeaking his excellent circulation and his fine state of health. Not an extra pound weighted his lean frame.

Of late, life for Albert had been surprisingly free of vexation. It is true that a credit-card company and Albert had just had a long and spirited exchange of letters over his Invicta diner's card. The card was finally imprinted simply "Cartwright-Chickering."

And it is also true that a giant utility from which Albert bought several kilowatts of power a month had rendered him A. D. C. Chickering when they switched over to computerized billing.

He wrote to them in protest. They did not reply. He withheld payment. They sent several warnings. He responded to each fully, repeating his original complaint. You don't bill someone under a wrong name, he pointed out.

That went on for a time and then they turned out his lights. He sent a telegram, but he had to carry his plea right up to the chairman of the board before they agreed to bill him under the name Cartwright-Chickering.

Then, of course, he paid, and they turned the lights back on, but for four days he had illuminated his home with candles and had cooked over an elm-wood fire in his hearth.

Albert usually prevailed in such circumstances. In fact, he

was something of a granite boulder when it came to his last name.

Then came an irresistible force, a computer whose full name was the Randolph Datatronic 8080. This marvel of electronic circuitry made certain assumptions about its world. One such assumption, pursued at two-microsecond speeds in its core memory, was that all names contain twenty characters or fewer, including spaces.

The 8080 also had a stand-by assumption: a name could always be abbreviated.

Albert held his own assumptions, processing information based on them at somewhat slower than two-millionths of a second, to be sure. Yet he held to his principles with an uncommon tenacity, a fixity that belied his amiable appearance and his diffident manner.

Albert would sacrifice a great deal in inconvenience, and even in money, for a person, a bird, or a flower. But he wouldn't dream of doing the bidding of a machine: he wouldn't drop one half of his name any more than someone named Tyler would consent to having himself decreed Ty, or Ler.

Albert's last name was Cartwright-Chickering, neither more nor less, and that counted out to twenty-one characters, including the hyphen. The trouble began right there.

Buster Doyle

□ Highly shined shoes atop laminated walnut. A quiet whoosh of an air-conditioning convector, thump-thumping the venetian blind cord weight against the buff plaster. "Mr. Doyle, we've completed our name audit, but somebody's gotta be joking. . . ."

"About what?"

"This one name. A. D. Cartwright-Chickering." A long sheet unfolded, accordion style, onto the desk top. The shiny nail of the index finger glinted on the paper.

"Where?" Doyle asked, leaning over, pushing back the

carafe, shaking his head. "Where, Mr. Hackle?" Broderick Doyle felt puzzled and uncomprehending. Everything was supposed to have been worked out, debugged, weeks ago.

"Here. Twenty-one characters in the last name *alone!*"

"Could be a mistake. What's the name again?"

"Lookit for yourself."

A craning glance and a slow shaking of the large head. "Could be a mistake," Doyle repeated, less loudly.

"You know the name? I mean personally?"

"No. Let me check."

Broderick Doyle sat down heavily in his swivel chair, swung around, and as he reached for his telephone, he gazed at the weather ball atop the Chauncy Towers across the street. Temperature fifty-six, falling. Rain and colder. A bad day for golf. "Mary, get me Gladys Bronislaw, will you, right away like a sweatpea? Thanks . . ." The receiver slipped back into its cradle, and Buster's glance remained on the weather ball.

"Here's another one—Leczinskailovich. But that's just sixteen."

The answering buzzer. Buster picked up the phone. "Gladys? When are we having lunch again? Eh? That's what Uncle Buster wants to know. . . . Er—Gladys, we got a confidential question. Are you free to talk? . . . You have your . . ." The voice lowered confidentially and the large gray eyes rolled over the mouthpiece across to Hackle, who rubbed his nose and shifted in the black-plastic-lined chair. ". . . Z-8 comprehensives on payroll? . . . It'll take you a jiffy? Take your time, honey . . ."

A big cigar from the breast pocket, slipped out like a wand and stripped of its cellophane. ". . . Yeah? Yeah. Handy now? Good. Check a name for us, will you? Cartwright-Chickering. D. C. . . ." Buster bit the tip of the cigar off.

"A. D., Mr. Doyle, not D. C.," Hackle said.

"Make that A. D. Cartwright-Chickering. Yeah . . . You know him? . . . Oh? senior market analyst on Mr. Pierce's staff, eh? Nonferrous. Aha. And what . . . ? I see . . . Yes." A moment's silence. "All right. Very good. Thanks a million, Gladys. Let's make it soon, hear?" Buster spat out the tip of his cigar.

The phone dropped back in the cradle. The large hands surrounded the pink head and the look turned doleful. "Hackle, you're right. We got an executive named Albert

Duane Cartwright-hyphen-Chickering. A level-three employee."

Buster's voice lowered confidentially. "That's in the thirty-thousand-dollar range. Been here thirty years. Dartmouth graduate. Expert on copper, lead, and zinc prices. Happens to be on jury duty this week. Reports, when he's here, direct to Mr. Pierce. . . . So that's that."

"That's what, Mr. Doyle?"

"That's your answer."

"Yeah. But that isn't the point," Hackle said, leaning forward in his chair.

"Huh?"

"That isn't the point."

"You said that already."

"The 8080 won't process longer than twenty characters—for an entire name." Hackle leaned back in his chair, letting the long accordion fold decant into his lap.

"So?"

"So all the forms are based on that. I mean you okayed it, as administrative V.P. and systems manager. Of course . . ."

"Wait a minute, Henry. Do it again."

"Twenty characters, including spaces, is all the 8080 in this program will accommodate. All the personnel forms, the JS-360 series, plus the major control documents, validation forms, insurance, and payroll . . ."

"What?"

"Are set up on the basis of twenty characters. Including spaces."

"Why didn't you tell us that before this?"

"Mr. Doyle, we have repeatedly informed you and your staff on every one of the features of the new solid-state 8080 series. How it is custom engineered for minimum access time under any of two hundred and seventy-five major programs, enjoying the vast storage capacity of magnetic tape with the nearly instantaneous recovery of a drum storage; its reliability, built, as it is, in Datatronic Valley with standards of craftsmanship . . ."

"Not now," Buster said, fiercely mashing the big cigar into the ashtray, cracking the brittle outer leaf. "We're eighty per cent ready for a simulation run. The Executive Committee is making a special occasion of it—and you give me a

sales talk . . . and then you tell me some of our people's names can't . . ."

"Not some. *One*."

"Are you sure?"

"Look for yourself." Both men hunched over suddenly. Buster yelled out his office door to his secretary.

"Bring your pad, Mary. And your glasses . . ."

Scanning up and down, spreading out the accordion fold onto the brand-new carpeting of dense ultramarine with accents of lime. "Allmendinger."

"Yeah, and Barretson."

"Kippenhouser. And here's Leczinskailovich again. But none longer than Cartwright-Chickering."

"Why's he have to have so much name? I mean take yours. Hackle. Six letters."

"Yeah. Or Doyle. Five."

"Yeah," Buster Doyle agreed, "or even—look there—" A large finger traced across the green paper. "Pym. Three letters. P-Y-M. Ann Pym. Six letters from start to finish."

Another half-hour on their knees, the secretary hovering. At last: "Well, sir, as administrative V.P.," Hackle said, "I'd say you had almost no problem at all. That's it. One name."

"A level-three man," Doyle said wearily as he struggled back to his feet. "Roll that thing up, will you, Mary? Reporting to Mr. Pierce! If it just weren't for that. He isn't one of my admirers—Mr. Pierce—if you know what I mean."

"Oh really," Hackle said.

Buster had his head cradled in his hands again. "Okay, Hackle. What can you do for us?"

"Modify is costly."

"How much?"

"We'd have to figure it out again. Reprogram, new card layout, new print layout, new tape-record format. I don't know. Not cheap."

"In all."

"In all? I don't know. Maybe thirty thousand, maybe fifty. That's just a guess. Don't hold us to it."

"Wait a minute. You mean you're asking maybe fifty thousand more?"

"We have to reprogram all machine functions that have access to the name file, reorganize the name file. New programs don't come cheap. Then we have to debug."

"All for that one name?"

"It could cost more."

The forms, Mary the secretary wondered. A three-year supply was already on hand. Sixteen forms would have to be redone, she pointed out, and when redone, they would not fit into existing file drawers or be compatible with the other equipment.

It came, by the time they were done, to an estimated \$55,000.

A wounded whistle from Buster Doyle. "We've already exceeded our budget, twice. . . . And he reports direct to Mr. Pierce!"

Jury Duty

□ *The Works of Lord Byron in Verse and Prose*, full morocco bound, lay open on Albert Cartwright-Chickering's lap. His glasses sat far down his nose and he waited. Just then he was peering over them up the long aisle in the general jury room at the courthouse.

Like the other 120 people in the room, he was listening to the litany of justice, as the clerk and bailiff would alternately rouse themselves from behind their barricade of oaken table and file cabinets and bellow out names.

The words of the officials came glancing down the brightly varnished maple aisles:

"Carter! . . . Dudley . . ."

Albert hitched his glasses back up his nose and turned back to *Childe Harold* for a few more quatrains, but it was no go. "Too much time," he said quietly to himself. Too many years since undergraduate courses in Romantic Literature under the elms of Hanover, and too much lost in the immediacy of the language.

After all, he thought, one couldn't immerse oneself in the affairs of the London Metals Exchange for more than twenty

years, in the orebodies of Utah and Montana, in the copper seams of Chile and the zinc deposits of Colorado, and still have a feeling for poetry.

But he had tried. Had taken down the old volume that Beth had had and treasured for so many years, until her death. It was a memory of her that came welling back to him as he held her book, but that was all.

His eyes fell on a phrase and he scanned back to the top: "The Maiden Speech of Lord Byron, delivered in the House of Lords, on the Frame-Work Bill," which proposed stern penalties for men who attacked spinning frames or looms with sledge hammers. For attackers of machines—the death penalty. The only voice raised in opposition: Lord Byron's.

A crescendo of indignant scorn came up from the page. Byron had seen the "most oppressed provinces of Turkey," but he had never seen "such squalid wretchedness as I have seen since my return in the very heart of a Christian country. . . ."

The words drew Albert down so intently that it required the elbow of his neighbor, an old man with a missing front tooth and a thorn-wood cane, to bring him back to awareness. "You Cartwright?"

"Cartwright-Chickering. It's a hyphenated name."

"Double name, eh?"

"Yes."

"Called your name I think," the man said, tossing his head toward the clerk's desk.

Albert rose and tucked his book under his arm, and strode firmly up the aisle toward the front of the room. Eyes on him, as they often were, fastened on his extraordinary fine coloring—his shock of silvery white hair, his extremely blue eyes, and his ruddy cheeks. Not a tall man, and not at all disproportioned in his physical dimensions. Self-contained, and well balanced were the impressions his mere appearance created.

The other remarkable thing about Albert was the way his eyes looked at you. They were deep-set, and they gave him the appearance of peering out from under an overhang, and that created the vague impression that he was watching from ambush. It was his only bad feature, except for his nose, which had twice been broken in college on the boxing team.

One bailiff waved Albert through a door after matching

his name with a file card, and another motioned him forward, into the smaller of the rooms adjoining the main chamber.

Several women already seated looked up from the jury box and they seemed ready to smile if he would give them a chance. Wrinkled though he might be, and worn by years, there was at the same time a triumphant air about him, a spring in his step that conveyed its power and vitality and seemed to invite others to vie for his benediction.

Back to Lord Byron. "And what, my Lords, are your remedies? . . . Will the famished wretch who has braved your bayonets be appalled by your gibbets? . . . Will that which could not be effected by your grenadiers be accomplished by your executioners?"

Why couldn't he have a feeling for poetry?, Albert wondered. Had it been trained out of him? He thought of that for a time, and of his life, and of his loneliness now that his daughter Jenny had moved with her family to the Sea Islands, but that was space research for you, and his son-in-law Hilton Knapp—everyone called him Hill—was making rapid strides, so the grandchildren would be well provided for, but still . . .

"Mr. Cartwright-Chickering?" The attorney, small and venal looking, rubbing the lapels of his blue nubby-silk suit, was gazing sharply at Albert.

A nod.

"You following us?"

"I was reading."

"Will you take Seat Number One, please. Juror Jones is dismissed."

The bailiff motioning back into the general jury room.

"Now then, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, you're an executive, is that right?"

"Yes."

"With what firm?"

"United Metals Corporation of America."

"For how long?"

"Almost thirty years."

"The case before us is a negligence case, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, concerning one of the largest corporations in the country, and a plain housewife. Do you think you are likely to have any predispositions one way or the other?"

"I don't think I am."

The attorney smiled and inclined his torso forward, as if

he were about to execute a stern christiana without any arm motion whatsoever. "None at all?"

"I don't suppose I could entirely forget my natural outlook."

"Which is?"

"I would say, sympathy for the underdog."

"Sympathy for the underdog, eh?"

"Yes."

"That's how you feel? Even though you're an employee of one of the big corporations? Even though you've been an employee, faithful and obedient, for thirty years—the greater part of your working life?"

"Yes."

"How old are you, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering?"

"Sixty-two."

"Juror dismissed," the lawyer said, smiling afresh at his own acuteness.

It caught Albert by surprise and something in his wind-pipe felt as if it would react on his stomach, and something in his spine felt chilly and uncomfortable. He rose quietly, once again tucked the book under his arm, and as he did so, the lawyer was calling another man, a Negro, to the Number One seat: "Mr. Osgood."

Albert went back to his seat in the main room. Back to Lord Byron. No further indication—no headnote—about the legislation on the Frame-Work Bill, except that it had passed with only one dissenting vote, Lord Byron's.

A picture sprang into Albert's mind, then, that came from some dark memory of a forgotten year. It was a fragmentary and tantalizing view of the machine-wreckers, the conspirators who had set out by stealth to knock apart the fiendish devices that had robbed them of their livelihood, cast their children into the dark, satanic mills.

A dark fen, large moon, elongated shadows, and a whistle in the night. An answering whistle, followed by a deep voice calling from the darkness for order. Then forming of long lines of men, rough-dressed and sallow-complexioned, answering their leaders as numbers—not names—are called.

Weapons glistening in the moonlight—hatchets, pistols, and huge hammers and bludgeons. "On to the braggart's mill! On to Rawfolds!" Along the wall and over the fen, through the small village the tramp, tramping of the conspiratorial feet.

Houses shrouded in night, leather thudding on cobblestone, and another round of whistles as another group, emerging from a side lane, comes across the moor to merge with the first.

Darkness again, and the pulsing hearts of the watchers huddled behind their shutters; the moonlight picking out the glistening gun barrels as the men wheel to their right at a barked command near the White Hart Inn to pass down the defile into the river valley where the mill stands.

"You passed over too, huh?"

Albert turned in surprise to see the Negro standing behind him. "Oh yes."

"Yes," the man said.

Albert yielded to his whim. The noon whistle was blowing. "Want to get some lunch?"

"Sure, like to, if they let us out."

They were free, as it turned out, so they went downstairs and crossed Court Street to the Chinese restaurant there. "What are you reading?" the man asked.

"Lord Byron's works."

"Maude?"

"No, a speech. How'd you know about Maude?"

"I once had to write a term paper on her, or I could choose something else."

They went inside the restaurant. Albert turned to his companion. "I don't even know your name. Mine's Albert Cartwright-Chickering."

"How do you do. My name is Osgood. Nathan Osgood."

They slid into the booth indicated by the hostess and Osgood's manner signaled to Albert that he had better not assume that he would be paying for the other man's lunch. Clearly Osgood would be able to pay his own way.

"What kind of work do you do, Mr. Chickering?"

Albert breathed in suddenly. "Cartwright-Chickering. I analyze commodity trends for United Metals."

"Is that right? . . . Cartwright-Chickering, you say?"

"Yes. It's a hyphenated name."

"Oh."

"And what work do you do?"

"Mathematician at Triple-I Special Programming Department." The man's skin was a deep chocolate color and a

knot about the size of an almond stood out on his forehead. When he spoke the words came slowly. Albert resumed:

"Then how do you know about Maude? I thought engineers and scientists were barbarians?"

"Oh, we are," Nathan said, smiling. "But I had this paper to write. An honors seminar. Maude. Or I could try something else."

"What'd you do?"

"I wrote about his club foot. Something about the man's weakness attracted me. You know his poem *I Stood on Tiptoe*?"

"No."

"He had to stand on tiptoe, it wasn't a matter of choice. To cover up his limp. Hated to cross a room. Would jack himself up against the mantel and stay there and all these babes would swoon at his feet. Intrigues me, a man's handicaps. And that's what caught my ear. What you said about the underdog. Same thing."

Albert eyed the man warmly, and they ordered a drink and began to talk with animation about Lord Byron, and Albert told him about the speech and that odd memory that hung at the back of his mind like some kind of phantom.

That got them to talking about the deeps of the mind, how things lay back there like dark forms at the inner wall of a cave until they suddenly came rushing forward and there was a thought or a memory that hadn't been there a moment before. That was the way mathematics were, too, and the way a problem solved itself, Nathan said.

"It's all a question of questions, not answers," he continued. "I mean, you sometimes feel it's spooky the way things just leap out at you after you've been messing around for weeks with a problem. Wham, and there it is."

They were through lunch before they knew it, and Albert was telling Nathan about his job, how he never really had liked it, but how his boss, the executive vice-president, had long depended on Albert's expert knowledge of a field that no one else seemed to command.

"I never have been able to warm up to copper, but there I am, the expert on price trends, because no one else ever wanted to become what I've become. A degree in English Literature. That's all I have . . ."

"That's more than I have," Nathan said.

"And less. You're a Ph.D., aren't you?"

"That's got nothing to do with it. It's still more than I have."

Ann Pym

□ Closing doors signaled trouble. Ann Pym knew it from twelve years of devoted service with only a few days missing because of illness. Straightening out the files in the little alcove outside Mr. Pierce's suite, she tried to catch any words, but just a fragment now and then drifted under the door.

Ann was usually dressed in muted colors, tidily but plainly. Ann was not pretty like Albert's daughter Jenny or his late wife Beth. Ann knew it, and felt the daily struggle to live with something she hated—her own face.

Ann Pym was forty-five, graying, and uninterested in dyeing or bouffanting or otherwise evading the signs of advancing years. Lunch each day started promptly at twelve with a can of Metrecal, and ended at twelve-fifteen, when she began cutting the stencil for Mr. Cartwright-Chickering's daily price bulletin to management. Done by two-fifteen, or sometimes two-thirty if the final confirmations from the L.M.E—everything was by initials—made a difference in her accurately typed columns of figures. Then a few moments of dictation and that was the day.

A voice came through the door, even though Ann wasn't eavesdropping. "That's fifty-five thousand dollars, chief. Remember that!"

She lived with her mother in Halcyon Square and went to the opera as often as she could, ruling out only *La Traviata*. Everything else, she could have seen a dozen times and exult in each note.

La Perichole was next, and her libretto was already lying open in her upper left-hand drawer for her to scan just as soon as . . .

"What are you saying, Doyle?" Mr. Pierce's voice had

never been raised in her memory, and even Myrtice, his stolid secretary, seemed to have noticed, because she put down her copy of *Time* and glanced with surprise toward the door.

"Some conference!" she said.

"What's it about?" Ann asked innocently.

"Matters of mutual concern, I imagine."

Ann smiled sweetly. "Thanks." When she smiled, her full lips drew back and revealed a pleasant set of teeth. It wasn't likely that she could get any real information when Cartwright-Chickering was gone. She depended on him for what hard news she could get on that floor, and on the people in Accounting and in Personnel for the tidbits that were known only to management.

She finished putting folders in the cabinet and came back to her desk briefly. One call: a commodity analyst from Wall Street, wondering what the company's position on long contracts in zinc would be, forward from May. He would have to await Mr. Cartwright-Chickering's return, Ann explained in her most pleasant way.

That left her free, and had the intuition not been so strong, she would have settled down to her libretto. Instead, she went to the elevators, planning to go to her friends in Accounting. As she stood there, the doors slid swiftly open, and two dark-visaged forms emerged.

She recognized them immediately as the manager and the assistant manager of the Wire Mill Division. Neither acknowledged seeing Ann Pym, although both of course knew her well.

Her apprehensions became more vivid. Two men drawn in from eight hundred miles away. For what? She went to see her friend Gladys Bronislaw, the chief clerk in Accounting. Gladys knew more than anyone else because she had been around for longer than anyone else and worked a longer work day than anyone else. Her adversaries said she read people's mail after hours, but Ann never really believed that.

Gladys sat in a glass-walled office, bolt upright in her chair. A stream of young girls with gum in their mouths came wiggling in to Gladys with pieces of paper. She would scan each briefly, pull her pencil out of her dense upswept hair, and using it as a baton, would correct her charges. A sudden nod of comprehension from the girl would give Gladys the reward she sought.

In between times, Gladys told in fits and starts the story of a new purchasing policy in the Special Fabrication Division. Warehousing, to save about 3 per cent, was to be shifted to another location.

"I don't understand," Ann said.

"It's not easy," Gladys said with a sigh. "The new place, in Oronton, was supposed to have fifty thousand square feet of space available immediately, with racks in place, and another hundred and fifty thousand in thirty days. All based on the price of copper. I'm surprised your boss didn't hear anything about this, Ann."

"Nothing, as far as I know."

"Nothing at all?"

"No. I'm sure he hasn't."

Gladys pushed her pencil back into her hair and thrust a cigarette into her carmine-red lips. Another perplexed girl came in. "Miss Bronislaw."

"Yes, Mary."

"Where do I reconcile this figure?" She pointed glumly to a column of figures.

"Carry forward your subtotal, Mary. And enter this in the journal under G and A. But first compare your vouchers." The girl nodded, turned, and padded out, cracking her gum in her molars as she went. Ann jumped.

"Don't let 'em get you down, honey," Gladys said heartily. "So, as I was sayin', the racks weren't there. And there were only twenty-five thousand feet cleared, not fifty. . . . So that means paying two hundred dollars a day for each boxcar on the siding. At least that's what May told me in Traffic. So then we have to begin handling the customer complaints here, as there is nothing—absolutely nothing—going out now from the Special Fabrication Division. They're three hundred and fifty orders behind.

"And now they are afraid they'll be five hundred behind in another week, and the Order Processing Section is beginning to get bogged down because of the switchover to the computer. You know, one customer has been handled by one senior clerk in such and such a way. . . . Well, you can't tell that to a computer. So that's another thing . . ."

"I see."

The story poured out of Gladys, as if she had been denied the pleasure of talking for several weeks. The picture was hopelessly confused. Only one thing was clear. The general

manager of the Special Fabrication Division in Cleveland was on the spot. That would be Gerald Connaught. A vision of him came to Ann's mind, and it filled her with turmoil. The face, so like another she had once known, and the body, so unlike . . . Bulging so badly that his pants—already fifty-six at the waist, she guessed—were turning over at the top.

Gerald Connaught the enthusiast, the man for a sharp slogan, to which Albert would react coolly in his crisp, declarative way. Nothing to offend, but a blow for sensibility. She admired Albert because he spoke nearly with the authority of an old Bostonian.

To Ann, Boston was the only city and the only culture that completely met with her approval. Boston Common for her, Marlborough Street, and her grandfather's house. Stained glass in the fanlight and the number 27 set in bright milk-white porcelain against the blue enameled-iron plate.

Daffodils by the acres blooming, and the wind fetching off the Charles, soaring in the branches, and box kites flown off Grandfather's roof, or strolling in the Common. Love, once, with a ruddy young man studying medicine at Harvard. He walked in on old Mike Curley, introduced himself as if Curley knew him, and walked out with the contract for pruning every tree in the Common. Enough to pay a man's college education, which is just what he did. But then came the war, and a P-40 with the Flying Tigers claimed Ann's fiancé.

A burst of flak from the Japanese light cruiser *Kanamoto*, and that was the end of her young medical student. Grief, and long days of isolated somnolence. And now another face like his, an uncanny resemblance. He was coming toward her, Gerry Connaught.

"Annie, lass," his loud voice said.

She shuddered visibly.

"Don't frown at an old friend. Where's Al?" he asked, putting his hands on the edge of her desk and moving toward her. She rolled her chair back a foot and a half.

"Don't be skittish. Every time I get close . . ." He straightened up, hands behind his back. "Where's Al?"

"Jury duty . . ."

"All week?"

"Yes."

"Well you don't have to get huffy about it, Ann. I just

wanted to know. You might tell him, if I was him I wouldn't linger away from the office this week."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Connaught."

The kite came back in her mind's eye, soaring crimson and yellow. Shuddering and popping into the blue, buffeted, and almost invariably fouled by a tree or a telephone line, but while it lasted . . .

Ann realized that her thoughts had wandered when they should not have. She snapped back to alertness, and she saw now that Connaught and Pierce were in the conference room with the others. Much later they emerged, silently, almost grimly. No eye met hers.

The Meeting

□ "Miss, get me light coffee, please . . . no sugar." Buster Doyle was leaning over Ann's desk, reaching into his waistcoat for a coin. He glanced back at her. "I haven't met you, have I? You work for Mr. Pierce?"

"Mr. Cartwright-Chickering."

"Oh." A flickering surprise in the eyes, and a sudden surveying of the surrounding terrain. "He . . . ?"

"On jury duty this week."

"I see. And your name?"

"Miss Pym."

"Ann Pym?"

"Yes."

"I'll be damned!" he said, a look of joy suffusing his face. "Six letters!"

Ann rose and moved toward the canteen. "Light with no sugar?"

"Right!" he said, and he moved a step after her, paused, and watched her with admiration and smacked his fist into his opened palm. He turned back toward the conference room. "Six letters!" he repeated to no one in particular, shaking his head and smiling.

The gathering ones inside were murmuring audibly

through the closed double doors. Another noise, the pinging of the elevator bell, signaled the arrival of new participants to the eighth floor. Others drifted in from adjoining offices: Connaught, the Wire Mill men, and staff men from the presidential suite.

David Pierce came out of his office and headed toward the conference room. Deep mahogany cordovan slid over wall-to-wall carpeting, while inside, gold watches were smoothed against hairy wrists, a shoe ascended, legs in a figure 4, and the tip rubbed on the rear of the trouser leg. Shining for Number Two.

Cuff links visible, shining in the light, gold, the size of silver dollars, glistening star-sapphire rings, and Masonic diamond lapel pins, and the slight scent of male lotion—*Fleurs de Tabac*, Sandalwood. Handkerchief pluming sharply out of pinstripes, and silk linings rubbing against combed-cotton shirting.

Ann Pym was back, and David Pierce glanced over at her, puzzled, and then swept Doyle's face. "No coffee for the rest of us, Doyle?"

"Er . . . sure, Mr. Pierce. I didn't think . . ."

Pierce looked like Harvard '26, lean and mostly gray, and sharp at the nose and mouth. Thin glasses, like Albert's, sat midway on his nose, and the look over the top was like a Kansas banker telling you he has to foreclose, you understand, nothing personal, but business is business.

Number Two turned to her, a slight smile on his thin lips. "Ann, would you and Myrtice mind terribly getting coffee for the men?"

"Not at all, Mr. Pierce."

She and Myrtice began, then, in the tumultuous rising and falling of introductions and conversations, to take their orders.

"Henry Hackle. Call me Hank."

"Light with two sugars, please."

"Just call me Hank."

"It's got twenty-one . . . oh, oh, that's . . ."

". . . the way the ball bounces."

"Hey! Good. Real good!"

"Five martinis for lunch, two more at dinner, and he falls asleep in front of his TV."

"With sautéed mushrooms. Delicious, really."

"Black, please, and just half a cup. I've got a twitch."

"Don't tell us about your problems. We got enough of our own. None for me, thanks."

"Antofagasta, and right away you're on the wrong coast. But you can't tell him. Thirty-seven years, he keeps saying; thirty-seven years with the company."

"Regular, honey."

"Black, please, for me. And regular for Mr. Hackle. You can put both ours right here."

"All's I know is we're down seven per cent in the Wire Mill Division and management isn't happy. . . . I mean who would be happy? Just because of some stupid mix-up on shipments or inventories . . . or whatever it is."

"I think it's both."

"Both. All right, both. Well, would you?"

"Hackle. Just call me Hank. With Randolf Datatronic."

"Regular, please. And black for him."

"A 'pause,' they call it."

"It's just too long. Twenty-one characters . . . I don't care what anybody . . ."

"Not now!"

"'Pausel' That's a hot one. That's a euphemism."

"It's a what?"

"Moratorium."

"What?"

"All right. A thrombosis. I don't care what you call it, it's a g. d. paralysis."

"Very well, gentlemen, shall we come to order?" Mr. Pierce looked coolly down the table. "Mr. Doyle, will you sit here, please? And Mr. Connaught, here, please?"

The walnut door latched behind them, and Mytrice and Ann moved out toward the canteen again. "What is it all about?" Ann asked, but in her heart she thought she might know. Myrtice shrugged. They walked into the canteen, where nickels and more nickels poured from their fingers into the machines, and coffee spurted steaming into plastic cups.

"It's a funny thing," Myrtice Holtz said, with a far-away expression in her eyes.

"What is?"

"Mr. Pierce. Never will have a crockery cup."

"Neither will Mr. Cartwright-Chickering," Ann said.

"That's just because he's tight. With Mr. Pierce it's different. He doesn't want to feel this is his home. . . ."

Ann felt irritated. "So?"

"So he keeps drinking his coffee—an executive vice-president—the same way the shipping-dock boys drink theirs. I mean it signifies something, don't you think?"

"I hadn't looked at it just that way."

They loaded their plastic trays and backed into the double doors. Hands inside rushed to help as they appeared. Again, the jumbling voices and the breakdown of order. Mr. Pierce looked piqued.

Ann could feel it: foreboding, gray, a cloud over the sun. The eyes of David Pierce would not meet hers. It was something, then, so clear that she nearly began to tremble. She knew that it was turning against Albert. But how could it? And why? It didn't make any sense at all! She wanted to telephone him. To announce her suspicions so that there would be no mistaking.

Myrtice was waiting at the door, quizzical. Mr. Pierce was intently studying the ashtray in front of him. There was silence, then, elsewhere in the room. Waiting, and watching.

"So the package to negotiate depends on the monthly upkeep spread out over the life of the equipment. I don't know what management will see fit to recommend, but if you ask me . . ."

"We didn't ask you," Mr. Pierce said.

Ann Pym moved to the door through the embarrassed silence, and as it latched behind her, there came an explosion of voices inside. There was a sinking in her chest as a heavy weight descended over her heart, sank through her middle, and kept on descending.

The Library

□ The bailiff was leaning over the railing and talking into the phone. "No, ma'am, he's still in the jury room. I'll try to get him a message, but I can't promise anything."

She talked fast. There was a moment's wait.

"I just glanced in there. They're all gone. I think they've been released for the day. . . . Yes, ma'am."

Albert and Nathan were walking slowly down the courthouse steps, laughing easily in the pale afternoon sun. "Well that's really interesting," Nathan was saying. "Really interesting. A whole group of them?"

"It just came back, it's very unclear. It's been forty years."

"Well let's go look it up, then. Go to the Campion Collection, that's what I say!"

Keys turned in sections caged like vaults of bullion. Old books, reviews, scholarly journals. Yellowed pages, flaking under the thumb, moldering before they were a half-century old. A scent of acid in the air.

A bare light bulb overhead, and the iron and cement bulkheads reverberated like battleship companionways under their tread.

A bare maple table sat there, next to the translucent windows reinforced by fine imbedded wires, guardians against burglars.

"Here's something," Nathan said, scanning an old title. "*The Rising of the Luddites*," he said. They were reading avidly, side by side.

"Here's the initiation ceremony," Nathan said.

"Read it, will you?" Albert asked, and the younger man read while Albert leaned back in his chair, clanging up against a pipe beam behind him. His eyes were closed and his hands were propped behind his head. The rich baritone of Nathan's voice added stately dignity to the words:

"All right, Albert. Here, on page twenty: "What is thy name?" "John Booth." "Art thou willing to become a member of our society and submit without demur or question to the commands of General Ludd?" "I am." "Then say after me: I, John Booth, of my own voluntary will, do declare and solemnly swear that I never will reveal to any person who are members of this secret committee, their proceedings, meetings, places of abode, dress, features, complexion, or anything else that might lead to a discovery of the same, either by word or deed, or sign, under the penalty of death by the first brother who shall meet me, and my name and character blotted out of existence and never to be remembered . . . So help me God . . .'"

"That's pretty somber," Albert said.

"No more than necessary, I suppose," Nathan replied.

They scanned the old books there in the stacks until they had learned all that could be learned of the machine-wreck-

ers and of their mysterious leader, Ned Ludd. Albert said, "Oral tradition. Passed on by word of mouth, mostly."

They walked out of the old library in silence and onto the narrow street, where the pinks and blues of neon were cutting through the afternoon gloom as the setting sun plunged them into deep shade.

"What's a mathematician doing against machines?" Albert asked, turning to view his companion. There was a silence and then a smile began to spread over Nathan's features.

"Against? Is that how you see it? Are *you* against?"

"Ask a question and I get a question."

"Isn't that what Mr. Socrates said was the way to wisdom?"

Albert looked around, realizing that something that had never put itself into words before was suddenly hovering over him.

"Well?" Nathan asked. He stopped at a fireplug and propped his foot up on it and was holding in his hand the green tyrolean hat that he never seemed to put on his head.

"I don't know."

"Well, I know. My uncle Jake, he lost an arm at twenty-eight. Logging accident. Power saw. Lost his life the year after that. Planing machine. My brother, Billy, got his third and fourth fingers mashed off by a punch press. My grandfather was thrown out of a job with the railroad—not that it was much of a job—when they went off coal. I could go on, and the Osgoods have had it good. I mean, relatively. I never knew my father. And my oldest sister died a whore. Her husband was killed by a thresher."

There was nothing more said, but Albert knew then that they understood each other, and at the corner of his eye a small tear gathered and threatened to trickle down his cheek. Nathan stole a surreptitious glance at him, and Albert felt his throat tightening.

"Of course every word I've just said is rubbish," Nathan said calmly.

"How?"

"I mean none of it is true."

"I don't understand. . . . What *is* true, then?"

"All right. I was born in Paris. My father was a chemist and my mother was an operatic contralto. My uncle wrote seven songs. You've heard them all. And three of them earn us about six thousand a year, year in and year out. Then

my parents both taught for years—mother, voice and father, chemistry (what else?)—until my father invented this process for polyethylene that the Germans pay him a royalty on. So it isn't that we suffer. I went to school at the lycée and then to Oberlin. A year at Göttingen. And then graduate work at M.I.T. So, really, I haven't known hardship except as a sociological fact."

"In other words, no fact at all in your personal life."

"I see what it does, the System . . . and I remember it. Race memory, call it."

"You have dinner plans?"

An evasive gesture.

"Well, then, at least let me buy you a drink," Albert said.

They went into a bar, where the waiter snubbed them. Albert was furious, ready to lodge a complaint, but Nathan laid a soothing hand on his arm. "Take it easy, Al. It's nothing. No joke. That happens to me six, seven times a week."

"Why did you tell me all that stuff about the thresher and the punch presses?"

"Because they're generally true. The letter of the truth? That's another thing. But the spirit of the truth is something that does touch me. Like when that waiter . . ."

"I see."

"No you don't. You might want to see, but you don't see. Nobody does, unless he's living it."

Albert's eyes came to rest on the line of bubbles moving up the glass of imported beer in front of him, and he went into a limbo, sorting out as best he could the story of his life, and his loneliness, and his new friend, and the vibrations that he felt, as if there were a certitude growing, but that would take more time to form itself. The trip—why was it taken, anyway?—downtown to the old library building, and the excitement of finding the old accounts.

Nathan stole a fast glance at his wristwatch. "Man, I gotta run. Look, I'll be seeing you this next week, and we'll keep in touch."

Albert rose to his feet. "Do you really have to rush off?" He didn't press for a reply. Nathan nodded, set his glass down firmly, and moved swiftly off into the gloom, and Albert just stood there, feeling more isolated than he had in weeks and more exhilarated at the same time.

It had been a genuine encounter. How long, he asked himself, had it been since his last one? He wasn't being

treated like a skill, or an object, or a piece of corporate furniture, and that alone was enough to put a spring in his step once again as he headed home for the cold can of baked beans that he was to eat alone for supper.

The Knapp Family

□ Jenny Knapp, a peach-pink cheek turned to catch a bird-song, huddled in her zinnia patch, the sun coming at her from behind a cloud that alone marred the cerulean sky overhead. In the distance where she could see them, Anthony, her first-born, and Michael, her second, played with plastic rifles their grandfather had sent to them.

Her father worried her: living alone as he did, and having nothing but the dry statistics of copper prices between him and retirement. He had his fishing, she remembered, and saw in her mind's eye the jumble of his auto trunk, full of the eternal creel and waterproof boots, the rods and lures, and the rusting implements of fresh-water angling.

Yet as Hill said, the place for fishing was hardly up North there where her father lived, but here in the Sea Islands, where the pompano run in the tidal creeks, and where the cobia and the sea trout abound.

Suddenly she felt her husband's hands on her back, and his kiss atop her close-cropped blond hair. "Finished?" she said, turning around.

His face had the etched lines of defeat. "No go."

"Something went wrong?" she said, suddenly feeling his sorrow and wishing to share it. A silent nod of assent. "Where?"

"I don't know. Second stage, I think. I mean, you'd think that this assignment of all my assignments might be a little more easy. Go without a hitch. But no. Everything that could go wrong has."

"Oh, Hill! I'm so sorry." She hugged him and walked with him, arm in arm, to the breezeway, past the small sandbox

there, and onto the screened porch that looked off to the beach where the sea breezes were gathering and wafting across the island toward them. She got him a beer, and he sank into the raffia wicker chair and tipped back on the rear legs.

"Did your father's secretary call you?"

"Ann Pym? No. Why?" A sudden apprehension swept Jenny, and she leaned sharply forward in her chair. "Why, honey?"

"I just wondered. She called me. Wondered if the old man had been in touch . . ."

"I wish you wouldn't call him that. . . . Why did she call, do you think?"

"I don't know. Something about a big meeting. He's supposedly out on jury duty . . ."

"Is it serious, do you suppose? I mean, should I call him?" She was on her feet, and the children were running toward her, Anthony with his new plastic rifle broken in two.

"What would we tell him? No, I don't think so, Jenny. You know Miss Pym . . . a bit of an alarmist."

Jenny wanted badly to call her father. "What else did she say?"

"Nothing," Hill said, setting his can, empty, down on the cement floor of the porch. "Hot, isn't it?"

"Yes. Beastly."

"Well, it won't be long now, honey. The next assignment areas were posted this morning."

"Really? And . . . where will it be?"

"The Mountain West . . . Denver, probably. Or maybe Boise."

"Oh." She sank down on the couch-swing, and just then Anthony her oldest, seven and fidgety, came bursting in, nearly in tears. He glanced at her for an instant, and then, seeing his father sitting back in the shadows of the porch, made for him with his lament.

The gun, new, had broken, and there was no reason for it, was there? No reason at all. Except that they made them weak. Hill, his cares forgotten in a moment, took the plastic rifle in hand and began studying it.

Jenny went back to her zinnias, her plastic watering can in hand, hurrying so she could begin fixing lunch. She stopped at the wall faucet. She thought of her father, alone,

upright, and too proud to call her, needing them, and not letting them know.

She shook her head, thrust the can under the spigot, and tapped the perforated watering head against the concrete foundation of the shell house that she had so despised ever since they had been assigned to the Melanie Island Missile District. But it was a coveted assignment, and confirmed their feelings that Hilton was being groomed for a large administrative post in Washington, probably the Pentagon, as soon as he had become more seasoned.

There was a faint cracking sound, and the head of the watering can sheared off and plopped into the sandy soil at her feet. "Oh, for goodness sakes!" she said, irritated.

She leaned down and looked closely at the jagged edge of the yellow material, and then she fit the irregular pieces together like a puzzle and held the head in place, as she watered her zinnias and petunias. A quantity of water dribbled through the cracks and down her bare bronzed leg and onto her red canvas sneakers. It was hot enough so that it didn't make much difference; in fact it felt good to her.

The can was empty. She went back to the porch, where Hilton sat with the boys on the floor, intently peering at the broken rifle. "Something's been eatin' on it, I'd say," he said in a low murmur.

"What, Dad?"

"A prehistoric animal?" Michael asked, pushing his hair back from his eyes.

"No, stupid, there are no more prehistoric animals," his brother said contemptuously.

"You mustn't speak like that to one another," Jenny said, surprising them with her presence.

"You came up mighty quietly," Hilton said, beaming up at her with his appraising glance that always made her feel a bit uncomfortable. What if he should turn it on another woman? What if they saw his dark good looks as she did, and made . . . But no, she told herself. Marriage was a matter of trust and she must be as trusting as her parents had always been of each other. Laughter, then, sudden and unexpected, came booming around her.

"Did you water the zinnias or yourself?" Hill was asking.

"Yeah, Mom, you didn't aim too well," Anthony was saying, laughing.

"Yeah," Michael agreed. "You didn't aim too well."

"Don't be a copycat; everything I say you say. That's being a copycat."

"All right, boys, all right," Hill said, motioning them to be still.

"Well I couldn't help it. This watering can just broke. And I couldn't fix it. Two-ninety-eight, and broken!"

Hill's eyes narrowed, and he rose swiftly from his knees and went over to her. "Where's the can?" he asked, and the urgency of his tone surprised her.

"Outside. By the live oak there."

He burst through the screen door, and the boys rushed after him. She went to the door and laid her hand on the cross-member and watched as Hilton leaned down and studied the broken neck of the can carefully. He picked up both pieces and came swiftly back to the porch. "Where's this been?"

"In the shed, there, next to the lawn mower."

"And where have your guns been, boys?"

They shrugged.

"You don't know?"

"By the tree. Or in the grass, I think," Michael said.

"Mine was by the shed," Anthony said.

"Show me. Where?"

A small procession formed, going back around the aluminum-walled shed. There was talk, then, about things Jenny didn't entirely follow. Some kind of mildew, he seemed to be saying. She went in and began to prepare lunch, and again her thoughts turned to her father.

Albert at Home

□ Albert let the telephone ring, and he sat there in his favorite chair in front of his small fireplace and drank his scotch whisky without ice from a small glass with a Dartmouth Indian decaled on its side. No telephone talk for him. All he wanted to hear was music.

The Pastoral Symphony came lyrical and stirring from his large loudspeakers, but something was not quite right. He strained to listen. Suddenly, under the violins, came the sound of horns, ever so faintly, playing out of phase, as if they were moving backwards.

One of the hidden drawbacks of stereophonic tape, he had discovered, was something called "print-through." They promised you twenty thousand plays with tape. Never any surface noise. Never wear out. He had even learned—Hill said it was easy—about demagnetizing the heads every eight hours, and capstan lubrication, and mending tapes that were forever getting broken.

Hill had urged it on him. "A good investment, Albert. And you'll understand how computers work, how they read magnetic tape, if you get one. So there's another good reason for it." That argument had hardly been the crucial one, but Albert had remembered it.

He leaned forward, but now the phantom horns were gone. There was only the purity of the orchestra, allegro, moving into the thunderstorm movement. As the glowering sound of Beethoven-thunder surrounded him, barking with angry brass and sawing with percussive strings, his thoughts turned back to the machine-wreckers, the night-time marauders marching under starlight.

Imagine the audacity of them, walking into a great spinning mill and taking their hammers and bludgeons to the machinery. And never any intent to attack men, that was what was so admirable about them, just machines. But then, inevitably, something went wrong with their organization. The need of the leadership for a victory pushed them to a murder from ambush, and then, of course, the counter-measures grew fearsome indeed. Pride. That was the problem.

"Isn't it *the* problem?" Albert said aloud, and nodded his head emphatically in agreement. The rule he had made was that so long as he just asked himself questions, it was all right. When he began to answer his own questions aloud, however, he would have to become actively concerned. Beyond that, he wasn't sure what he would do about it.

The room was still full of the signs of his dead wife Elizabeth, the flowered slipcovers on the stuffed chairs and divans, and the carefully placed etchings and watercolors that she had done; the good Philadelphia antiques that she

had brought to their marriage from her family home in Gladwyne. The bronze bust of her grandfather, the first president of the Paoli & Harrisburg Railroad.

How he missed her at times like these, in his house, quiet except for machine-made music, with only the memory of Jenny hanging there, and the faint scents that even now remained of Beth. The new highway had to go through, the engineers said, and even Hill said their calculations were correct—just from an onlooker's standpoint, but still, it was agreement.

Engineers all seemed to agree that so long as it meant ramming to earth another acre of pines or ripping an old house from its foundations, it must be progress. Ram, ram through the village they came, like the votaries of a giant dragon divinity, pushing topsoil off the earth and leaving the scarred underearth there for the rains to pelt and erode. Then they moved in with their jackhammers and broke down the hill of basalt that stood behind the Cartwright-Chickering acreage, until they had opened a man-made valley from the high spur of land that ran there, right down to the river, and that was where they came with their great roaring compressors and tungsten-steel-tipped inserts to rip at the rock and powder it, to fill the air with their screeching brakes and billowing fumes of monoxide, until they came then with monstrous scraping blades and giant trucks that dumped cement onto the soil, until the great highway, the redundant highway, was finished, and the birdsong and babble of brooks in that part of the country grew less audible, and in its place came the relentless roaring of cars and great trucks.

One day Beth, unsure of their new car anyway, came to the interchange, and a great tractor-trailer caught the Chrysler on the left side, just behind the driver's seat, and pitched it over on its side, crumpling it. Beth was dead when the police got there.

He finished the scotch, and began to tell himself how important it was not to be bitter at the great highway, at the mindless enthusiasm for ugliness that came with progress, or at the loss of life that also inevitably accompanied each new public improvement. The arrogance of such technology, the simpering certitude of the engineers, filled him with a kind of animal fury, fight against his anger as he would.

But then he thought that he himself must be vulnerable to a charge of the opposite kind of pride. A belief in the past that verged on rigid conservatism. His name, for one thing, would more easily have been rendered simply Cartwright, or perhaps Chickering, except for a promise he had made to his grandmother just like the promise his father had made.

"Now, Albert, you'll be pressed to change, just as we were. But remember, it marked the end of the Civil War in our family, and that is something that we oughtn't to ignore, no matter what people say—and they will say things. Lord knows I've heard it all my married life, and chances are you've heard it most of yours, but some things are just worth fighting for, and this is one of them, young man. This is one of them."

How many clerks in department stores, or gas-station attendants, or insurance salesmen calling to make a solicitation stumbled and were uncertain? The effort of leaving a message that Mr. Cartwright-Chickering called was more than he could tolerate sometimes. Yet each time he used his name, he held his family's tradition intact and followed his grandmother's and his father's wishes precisely.

The fire was low, the recording was finished, and he was hungry. He decided to go out to the woodpile by the garage and get a few more logs before opening up a can of beans. On the way back from the pile, he saw the lights swing into the gate down the drive, and make their way up the long, tree-lined drive toward him. He hurried into the house, dumped the logs in the hearth, and made his way back to the front door. The car stopped down below in the parking area beside the garage. In the gloom of the dusk he called out in his most proprietary tone of voice: "Can I help you?"

"Oh, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering. Are you all right?" The small form down below came to the base of the steps and peered up at him. "Are you?"

He wondered if she might be joking. "What's the meaning of this, Ann?"

"Are you?"

"Yes, of course . . . Why?"

"I tried to call . . ." She edged forward up the stairs. She glanced apprehensively back toward the car. She nodded vigorously.

"Why?"

"Oh, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering. You shouldn't have been out this week. Things are happening."

"Who's in the car with you? Why don't you come in?"

"Oh, I hope you don't think . . . Mother came out with me. . . . I was so worried when we couldn't get you on the phone."

"Why don't you come on in?"

The plump old lady ascended the stairs with the imperious air of a dowager, on the arm of her daughter.

They had been so worried, she explained, that they had abandoned their tickets to *Tosca* that evening. Taken them to the standing-room-only line and sold them. They set off a scuffle, as Mrs. Pym explained, that was one of the drollest things in many a month. The great ruffian there—that was her word for him—who put out his chest and treated the faithful opera-lovers like so many waifs at a soup kitchen, had looked defeated when two young people whom he had been particularly rude to came back shortly after and waved the Pym tickets in his face. Victory.

"Who's we?" Albert asked, turning to Ann.

"Well, Jenny, too."

"You called her?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's terrible, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering. The meeting. Today. They're . . . well, sir, I'm afraid of the worst. And so is mother."

"Yes, that's right," the old lady said, "and if this travesty, this miscarriage occurs, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering . . ."

"Miscarriage of justice, Mother," Ann said quietly.

"Oh yes. Miscarriage of justice occurs, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering. I just want you to know I am prepared to order my broker to sell my entire holdings in United Metals, and my daughter is prepared to do the same."

"That's very nice of you," Albert said, growing somewhat perplexed, "but I'm afraid I don't understand. Why Jenny? And why surrender your *Tosca* tickets? What could be so urgent?"

Ann told him then about the meeting that morning, and the scraps of talk she had heard, the significant glances that had shot through the air, and the atmosphere of hugging-mugger that surrounded Mr. Pierce and Miss Holtz. "We

don't like the looks of it, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering," the old lady said regally.

"No, I can see why not," he said, becoming alarmed now that something was indeed afoot. "But I was planning to go in Monday anyway, Ann. Our jury term is about to wind up, and if I'm not selected tomorrow, I could come in tomorrow afternoon."

They talked about it for a moment, Albert growing more calm and even regarding the possibility of trouble at the office with some relief. Never liked that job anyway. But that would not do. Without a job, he would be unemployable, and there were his obligations that continued. His hope to educate his grandsons. His plan to buy some adjoining acreage. And his hopes to help Hill and Jenny make a down payment on a house once they were more permanently settled.

The ladies edged toward the door. They agreed that Albert should come naturally, not in a hurry, and should there be any trouble, Mrs. Pym reiterated, she would be ready to sell out her entire holdings. "Not major, mind you, but enough—I'm sure—to make the market price skid a bit, and frankly that's what I intend. Skid it down enough to make those overstuffed martinets think about a thing or two!"

The impression persisted in Albert's mind that both knew more than they were saying. A power struggle was taking place at the office, no doubt. They happened frequently enough to cause no more consternation among the old hands than a thunderstorm might cause.

Probably the systems manager—he was a comer—and Gerry Connaught. There might be a natural aversion, even a power vacuum, in view of David Pierce's avoidance of conflict.

No telling how things would turn, but there was a fair certainty in his mind, as Ann Pym was not an alarmist, that he was in grave danger. And yet . . . It would not do to react too fast. Let things take their course. He had a few potential answers. He smiled at Mrs. Pym's vehemence. He smiled and thought that, yes, the old lady might have something there, after all. The thing to do was wait a bit.

Buster Doyle and Gerald Connaught

□ "What do you mean 'Systems' Domain"? That isn't your domain and never has been!"

"Now, now, Mr. Connaught . . ."

"Why do you insist on 'Mr. Connaught'? I mean are you some kind of a holier-than-thou?"

Buster Doyle sagged a bit and hung his head. "Now, Gerry, let's go somewhere quiet and discuss this like adults, shall we?"

His humility disarmed the taller man, and they padded together down the long corridor outside the meeting room, through the double glass doors with the etched symbol for United Metals Corporation—the gleaming ingot against the beaker on the tripod, the UMCorp in three-dimensional block letters—and out to the fire door.

Down, clumping, to the lobby floor, and across the polished stone flooring to the coffee shop. Into the deepest booth there, back behind the sunglasses and the suntan lotion displays, next to the deep-fat fryer. Coffee, black, for both of them.

An earnest Doyle, bending into his unwelcome recitation with the genuine reluctance of one charged with a very disagreeable duty. Regularization of procedures meant, after all, certain adjustments, didn't you know? And such things always were painful, cutting some departments in inopportune places and in perhaps unwelcome ways.

The voice lowered in the confidential way, and the gentle quaking of the cheeks, and the unmistakable appearance of compassion in the eye. Hands, when they gestured, taking on the aspect of a preacher handing out the gospel message as if it came in units the length of French bread.

"Yes, yes," Gerry Connaught said, at length, and things began to get better between them.

Buster explained in his softest way how the reorganization of the Special Fabrication Division would have to be

accomplished. "I'm not trying to tell you how to run your division. . . ."

"You better not."

"Well, I'm not, I tell you. But management is concerned about that order backlog. Confusion. It's just that with this new system, your materials ordering—purchasing and general materials management—will have to be centralized here at headquarters, under—as Mr. Pierce said . . ."

Connaught was on his feet. "Like hell!"

"Now wait a moment . . ." Doyle got up and tried to put a restraining hand on Connaught, but the manager of the Special Fabrication Division did not bend an inch, and for a moment it looked as if he might take his great ham-like fist and begin raining blows on Broderick Doyle. "Wait a moment . . ."

Connaught was out into the aisle, and as he went, the beams under the tiled floor of the coffee shop trembled. He threw a half dollar up on the cashier's counter as he went past, and fluttered a rack of Kodachrome postcards in his wake as he pushed into the swinging glass doors.

Behind him, rushing to catch up, came Buster Doyle, but by the time he had gained the lobby, it was too late. Across the way, Connaught was slipping into a waiting elevator, and the green light winked out as the doors slid shut.

Doyle hurried into the next car, but a slow-moving postman, struggling with a bundle of mail, delayed the dispatch of the car by at least thirty seconds, while Doyle rapidly mopped his brow with his Irish-linen handkerchief, drawn repeatedly out of his coat pocket, from behind an array of ball point pens that Buster always kept there.

He began to fidget, to rub his hands together, and finally, he helped the postman struggle into the car with his burden.

Connaught was nowhere to be seen on the eighth floor, but a nod from the receptionist indicated that he was in Pierce's office, and the glance on Ann Pym's face confirmed that he had slipped in behind the closed doors.

Myrtice Holtz glared at him, but he seemed to look right through her. Slipping around her desk, he went right to the door and knocked once before twisting the knob and throwing open the door. "Mr. Pierce . . ."

Pierce was walking back and forth and Connaught was standing there with one hand on his head, and they both locked their gaze on Doyle as he came in. "I thought

you might be here, Gerry. Now just let's get one thing straight . . ."

An intense low conference, words flying about the room like projectiles, the tension like a magnetic field aligning iron filings in the jagged patterns of momentary repose. Pierce, struggling like a man with a tiller in a heavy sea, and forbearing, when each expected him to take a side.

A jumble of charge and countercharge, and all Pierce could think was that retirement for him was only two years off, and wouldn't it perhaps make sense to put in for it early? Let the Board wrestle with these two. Let Mr. Zouver, who always seemed to remain aloof from such struggles, exercise his presidential power and pick one of these oafs.

That was clearly what the management intended, and each had been advanced with the same objective in mind. Like two overweight horses, set to racing toward a remote finish line, certain only that one would win.

The issues were never clear. The charge of special privilege in purchasing balanced the countercharge of empire-building in Systems Management. There was a plea for continued decentralization of materials management and a counterplea that the economies of the 8080 required standardization of all procedures, company wide.

"You know, Mr. Pierce, as well as I do, what's involved. Mr. Hackle has made the point most forcefully." Buster was running strong now, and the fury of seven men could not stay him.

Another incoherent collision of words into nearly palpable objects that seemed to suck the oxygen from the room, that seemed to flourish on the cigar smoke that now was billowing out from Buster Doyle. He looked, as his cuff links shimmered in the cold light streaming down from the high-intensity light panels in the ceiling of Pierce's office, as if he had already begun to take command. But Connaught was not through. "I'm taking this to Mr. Zouver."

"Go ahead."

"I think I had better present it, Gerry," Pierce said.

"Well, then, I better go along, too," Buster said.

"Fair enough," Pierce said. He dialed the special number of the president. The three made a silent recessional to the other corner of the eighth floor. They had to wait a moment before being admitted, and Pierce saw that a cabinet door

was still slightly ajar, and inside he thought he saw a gleaming shaft, a golf stick.

Buster Doyle was not in doubt much longer, for he saw a small round object that the president palmed in his hand, and then slipped into his pocket. The track the ball had made in the rug was still visible.

They talked and the buzzing went on, and it was clear that there was no solution forthcoming when, after about twenty minutes, the president rose in a gesture of dismissal. "Very well, gentlemen. I'll let you know my decision."

"And for now . . . ?" Connaught asked.

"For now, the status quo."

"Status quo?" Doyle asked, impatiently. "But . . ."

"Let's let it rest," Pierce said. "I think it's time, don't you?"

"Indeed," Eli Zouver said, and the other men nodded their agreement.

There was a huffy exit, and as the three were striding down the hall, it wasn't until a few paces had been taken in silence that Pierce was suddenly aware that Doyle had peeled off and was back in the president's office, and it was all that Pierce could do to restrain Connaught from bellowing into the room after him like a wounded bull.

The Knapps Make a Discovery

□ Jenny Knapp went alone to the small post office, pluffing up a swirling cloud of dust as the family station wagon waddled up to the wooden front porch. Whatever millions of dollars the government might have been lavishing a few miles away on new missile launching devices and supporting buildings and facilities, the venerable post office still remained as primitive as it ever was, despite the whispered reports of a new building in the offing.

"Yep?" the old woman behind the cage said.

"Package for Dr. Hilton Knapp?" Jenny asked, pushing

forward the notice that had been left in the Knapp mailbox that morning.

"Yep," the woman said as she disappeared toward the back of the mail room. She struggled forward a few steps with a large carton, and then, as it was too heavy for her to manage alone, she called across the room for a boy to help.

"Mighty big box," the woman muttered. "This something to do with space?"

"My husband is with the center," Jenny said.

"Aha!" the old woman said, showing her missing teeth in her broad smile. "Well, sign right here, dearie, so's the insurance is taken care of. Soon's you unpack whatever it is you better check it, too."

"Yes, I suppose I should."

The boy carried it out the small door to the car, and it rested on the front seat next to Jenny as she jounced out of the parking lot and back to the shell house. She struggled with the thing, and as she did so, Anthony broke off from a baseball game he was pitching across the street and came to help his mother.

"What's that, the microscope?"

"I think so," Jenny said.

"Let me open it, please? Oh, please?"

A dubious look at the eagerly shining eyes of the boy. "You sure you can be trusted?"

"Oh yes! I'll be carefull"

"All right, Tony, if you'll be carefull"

She went in through the breezeway to the kitchen, where she began to peel the potatoes for the potato salad that evening, while young Anthony silently stripped away the carton from the package.

It had been another bad day for Hill, Jenny learned when he returned. Valving troubles were all but nullifying the scheduled completion of the program, and it looked as if they would have to delay their departure to the new assignment at least another month.

She consoled him, and he seemed to brighten up as he and the boys huddled around the microscope at the blond-veneer dining room table. Outside, the insects were setting up a chorus of sounds, while inside, the three hovered, getting the small light to work under the specimen slot of the microscope.

"Where'd you put that watering can, honey?" Hilton asked her.

"Threw it out, I think."

"No! I told you!" She was surprised by his vehemence.

He gestured to Anthony to go out to the garbage can. "When?" he asked her.

"I don't know. Yesterday, or maybe the day before."

"Has the garbage been collected yet?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Check, Tony, will you?"

The boy rushed out through the kitchen into the carport and into the utility room there where the garbage can sat. Jenny leaned out after him into the warm evening air, which was heavy and moist against her cheek. A rustling in the room and a low oath from the boy, and soon he emerged, triumphantly, with the watering can fragments.

She was glad to see it, yet curious and silent as Tony came back in. He was obviously proud of himself, as if he, the first-born, had brought an elusive quarry back to his doubting father; as if he had proved his prowess as a hunter.

"Good, Tony," his father said. "Right over here. And Michael, you get your brother's gun, will you? On the back porch, isn't it?"

The younger boy nodded and darted out into the screened porch, and in an instant was back with the broken plastic rifle, one piece in either hand. They adjusted a small Tensor light near the base of the microscope, and then, carefully, Hill broke off a small piece of the watering can first and placed it under the viewing mechanism.

He studied it for a moment, and then pushed it aside. "The gun, Mike, please."

"Whatever are you up to?" Jenny asked from the far side of the room.

"Just a minute, honey," Hilton said, a trace of impatience in his voice. He took the gun from his second son, broke off a small particle of the now-brittle plastic, and placed it under the eyepiece.

"Just as I thought," he said after a pause.

"What's that, Dad?"

"Something has been eating this stuff. . . ."

"A prehistoric monster?" Michael asked, rolling his eyes expansively.

"No," his father said distractedly. "Get me a couple of

those plastic bags, will you, Tony? Can you help him, Jenny?"

"Certainly," she said, darting to the cabinet beneath the sink, where she pulled out two of the film bags. Hilton broke off a piece of the watering can and slipped it into one of the bags and a piece of the rifle into the other.

"What is it?"

"Fungus," he said. "A million spores, I guess. Pink, orange, rust, brown, white. All kinds. Impossible to say how many."

"That's why you got the microscope?"

"Yes. I've been noticing the rust and smuts around. On the paint, for instance. Have you noticed under the carpet there? And on the wall there behind the icebox?"

"Yes."

"Rainy weather like we've been having . . . and at the base, too. The valving mechanism keeps fouling. It's the same thing, some kind of micro-organism attacking. Single-cell spores, disseminated by air currents. I don't know exactly. Washington has a mycologist coming down to check it for us."

"A what?"

"Fungus expert. Some kind of specialist in powdery mildew."

His expression was harried. Jenny wanted to ask him more questions, but his manner discouraged her. The boys apparently did not see his apprehension, and they at once began to bombard him with questions.

To Jenny's surprise, he began to reply patiently, explaining how the fine traces of tinted powder on the glass were clusters of spores, growing geometrically even as they gazed at them, and how they would float off into the air, waiting for a current to bear them toward some other possible feeding ground.

He told the boys how spores would last for months or even years until the right conditions arose to permit them to grow. How they could give you ringworm or athlete's foot, could kill your trees or peel the paint off your floor, crack stone off the Parthenon or even eat away some essential ingredient of a plastic toy until it collapsed. He told them how it could grow, if it was yeast, on petroleum, and how it could change carbon into sugar, which it then ate and flourished on.

"Those little things do all that?" Tony asked in disbelief.
"Yeah, Dad, do they?" his little brother echoed.

Their father was nodding his head silently. "Yes, and they can set back our missile program, too, by fouling our feed valves and eating away the adhesives."

"Gosh, that's terrible, isn't it?" Tony asked.

"Yes. Terrible."

The Last of Jury Duty

□ Nathan spotted Albert right away as he came into the general jury room, and slipped into the seat next to him.

"Whatcha reading now?"

"About the Industrial Revolution," Albert said.

"Oh. 'Art thou willing to become a member of our society and submit without demur to the commands of General Ludd?"

"Of course! Aren't you?"

"Nah . . ." Nathan said. "Nah. I wouldn't put up with that kind of nonsense. I never join anything."

"Me either."

Albert told his friend about his office worries. Something was going on, he said, and he wasn't sure what.

Nathan looked at him solemnly, then asked, "What? Something bad?"

"I don't know," Albert said, and then the officials began calling out names again before he could continue. Nathan's name was called but Albert's wasn't. They agreed to have lunch together if possible, but Nathan went out on a jury to the main-floor courtroom.

Albert was called to another panel, a case involving a woman's gas oven that supposedly exploded on her. He was made foreman of the jury, and as soon as the case was arranged and the panel approved by both attorneys, they began to hear evidence.

Albert looked apprehensively at his watch, wondering what chance there would now be that he would ever be

free for lunch, or what chance that the case might drag on into the next week.

His fears proved unfounded, because the attorneys approached the bench and suddenly it was settled and they were all released. Albert went on back to the main jury room to wait for Nathan.

Noon came, and then twelve-thirty, and Nathan's jury still remained in session. Albert finished his *Wall Street Journal* and his *Nonferrous Daily*, and turned back to his book, a heavy tome called *The Making of the English Working Class*.

He immersed himself in the tangled chronicle of the poor Englishman, cast out of his croft, crowded into the new industrial city, ground down by the voracious machines, dissenting as best he could.

Why did his thoughts always run in this same channel? Albert wondered. Why had he always had to struggle, over lunches in the executive dining room on the eighth floor at United Metals, not to express his real views?

The clock stood at two-fifteen, and only then did Albert go downstairs and look into the main courtroom, where Nathan's panel was sitting. Empty. He turned and began to go out the side door, and there he saw the deputies leading the jury on which Nathan was sitting back into the courtroom from their lunch.

Albert and Nathan exchanged glances. The jury was not likely to finish any time soon, Nathan's gesture said. Still, Albert decided to wait, and he tried to signal as much to his friend before going out the door to his lunch. He settled into a booth and opened his book again.

There wasn't any logic in striking back at a machine. That was all there was to it. Industrial development couldn't be reversed. It just couldn't. And yet, wasn't there a general feeling of sadness—not just in Albert's thoughts, but generally—for the good old days? For the broken sod, the felled forest, the sky smirched with yellowed fumes from acid vats? Weren't most by-products of industrial development simply ugly?

Albert thought then that it was like a fall from grace, a decline from a more blameless existence. Yes. But small-town life, the agrarian regimen that he had known as a boy, was hopelessly dull. Excitement came with the clamor

and the filth and the grinding gears. It was enough to mix a man's emotions, and fill his heart with sadness.

Albert's eye fell on a name in the fat book. Major John Cartwright sprang up as an early reformer, a pamphleteer, and there was another reference there. A "clerical brother" of the major had invented the power loom.

Albert wanted badly to show the page to Nathan, and he wanted with equal fervor to go back to the library once again. Now the clock said three-thirty, and still there was no sign of a break in the room below. Finally at five Albert decided to go on home, sadly aware that Nathan's jury might be tied up for hours more.

Monday Morning

□ David Pierce got to the office shortly after eight and pushed the stack of memoranda and papers back into the in-basket on the corner of his desk. There was only one piece of business that could command his attention this morning, and he nearly grew nauseated thinking about it.

It would have to be quick. That was the only way that it would be tolerable at all. David Pierce got up and walked over to the door at the far side of the room and opened it into the small private bathroom there. He strode up to the medicine cabinet. As he swallowed several pills, he studied his own face in the mirror.

The regular features staring back at him seemed alien, for for an instant, and in that instant, as if his brain was a fast-rewinding tape recording of every memory that had ever impressed itself on him, his career flashed in front of his eyes, and there was an insistent worsening of the pain in his occiput.

David Pierce was born in a manse, the son of a Presbyterian minister whose frosty manner never endeared him to his parishioners or suited him for the big-city parishes that he aspired to. David's mother, a mouse-gray little woman, always carried with her the air of defeat, and somehow

that had the effect of making young David all the more careful of his own aura. He learned the hard way to carry himself erect and to act more confident than he felt.

The headache got no better, despite the three aspirins, and David shook his head slowly and walked back behind his desk. There was no way to avoid it, he knew. There was the directive, and it had been initialed by Zouver. A buzzing on his desk. He depressed the small red Bakelite knob. "Yes, Myrtice?"

"Mr. Cartwright-Chickering is in his office."

"How long has he been in?"

"He's just taking off his coat now."

"All right, Myrtice. Thanks."

"Shall I call him?"

"No. I'll go over." He straightened in his chair, leaned forward to tidy up the fresh stack of mail that Myrtice must have just placed there, and then slid his chair back and rose to his full height. He thumbed his glasses back up his nose, buttoned his middle coat button, and went outside and headed across the expanse of office corridor behind Myrtice Holtz (whose gaze he could feel upon him) and past Ann Pym (who was standing silently behind her desk, her eyes looking fearful and vacant).

"Good morning, Ann," David Pierce said quietly.

"Good morning, Mr. Pierce," she said woodenly.

He knocked twice and then thrust open Albert's door. Cartwright-Chickering turned quickly and smiled as he saw his superior enter. "Good morning, Dave."

"Good morning, Albert. How was jury duty?"

"Pretty interesting. Terribly costly, the jury system, though."

"Yes, but worth it, don't you think?"

"Oh yes. Well worth it, cumbersome though it is. . . . And how are things with you?"

"Albert, I better see you for a moment. Can you come across?"

"Sure." A flickering look of fear played over Albert's features as he turned around fully to face David Pierce and to search his face.

"Is it all that serious?"

Pierce shrugged before straightening in the way he had long schooled himself to do when he felt more like trembling.

"It is, huh?" Albert asked.

A silent nod and a gesture of the head toward the other side of the corridor. Cartwright-Chickering came around the desk and Pierce put his arm around his associate's shoulder. When they got to his office, David Pierce motioned toward a large leather-upholstered couch, to which Albert descended slowly. He remained at the edge, not allowing his gaze to leave his superior's face for a moment.

David Pierce went around behind his desk and sat there clenching his hands in front of his face and bowing his forehead onto his folded hands, as if in prayer.

"Albert, this is the most difficult thing I've ever had to do. I feel . . ." He stopped and made a fist, as if he were pushing something into his own skull. "I feel as if someone were driving a spike right into my head."

"What . . . ?"

"Albert, we're going to have to ask that you go on terminal leave."

"Terminal leave?"

"Yes. We're prepared to offer a most generous arrangement."

"You're telling me I'm fired, in other words?"

"Well, not exactly. We're asking for somewhat—er—early retirement."

"Why?"

"Quite frankly, Albert, not for cause at all."

"Then why . . . ?"

"Albert, the Systems Management Department has discovered that to process your name in the new computer installation would cost an additional fifty thousand-plus. Your name—twenty-one letters and all. It's the longest name the computer boys have ever heard of. Unprecedented, they say. It's just too long to be handled along with all the other information that has to be handled—division, date of employment, social security number . . ."

"But that's absurd!"

A gesture of desolation, spreading his palms outward as if in supplication. "As I say, Albert, I hate this assignment, but it must be done. Mr. Zouver makes that quite plain. But he also asks that I express his compliments and, in behalf of the Executive Committee, he wishes to assure you of your full pension, even though it will still be three years before you would otherwise be eligible, and a severance set-

tlement of twenty thousand dollars. He wants it clearly understood that this is absolutely nothing against you, that he has the very highest regard for your work. So do we all!"

"Thirty years of service, David! That's worth something, isn't it?"

"Please, Albert. Think of me. Think of what this means to me! The new system is going in, and everyone has to conform. That's it." The voice was beginning to sound cold.

"And if you don't fit, you're out?"

"If you don't fit, you're out."

"And I don't fit?"

"I'm afraid not. I know it sounds silly . . ."

Albert was furious now. He rose to his feet and began pacing the floor. Who, he wondered, would be on hand to manage the contract advisory service for the company? Who would project price trends, and who would keep abreast of market conditions? Were his efforts of so little significance that his entire contribution could be swept aside?

David Pierce was quick to say he didn't know. "There are a lot of things about it I don't understand, Albert. All I can say is that I tried my best. I hope you will believe it . . ." He paused again, and the pain at the back of his head grew all but intolerable.

Albert looked at his old friend and for a moment felt an odd detachment, realizing that David Pierce did not at all want to do what he was doing, just as Albert himself had spent the last decade or two of his life doing things he really didn't want to do. But still, there was the matter of his self-interest.

"I don't think it's fair to give me less than ten months' pay when I am released through no fault of my own. I think at least the balance of my regular time here should be compensated. In other words, three years' pay."

"You'll be getting full pension."

"Still, I want full severance pay *plus* full pension."

David Pierce stood. "You prepare me a note of resignation, and I'll see what can be done. All right?"

"You agree on three years' pay?"

"I'll do what I can, Albert. I'll recommend it. All right?"

Albert got back to his feet. "Yes, fine."

Pierce was ashen by now, and there seemed even to be a threat of some kind of emotionalism, which Albert knew his superior would wish to avoid at all costs.

"I can't tell you how bitter a pill this is for me, Albert. But I do hope that you understand that this got caught up in things that really have nothing to do with you or with me. It just became a *cause célèbre*, twenty-one letters and all. You understand?"

Albert nodded wordlessly and went out into the ante-room and then slowly across to his office. He kept his head erect and his shoulders square, only by an act of will, focusing on a point in middle distance and trying as best he could to conceal his desolation.

Ann Pym Takes a Memo

□ "Ann, can you come in for a moment?"

She jerked her head up, alerted by the strange sound of his voice. She rose immediately, and her deeply furrowed expression signaled to Albert when she entered that she already sensed what had happened.

"A memo to the executive vice-president, please, Ann . . ." he said, but his throat was constricted and his voice wavered slightly. He had to pause and to take a sip of water from the desk carafe. Then he wheeled his chair around and gazed out the window to the Chauncy Towers across the street, where the weather ball said it was going to be in the mid sixties, and fair skies with low humidity. Just the right conditions to bring purple finches to feed on sunflower seed, he thought.

"Would you prefer it if I came back?" Ann asked, her voice carefully modulated and soothing to his ear.

He shook his head silently. He would gain his composure in a moment. It was just that there was something scary about being out, now, about realizing that this base of operations, this place where they took your telephone messages for you, paid for most of your lunches, and listened to your small observations—these offices that had become so much like home to him since Beth's death—were no longer to be his milieu.

It was hard to believe as he began to think about it. The early days when they actually had given him a roll-top desk and he had commanded most of the files himself. The merger, and the meeting with David Pierce, and his first real responsibility. The blistering pressures of World War II, when he alone of the procurement agents in the company could seem to crack through the bottlenecks at the mines and the smelters to get needed copper, and the letter of commendation from old Mr. Thompson, the dapper chairman of the Board. The year-end bonus that made it possible for Beth and him to pay off the mortgage in one chunk, and assure Jenny that she could go on to Radcliffe, after all, even though she finally chose Oberlin instead.

His triumphs and his defeats came swirling back before his eyes, and he realized, then, that one reason he had never left was that a man in his position accomplished so little that was tangible and verifiable. So little that could attract another employer. There was virtually nothing that he could claim to be really and exclusively his own. The price sheets, and the system for projecting the company's preferred contract position in the nonferrous metals, and the early-warning system when there seemed to be any imbalance in inventory at the smelters or at the wire mill.

"I really could come back, if you wish, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering . . ."

"No, Ann. I'll be all right. I've had a shock . . . Mr. Pierce has asked me to resign."

She shook her head and tried to speak, but no words came.

"But why surprise? You suspected it yourself, didn't you?" he asked.

"But not by Mr. Pierce," she said tremulously. "He was your friend."

Albert nodded his head sadly, and he felt himself getting control of himself now, and he felt his fear melting away, leaving a tower of rage behind, and he began to talk then, striding up and down behind his desk, and the aura of a commander began to mark his words.

"Yes. But friendship—even the best friendships—can't survive too great a strain. It seems that my name is too long for the computer. That's what it comes to. It's rather amusing, don't you think?"

"No."

"I do. Honestly. When you stop to think about it. I mean all this. Look . . . We have synthetic rugs, soft under foot. Plastic laminates here to make this walnut desk impervious. Tinted glass in the window here and push-button phones. That couch there, the wallpaper, these lighting panels. Machines made 'em, and we made the machines . . . and they create things for our pleasure. But then, you know what?"

Her eyes were wide, and they fastened on him as she slowly shook her head.

"They ask me to resign. To turn my back on thirty years of a career. Why? I'll tell you why. For the same reason—the very same reason—that your small-town grocer is being wiped out. Same reason, Ann. Exactly the same reason. Funny thing. We do things for the convenience of machines. I mean *we're* the slaves."

Ann made a gesture of protest, as if she felt he was overwrought and ought, perhaps, to sit down while she took his temperature.

"No, I know what you're thinking. That I've lost my wits. The strain and all. Well, I haven't. Buy our groceries in those big ugly sheds they call supermarkets—lighted so bright they make your eyes startle back in your head. Then they stroke you with canned music. Think they're fooling anybody? They call that a supermarket? I call it an abomination! You know what stands behind that slick facade? Big trucks that can belch out groceries better if there's a big store with a big loading dock and big shelf space. The big trucks can come roaring down the big highways overnight. So the stores don't have to stock so much. More volume. More crowd. To suit the convenience of the machine: Good-bye, old Pete."

Ann's eyes were following Albert's so closely that each word, each phrase seemed to be etching itself indelibly in her memory.

"More things out there," he continued. "Crowding us out. Crowding out birds and fish, too, out there where the woods and streams used to be. It's full of iceboxes and TV sets, Ann, racks of cotton dresses and skids of bagged cement, cartons of motors, and coils of wire, all moving around. No longer in stationary warehouses. No ma'am! Now the woods—what used to be woods—are full of warehouses on wheels, sucking in oxygen and giving us back carbon monoxide. Run-

ning all night to wake us up. And the woods—the old woods—are full of gutted iceboxes, dumped there. Machines. Dead machines. Crowding us out! So that's how you get that slick-looking facade. You know that Ann?"

She was shaking and nodding in bewilderment.

"It's true! They've taken an area as big as New England and put it under concrete and macadam. As big as New England! And they say a building in New York has a life expectancy of thirty-five years. Up, boom, down . . . And they're not through. No ma'am. They're speeding up! Crowd us together. Roar, hammer, zoom. Good-bye to silence and repose. To contemplation and peace. That's the secret. Make more room for the machines. Get us together right now, quick, in a dense clump." He stopped for a moment, fingering the venetian blind cord, and then, releasing it, it swung in a pendulum arc when he resumed his pacing.

"Ever been in a discount house, Ann? Sure you have. And ever analyze your mood? That's what they want. Appeal to the worst in us. The money-grubbing instinct. Good-bye, amenities. The senior clerk who knows his merchandise and his customers? Who has a *relationship* with you? No ma'am! Good-bye to him."

Albert paused again, and Ann was by now following him so avidly that he felt he had better get it all off his chest. "They call that establishing a market. Chop, saw, dig, scrapel Bang! It's a historic house, you say? Sorry. We've got to go through here with this new Interstate Route ninety-eighty-seven. Lookit, it's right here on this plan. Congress approved it. Saves seven minutes from Dentonville to Barnes Junction. Knock it down, lady. Bang! It's on the right-of-way and the grade's too steep to go around. All right, boys, let'er rip! . . . Then you know what, Ann?"

"What?" she said, nearly breathless, perched now on the edge of her chair, her eyes sweeping his pink cheeks, his flashing glance, the hint of a grimace that played around his mouth.

"Once they've got you hemmed in with these coils of theirs—these ribbons of concrete and these chrome and neon spangles—then they put a ring through your nose. No, not a ring like you might think. They put your name on a plastic card, and give you a *number*. That's the link. Imprint your number on tape. Process it electronically. Lord

knows that's how most of my life has been spent, making copper wire so better rings can be built for our noses."

She looked at him quizzically.

"You don't believe me?"

"I do. I do! I just never knew you felt that way. . . . And they . . . ?"

"They? Who? Them?" He hitched a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Pierce's office. She nodded.

"They asked me to quit because my name won't fit. It's ludicrous." He was silent for a moment, and the only sound was the draft of the air in the convector unit under his pair of windows. "Can you take a memo?"

"Certainly," she said, straightening in her chair.

"To Mr. Pierce. 'Dear David. Pursuant to your request of this morning, I am herewith submitting my resignation, as you request, on the understanding that the remaining years before my retirement will be compensated at the present salary, as you have agreed, and that my pension, in toto—better underline that, Ann—will be payable upon application, which is made at this time.' And sign it, 'warmest regards,' please."

A tear was traversing Ann's cheek and her body was quaking, but Albert by now seemed almost buoyant, although she could not notice it. It was a few more moments before she could compose herself and retire to her desk, where her electric typewriter was soon tapping out the memo.

Later that morning he dictated another letter, this one to Invicta Credit International, enclosing his plastic membership card and remonstrating with them about the annual service charge, which they had recently increased, and which he did not intend to pay.

He was resigning his membership as the enclosed card would attest. There was a twinge of pleasure—or was it regret?—as he sealed the envelope.

After lunch, which he ate alone in his office, nibbling on the sandwiches that Ann had brought to him, he slipped into his dingy old raincoat, plopped his hat—with its inevitable downward turned brim—onto his head, clenched his pipe in his teeth, grasped firmly his briefcase, and simply was gone.

A note she found later on his desk told Ann that he wanted the things with signs taped to them sent on to him at home. As for the rest, let his successor have what he wanted.

Nathan at Home

□ It was a barren Monday for Nathan at his office. There to confront him was the usual accumulation of papers after a week's delay—the minutes of meetings that he had mercifully missed and the various forms that had to be filled out for Personnel.

This, too, was the week he had to decide which of his two youngest team members, both honor graduates, really deserved the raise: Benjamin or Curtice?

The departmental budget assumed that only one of them would remain. That only one of them would get the raise, and that the other would, in time, learn that he had been by-passed, and would leave. To work for a competitor, perhaps, but that was the assumption that Triple-I—International Information Incorporated—made, and he wasn't one to tamper with fixed company assumptions.

Nathan worried about things like that, nevertheless. Worried that behind those quietly agreeable faces lurked malign thoughts that he could only guess at. Resentment of him, no doubt. Fear that they would not progress. Respect, also, for his abilities, and that was all that really mattered to him. The paradox. He nearly grinned at it. Curtice, the man better qualified for advancement, was nearly racist in his personal beliefs. And yet . . .

"What's bothering you, Nathan?"

His wife, Susannah, looking quietly up from her piano, saw that something was weighing on him. He waved off her question, and she returned to the keyboard, preparing herself for the next Sunday morning at the Bethel A. M. E. Zion Church.

He gazed back toward her, loving her and thinking how comfortable and free of tensions an old wife was. Even if she did nearly bar him from his own living room, making such an unpardonable fuss over the antimacassars and the figurines that she spotted all over the room, piled into little triangular shelves in the corners, and loaded onto the top

of the piano. Little dolls—he never knew their right name, whether Delft or Dresden—memorializing the age of the powdered wigs and the minuet.

“Nothing,” he said.

“No joke? Something must be, the way you’re glumming around the house.”

“Just business.”

“Nathan, don’t say that. I know what’s business and what’s something. And this isn’t business.”

He looked at her, wondering what emanation of his alerted her so. He walked over behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders, and told her about his friend, the old fellow with the cherubic look. He had been really friendly, all week long. In fact, there was something well past mere rapport.”

“And so?”

“I don’t know, Susannah.”

“You don’t know? Then what’re we talking about? There’s something. Tell me.”

“It’s only a feeling.”

“And what is it?”

“He’s in trouble. That’s my feeling. In trouble.”

He didn’t know, and he told her he didn’t, what kind of trouble. There was another long silence. After a bit, she turned and resumed her practice and he returned to his own inner thoughts, and this time they veered back to Curtice, the carbuncular young mathematician who had figured out the key to taking all the steps in machining airplane parts and reduced them to a half-dozen major categories for conversion into a fully computerized manufacturing process. Now all it would take would be to write up the dozen or so programs for them. . . . And that was where the reward should go.

Nathan got up twice to go to the telephone, but both times he came back to his chair and picked up his magazine instead. It was a curious bond that was somehow pulling him toward his new friend.

What was the stuff of loyalty? he wondered. What drew him to the old man? He thought, then, of the quality of his own commitment, and he wondered at the seeming lack of pattern.

Some of his friends had been critical of him for his aversion to demonstrating for civil rights, but he said to himself—and Susannah agreed with him on the many occasions

when they had discussed it—that mass action wasn't for them.

Their married daughters had been sarcastic over Thanksgiving turkey. "You're afraid, Daddy. Afraid the power structure will deny you your status. Aren't you?"

He had quietly turned the question aside. His business was with equations, and with new questions, and with abstracted thought, not with mass demonstrations, that seemed to him the antithesis of reflective thought anyway.

"Yeah, Daddy. You and your kind will get us to the moon, but will you do anything to get us a seat in a second-rate restaurant? How about that, Daddy?"

"Yeah, Daddy, how *about* that?"

Another shrug and a smile.

Susannah had finished her practice and was back now at her crewelwork, while he sat there and thought. "You as unhappy as you look?" she asked suddenly.

"Who looks unhappy?"

"You do."

"No." He rose and went to the sideboard in the dining room and poured himself a brandy.

"Well, if you're so worried about him, I imagine his wife must be just as worried, so you can lay off your worrying about him can't you?"

"He has no wife."

"You didn't say that before. What happened to her?"

"Killed. Truck ran into her car."

Her head shook sadly, and her pendant earrings joggled in sympathy. "Well, you better call him if you've got a premonition."

Nathan went out to the spool table in the entry hall where the telephone sat and looked up Albert in the book and dialed the number. It rang several times with that slow flatness that says no one at the other end is listening.

He came slowly back into the dining room, poured himself another brandy, and went back into the living room to his deep-cushioned chair. She saw from his shoulders that there had been no answer.

He slipped back into his office train of thought, and there it was again. What to do about Benjamin, who was always a step and a half behind Curtice? Who irritated Dunham, the regional manager, at every meeting. Slower when it came to formulating a plausible equation, less acute when it came

to criticizing someone's work. And then Curtice. A boy with almost a built-in sneer; cold and analytical.

Why must decisions so often go against personal choice? Why were business associates almost always the people whose traits you didn't really like?

And yet, for the profitability of the Special Programming Department . . . But what does it all mean? Nathan wondered then. How many would be thrown out of work, how many of his fellows put on the dole because of forces he had helped set in motion? 'Or can I afford even to think like that?' he said to himself, and then, audibly, he added, "Someone's sure to do it if I don't."

"Do what?"

"Nothing," he said, and hitched himself erect again, and went back out into the hall to call Albert again. Still no reply.

Why should he be thinking about prayer? Never prayed any more anyway. Never went to church, even if Susannah wished he would. He gazed over to her as she sat, her hand tapping gently on the prickly velvet of the arm of her chair, and the light of the Tiffany lamp overhead bathing her in its golden warmth, and on her lap, her worn Bible.

That was why he was thinking that way. It happened six times a night between them. She had a thought and he picked it right out of the air.

"Do you good if you would."

"Would what?" he asked, without even much surprise.

"At least read the Bible now and again. Couldn't hurt you, could it? Here." She slid forward; he could see the silvered edges glinting and the blue morocco leather, pored and fragrant, and worn by her constant hand. "Listen, here, Nathan. Just fell open here. 'And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass . . .'"

"Please, Susy, not now."

"Go on," she urged, pushing it toward him. "It's good for you. Read it for yourself. Here. Genesis Eleven. Might even see yourself there. Know what to do about Mr. What's-his-name?"

"Curtice."

"Yes. And Mr. Benjamin."

He took the proffered book, sighing loudly. "Tower of Babel. What's that supposed to mean?"

"Mean?" she said, looking sharply back toward him, fix-

ing him with her great brown eyes, and loving him with her glance. "Mean? Isn't supposed to mean anything but what it says."

"Susy, you're always the preacher's kid, aren'tcha?"

"Go on. Read it for once, Nathan. It won't hurt you."

Buster Doyle Solves a Problem

□ Word came that David Pierce had suffered his stroke the same afternoon that Albert Duane Cartwright-Chickering had left so suddenly, and it fell to Eli Zouver, president of United Metals Corporation of America and chairman of each of its several subsidiaries, to pass on Albert's memo to his administrative vice-president with the terse notation: "B.D., pls. advise."

It warmed Broderick Doyle to the bottom of his soles that the president should have put the Cartwright-Chickering matter in his hands, as his deputy. Buster sat down slowly and savored his moment. The dossier, sitting there in the long file folder, was the only paper on his desk, and only the leather desk set otherwise intruded on the shining surface of the wood.

The irony of it. The most fluent of men, David Pierce, silenced. Unable to use his gifts. Buster thought about that for a moment, and then, in a flash, he saw that his chance was already upon him. Mr. Zouver was giving him his chance right now. Today.

Buster gazed fondly back out the window at the weather ball, and then back inside his office, to the far wall, where the drapery had been drawn back to reveal the entire flow chart for the corporation.

There, for him to command, was the schematic picture of the anatomy of United Metals Corporation. No duplication, no backtracking, no redundant step could be taken without his knowledge.

In addition to the master flow chart there were shelves, bookcases, chock-a-block with time-and-motion studies for each of 845 jobs under 103 classifications—millwright, die-

maker, rigger, machinist, clerk-typist, borer-in, even purchasing manager.

His tomes covered them all. Besides, there was the library of slow-motion film for each major manual and machine operation. There it was before him, under his control, and waiting for him—as it always did—for interpretation and explanation to the Executive Committee. A simple, all-encompassing system that covered everything from maintenance of washroom tile to installation of annealing furnaces.

There was no reason, he knew, now that the 8080 was nearly installed, why other refinements couldn't be made; why managerial employees couldn't be evaluated in a flash by the computer.

Wait for the right time, that was the idea. Let Connaught make a disaster out of his beginnings. He may have won his point—for the present—of decentralized materials management, but it was just a matter of time.

Buster leaned back and supported his large head with his locked fingers, and then, remembering the new box of cigars in his lower left-hand drawer, he threw his weight forward and the chair gently yielded and he rolled open the bottom drawer and withdrew for himself a long, dark-brown cigar enclosed in an aluminum shaft covered with ivory and blue labels and a satin cord at the top.

His great hands swiftly ran through the documents in front of him. Zouver's memo to Pierce. The terse handwritten note that the resignation had been asked for. The memo from Cartwright-Chickering asking—of all things—full pay to the end of his sixty-fifth year. It was clear-cut, so far as Buster Doyle could see, and he scribbled out his own recommendation:

EZ: This seems open-and-shut to me. I recommend drawing a check for the severance amount agreed by you and send it on to Cartwright-Chickering with this note (or one like it): "Dear Mr. C-C: We are pleased to enclose herewith the agreed-upon severance payment of \$20,000, and the documents you'll need should you care to transfer your life insurance from the Group Policy now in force. We wish you the very best of everything in your new life, and we very much hope you will continue to call on us should you be in this part of town. . . ." Hope that suits you, chief. I think it should do the job.—B.D.

As soon as Buster had sealed the note into an envelope and scrawled "Confidential" over its face, and dispatched the whole dossier back to Mr. Zouver, Henry Hackle appeared at his door. Henry looked harried.

"That Cartwright thing is over, Hank, you'll be glad to hear."

"Cartwright?"

"Man with the long name."

"Oh." A smile lighted up the sallow features of the younger man. "Cartwright-Chickering," he said, and he slumped into the yellow leather chair opposite Buster's new film cabinet. There was trouble, he explained, with the Special Fabrication Division's order fulfillment.

"Full of bugs," Hackle explained. As he described the mix-ups, the shipments that went wrong, the dunning letters that were mistakenly being sent, the credit that got tangled, and all the strained relations with some of the division's largest customers—all arising in one traceable way or another from Gerald Connaught's insistence on keeping as much under his control as he could—a slow smile began to spread over Buster's lips.

"I thought you didn't like bugs," Hackle said, pushing himself upright and standing close to the door.

"A person can get used to anything," Buster said, pushing a little cloud of smoke out of his lips, letting it escape slowly toward the ceiling. "Anything, Hank."

"Even bugs?"

"Yeah. Connaught's bugs, especially." The phone on his desk was ringing, and Hackle waved and ducked out.

"Can you hold for Mr. Zouver, please?"

"Yes indeed!"

The president's rasping voice cut through the earpiece. "Doyle? Listen, nice job on this severance thing."

"Thanks, chief."

"Now another thing . . ."

"Yes?"

"With Pierce out for God knows how long, we better get straight in the Wire Mill Division. Slack practices in some departments. Bad margins. I'm sending over a couple of files you ought to go over. Then tour the mills. Give it a whirl, will you? Draw up a memo, comprehensive—and recommendations. How do we straighten it out?"

Ann Pym and Her Mother

□ The procession of young men who came to use Albert's office, past Ann Pym's uncomprehending gaze and into the chair that should have been reserved for him alone, were uniform in one respect. All were elaborately polite to Ann.

UMCorp's data processing experts had all been selected from the same schools that the president had attended, and each, in turn, looked very much like Eli Zouver might have looked thirty years earlier and talked with the same clipped precision Zouver attained, but none, Ann noticed, had the president's tendency to pun, for which she was grateful.

Ann took their memoranda and kept their files, and stifling her discomfort, and hating herself for stifling it, she learned new words like flip-flop circuits and multiplexing, parity bit and pulse density from two of the young men in particular, who, she discovered, were converting everything that Albert had done in the way of market forecasting and inventory control management to the computer system.

The day after Albert left, Ann had finally screwed up her courage enough to ask Gladys Bronislaw about the new developments, and she was surprised by Gladys' coolness. "Can't be sentimental about things like that, honey," she said, "and besides, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering wasn't all that much of a ball of fire, now was he?"

Ann sucked in her breath in surprise. "Mr. Cartwright-Chickering was the finest man I've ever known. Kinder and more considerate than any other person in this whole place!"

"Sure, everyone knew how kind he was, but I'm asking you about how *good* he was . . ."

"Superb!"

"Couldn't be all that superb. If he had been, he would still be here," Gladys said with an air of finality, and Ann made some neutral response and went back to her desk, feeling like breaking into tears. Now, it was plain, Ann would

have to tell her mother (after carefully concealing the bad news for several days).

Old Mrs. Pym was in her spacious apple-green kitchen, trying for the third time to get the ink to go through her silkscreen, squeegeeing it as hard as she could, but still not succeeding. She had reached the point of fury by the time Ann came home.

"Oh, Ann, love. How nice you're home. Help me with this weegee, won't you?"

Ann came over beside her mother, to the old table standing there in the middle of the comfortable old kitchen, its top covered with purple oilcloth and the fabric for the silkscreen furred at one end. Ann took one end of the implement. "I believe it's called a squeegee, Mother."

"Squeegee, weegee, all the same, isn't it?" she asked, and she glanced at her daughter, and something made her focus on the folds under Ann's eyes, where there were the flushed evidences of recent tears. "Ann, dear, you've been crying!"

"Yes, Mother."

"About what?"

"Mr. Cartwright-Chickering."

"That sweet Mr. Cartwright-Chickering? What about him?"

"Mother, he's been fired."

"No!"

"Yes . . ."

"When?"

"Monday, Mother."

"And you haven't told me?"

"I didn't want to upset you, Mother. On top of Delia's leaving, and the trouble finding any good help nowadays, and all."

The old lady flung down the squeegee and removed her rubber gloves and put her arms akimbo. She was obviously furious, and Ann saw in a moment that her fury was not at her daughter for withholding such unwelcome news. "Those big boobies who run that place!"

She asked Ann to explain why Mr. Cartwright-Chickering had been dismissed, and Ann's painstaking explanation only made the old woman more angry. "The arrogance! The temerity! His *name* was too long . . . ! Outrageous! Well, Daughter, I shall take steps."

"What steps?"

"Sell my stock."

"Oh, Mother, what good will that do?"

They sat on the straight chairs on either side of the work table, and the old lady was thinking hard. They considered what possible resources of protest they might have, and it was slowly and sadly agreed that they were virtually powerless. "But not completely," the old woman said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing, there's the power of the ode. I shall write an ode of protest."

"Oh, Mother!"

"All right, then. I *can* attend the annual meeting," she said, and there was then a low sputtering of her lips as she worked several other unformed thoughts over in her mind. "And I fully intend to fold, spindle, and mutilate my punch card—the one they sent solicitating my proxy vote. Not only shall I withhold my vote, but I shall pass in a defective card, and I shall enjoy myself! I may even recite an ode from the floor, to that detestable corporation. . . . The ideal!" She drew herself up to a more commanding height in the chair, and as Ann looked at the regal old lady, a sense of pride began to well up within her.

There was no power in those two, she knew—nothing in the way of a counter to the vast and monolithic force of a giant corporation. That giant had merely cleared its throat to remove a small discomfort, and that had been all that the departure of Cartwright-Chickering meant to it. "What good will *that* do, Mother?"

"I don't know," the old lady muttered. "I don't know, but I for one fully intend to mutilate the proxy card, and perhaps we shall just not cash the next dividend check they send. Remember the last time we were late cashing ours, and the letter came asking us . . . ?"

"Yes, Mother, but . . ."

"But nothing. Here. Get me the phone and the phone book, will you, Ann dear?"

Several attempts to reach Albert failed. He did not answer his phone. "You don't suppose he's in—er—trouble, do you, Ann? I mean psychologically?"

"No, Mother. You know how it was the other night? He sometimes just prefers to be alone."

"Without a wife? Without anyone?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Well," the old lady said, nearly snorting, "he can't refuse a letter."

She moved out of the kitchen into the living room where she withdrew some of her favorite lavender-colored note-paper from her old Charles II desk and in her nearly perfect script wrote:

Dear Mr. Cartwright-Chickering:

I have just heard from Ann the perfectly shocking news about the United Metals Corporation and you. I want you to know that our thoughts are very much with you, and that we do not intend that you take this outrage lying down. In fact, I have made plans to mutilate my punch card before I return it at the annual meeting next month. (Yes, I definitely plan to be there, and I shall see to it that Mr. Zouwer squirms, believe you me!)

I just hope some catastrophe will befall from the extra punch I intend to insert.

I want you to know that the Pym's are friendly with several important people in the metals business, and if you would like, we should be only too glad to recommend you in the highest terms to any of a number of companies.

In any case, we count on having you come to dinner soon, and I wonder if you couldn't plan to make it, say, Thursday evening? About eight?

Yours very sincerely,

Millicent Axminster Pym

Albert and Nathan

□ Albert had gone to his source of renewal, the woods, and there, among the towering oaks and tulip trees, his eyes scanned upward. He imagined how the shipwrights in ancient England had searched such massive branches for a proper angle, the right meeting of branch and trunk for a gunwale or a bow-joint.

He would not surrender to his woe. He simply would not. Upward his gaze continued, through the minute leaves, just budding out, the size of mouse ears. His glance ended with the ridge past which the new highway channeled the distant whine of internal-combustion engines. There, between his oak forest and the ridge that obscured the road, stood a grove of dead elms.

No, he told himself, he would not surrender. He intoned something then, directed generally upward, as if he were putting his affairs in the hands of the Almighty. Albert did not exactly pray. That mere word would have embarrassed him. But his heart was receptive to the warmth that he often felt there when all was right with his world.

Instead of warmth now, there was a chill, a sense of disjointedness. His pride had been dealt a hard blow, and he had to remind himself to stand upright.

He clenched his even white teeth still tighter on his pipe, until he could taste the bitter black plastic, tipped his hat back on his head, and leaned against an old willow. A goldfinch flitted across his field of vision.

He smiled and felt a sharp sense of elation. He, like his father, had loved finches above all birds—except perhaps the redbirds. His father, the exuberant country doctor and the indefatigable naturalist, had set the boy to keeping a daily log that set forth their observations on wildlife around their old house and in the neighboring woods and fields.

From that training and the habit young Albert formed of keeping meticulous notes on the habits of birds, the profiles of trees, and the growth of mushrooms, he became an

accomplished amateur naturalist—except for his block. He couldn't learn Latin.

"Albert, red oak?"

"*Quercu*—I can't, Daddy."

"Can't! How will you ever be a scientist if you can't learn Latin names for things? *Quercus Borealis*. That's simple enough, isn't it?"

That was how it began, and it continued that way, only worse, because his soft, sweet-tempered mother shared Albert's block when it came to languages.

Albert smiled at the memory. He resumed his quiet walk until he got to a large rock that overlooked a small pond, on the far side of which an ugly scar had been rammed by bulldozers. They had pushed in, he saw with slowly rising anger, several score cubic yards of dirt, obviously to fill in the marshland there for a house.

The boorishness of machines! How dare they ram down a woodland? Choke a pond full of rubble? He was again furious, his temples pounded, and he turned rapidly and stalked back to his house where the mail rested in the small wicker basket at the front door. He opened the United Metals Corporation letter first.

Dear Mr. Cartwright-Chickering:

In view of Mr. Pierce's untimely disability, of which you may not have heard (he has suffered a severe stroke), I am picking up the correspondence at this point. . . .

The check that fluttered to the floor as he unfolded the bottom third of the letter drew his eye down after it. He knew, then, that he had been betrayed. It came as knowledge beginning low in his abdomen and spreading throughout his torso until he thought he might retch and lose control of himself.

His eye fixed on the line "Pay to the order of" and there was a moment of sharply focused pain behind his forehead. Albert Chickering was the name of the payee. He glanced over to the amount, and again his fury crested. He crammed the whole thing, letter with its empty felicitations and check with its treacherous and erroneous markings, back into the envelope.

It was some moments before he could compose himself enough to look at the other mail: a letter in his daughter Jenny's fine small script, a letter from the Pym's, and several bills. He opened Jenny's first.

Dear Daddy:

The worst luck! Just as we were getting ready to have a holiday, they call Hill off to Ascension Island! Wouldn't you know? We've been at our wit's end, packing for him and getting him off (he leaves tomorrow).

And you have had us frantic, calling you as we have almost every night. But I know you—worrying poor Miss Pym half to death because that's just your way—being mysterious and all.

Now please answer this: Can you take a few days of vacation and come down and help us? Tony and Mike are so anxious to help, but they're just not old enough, and I despair of ever getting everything organized for our move to Denver.

We all miss you and would be so happy if you could help.

Is there any hope you could lend a hand? Please call. Kisses from us all.

Love,

Jenny

It was certainly better to be too remote than too much of a hovering grandparent. Beth and he had decided that long since. As he held his daughter's short note to his side and his thoughts slowly went back to his grandsons, he knew that he would leap at the chance to give them a hand, especially now . . .

A knocking at the screen door. He hadn't heard a car or a footfall, but there was the shadow on the front porch for him to see. "Anyone home?" a deep baritone voice asked.

"Who is it?"

"Albert, that you?"

It was Nathan Osgood. "Nathan? Come on in. How are you?"

"Man, you're elusive, that's what!" There was a warm

handshake and Nathan patted Albert on the back. "I even tried your office."

Albert felt a sudden surge of hospitality and he pressed a drink on Nathan and saw him comfortably established in the best chair in the house. When they both were seated, Albert leaned forward and offered Nathan one of his choicest cigars and then took one himself.

There was a moment of warm camaraderie. They lit up, and the smoke spread out to fill the corners of the living room.

"You know, I'm glad to see you!" Albert said.

"That so? A man'd never know it from the way you answer your telephone." Nathan was scanning his friend's face closely with a warm but watchful gaze.

"You hear from Miss Pym?" Albert asked.

"Sort of mysterious. Said you were no longer with United Metals. Is that right?"

Albert described what had happened, and Nathan's eyes signaled his disbelief, and his head began to shake slowly back and forth in sympathy, and in his brow came the deep furrows of compassion that Albert had seen in no other face and felt from no other person.

After he had finished his recitation—the story of David Pierce's promise and his seizure, the cold letter from Zouver, the office management people trying to hurry him out of his quarters—he handed his letter from Zouver over to Nathan, who read it quietly and whistled.

"What are you doin' tomorrow, Albert?"

"Nothing until evening. Been invited out to dinner," Albert said, his cheeks flushing again and his eyes becoming more animated than they had been for several days.

"I'll take the day off and we can go fishin'. I know this trout run upstate a bit. We can get an early start. Get Susannah—that's my wife—to put us up a lunch. What do you say?" Nathan asked, rising and setting his drink down on the table next to him. He glanced at his watch.

"Sure," Albert said, "I'd like that."

"All right. See you at six-thirty. We can get breakfast on the way." Nathan stubbed out his cigar.

"Good," Albert said. "Suits me." He wished Nathan would stay, but he didn't know how to ask it of him.

Nathan was out the front door and halfway down the steps to his car.

"You got another minute?" Albert called down after him. He moved quickly down the stairs and faced Nathan at the base. "Nathan . . ."

"What is it?"

"Nathan, I'm . . ."

"Bitter?"

"Yes. Bitter as wormwood."

"Sure you are. Got a right to be. But resist it. Won't do any good. Look at me. I've been bitter most of my life."

"But . . ."

"You have more power than you know, Albert. More ways to overcome bitterness than almost anyone I ever heard of."

"Power? Me?"

"Yes, you do. The power of planning, call it. So just forget your anger."

"Nathan, I can't. I don't even want to. I think of that big, sleek corporation, and you know what? I think the Ludites were right, that's what. That there's an arrogance that crushes a man down when things get above a certain scale. Crushes him down and makes him a brute."

"You're telling me?" Nathan asked quietly. "I spend my life making the central nervous system for that Goliath you're talking about. Me and men like me."

"They can't even fire me without garbling my name. Did you notice that on the check?" Albert asked.

"No. I didn't look at it. They did that, huh?"

"Yes."

"And what would you want to do if you could do something?" Nathan was seated now beside the small patch of mountain laurel that blossomed pink and spring-fresh.

"Nathan, they don't care about a single person. They don't hear you if you talk to them. But I'll tell you what I'd like to do."

"What?" Nathan dug his pipe out of his pocket and now leisurely stoked it down and struck a match on the stone of the wall.

"Send 'em a message."

"A message?"

"Yes, a message they can't ignore."

Nathan removed his pipe and fixed Albert with a steady gaze and then he began to smile. "I see. You mean a *big* message, in other words?"

"A *giant* message. Something like the slave used to shout

when he ran behind the Caesars when they had their triumphal march up the sacred way in Rome. 'Remember, Caesar, you too are mortal!' That's what they used to yell. That's the kind of message I want to send."

"You want to shake the chariot a little?"

"Yes," Albert said, but he was not smiling, "or maybe I want to demolish the Circus Maximus."

Nathan got down from the wall and came around and faced Albert, a new erectness in his posture. "I'll be the company. Now you send me a message . . ."

Albert searched the other man's face for a moment, and then, getting the idea, he began: "You're unpardonably arrogant, United Metals Corporation. You've wronged me, and I want you to know that I won't forget it. I'll have my revenge!"

"Revenge? That's a strong word."

"It's the right word for a deep grievance."

"What grievance?"

"Your machine—your computer . . ."

"Wronged you?"

"You bet your life it did!"

"One hesitates to contradict, but may I point out that the computer is the *bête noire* of the intellectuals and others who have no practical effect on everyday affairs—professors of philosophy, ministers of the gospel, poets, and harpsichordists," Nathan said urbanely.

Albert drew in his breath, but Nathan silenced him with a wave of his hands. He grasped at his coat lapels and began to stride, as if he were addressing a turn-of-the-century debating society.

"Surely," Nathan continued, "you who have benefited so lavishly from the machine industry system, who had a handsome severance settlement, would not deny—no, no, let me finish—that the computer will make business more exciting, more accurate, and more creative. Will raise the nation's income and per capita well-being. Will greatly expand the horizons of the entire Free World. The Good Society is closer because of the computer. It will of course have its occasional regrettable side effects, as in your own case . . ."

Albert was looking open-mouthed at Nathan. "'Occasional regrettable side effects . . .'"

Nathan was quick to wave off what he had just said. "I say things like that every day of the week. It's my protective covering. Like a chameleon, except I do it with words."

That broke the tension. "So did I," Albert said, "for thirty years."

"Thirty years that seemed like sixty," Nathan said.

"Thirty that seemed like three hundred," Albert said.

"See you at six-thirty, hear?"

"Right."

"And we'll figure out something, don't you worry, Albert. Some good way to get your message across."

"So they hear it?"

"So they can't miss it."

Nathan was sliding into his car. "'Art thou willing to remain a member of our society, and submit to the commands of General Ludd?"

Nathan threw back his head and laughed at his own joke, and the roar of his engine drowned out the sound of laughter, but his glittering eyes served well enough to engrave that memory on Albert's mind.

Albert's Visit

□ The air, when it came to Albert as he stood in line waiting for the stewardess to put down the rear hydraulic stairway, came sweeping into the cabin hot and moist, and the faint smell of the sea permeated everything.

The other smell, which assailed him when he reached the bottom step of the narrow aluminum stairway and emerged into the sunlight, was of the marsh grass that now, at low tide, lay exposed to the powerful rays of the noonday sun.

He blinked in the brightness, and shielding his eyes with his flattened left hand, scanned the small group standing near the modest arrivals building. There she was, he could see, waving and smiling broadly at him, and for a moment the

bronzed healthiness of her skin and the golden radiance of her hair made his heart leap joyously.

Then, scanning quickly below, he could see the two small straw-colored heads that bobbed up and down excitedly. Anthony and Michael stood so tall next to their mother—nearly up to her waist—that Albert found himself drawing in his breath in momentary disbelief.

As he strode the few remaining feet to them, his spirits swiftly sank. He came as the emissary of defeat, and he disliked to tempt bad luck, just the way the world disliked intimacy with its lepers. That was why he had refused to answer the telephone, why he did not blame those who wanted to shrink back and remain remote. He would make it easy for anyone to shun him.

Albert felt himself slowing down. He would have to tell her just as soon as he could. But in front of the boys? No. He would pick a time. When they weren't around. He dropped back until he was very nearly the last man in line, and he remembered then his presents for the boys.

That revived him a bit. He patted the briefcase he carried, just to make sure. He could feel the bulges. They were still there, the two tiny tape recorders that he had brought for his grandsons. Hardly bigger than two bricks, yet able to perform almost as well as an office dictating machine.

He felt his throat tighten. His family deserved better than a weak and defeated old guardian. Better than you, Albert, old man . . . Better by far. Now he wished more than anything that he could hide with his woe.

He was altogether last now. A blur of straw-colored hair exploded from behind the milling crowd of passengers and greeters, and the two small forms were dancing out the gate and hurtling swiftly toward him, their cobalt-blue shadows moving under them in the blinding sun, their small features deeped with tints from their bulging sunglasses, and their teeth—white and radiant like their mother's—exposed by their broad smiles.

"Granddaddy! Granddaddy!" Mike was yelling, oblivious of his older brother's attempts to maintain some decorum in a public place. Albert dropped to his knees and he gathered them both into his arms and lifted them up in his powerful grasp, and the boys protested, "Please, Granddaddy, you're squeezing!"

He laughed and released them, and they skipped alongside him until they got to the gate, where Jenny was bouncing up and down as she did when she was really excited.

"Oh, Dad, we're so glad you're here!" And she threw her arms around him, too, and then held him at arm's length. "Ann said you hadn't been eating, and you haven't, have you? Well, I can understand why. That dreadful company! She told me all about it, and I think it's ghastly. . . ."

They were walking around the little building and out toward the parking lot, and the boys, jogging alongside, began their quiet litany under Jenny's outburst.

"Bring us anything, Granddaddy?"

"Boys!" Jenny said. "The ideal!"

"Did you?"

"I think it's perfectly plain," Jenny continued, "that if Mr. Pierce hadn't had that stroke . . . But I've made a rule, Dad. That's all. No talk about lugubrious things. Not with Hill out there Lord-knows-where, Ascension Island. They're having trajectory troubles, it seems. Can you believe it? You'll drive, won't you, Dad?"

That was how they left the airport and moved down the palm-lined causeway to the island—Jenny a voluble stream of consciousness, her very animation energizing and awakening Albert. The boys continued their questions by non-verbal means, now that their mother's interdict had been repeated with more menace three times.

Albert reached down on the seat beside him and withdrew the two small cartons and handed each to a grandson, and they retreated to the back deck of the station wagon, where they eagerly attacked the wrappings as their mother carefully watched them with long glances in the rear-view mirror. "Tape recorders!" Tony called out, delighted. "Real tape recorders, Mom." And he held his up so that his mother could see it in the mirror.

"What do you say, Tony?"

"Thanks, Granddad. Thanks a million!"

"Mike?"

"I can't get mine open . . ."

His brother gave him a hand, more vigorously than the younger boy wished, but soon the second machine, also, was freed of its carton.

When they arrived, the Knapp house was a shambles.

Cartons and barrels and excelsior, and newspapers were balled up against the possibility of broken chinaware, and the rugs rolled, wrapped, and stacked against the walls.

"Did you ever see such a mess?" Jenny asked. "That's why we needed someone to help us organize. We're so glad you could come, Dad!"

The boys echoed Jenny's sentiments, and no sooner had they finished their afternoon soft drinks than Albert at last yielded to their urging and went with them to their "laboratory" at one end of the cabaña near the swimming pool. There, sharing half the space with Hilton's sacrosanct dark-room, were their bell jars enclosing mysterious wads of darkness, a rather imposing microscope, and any number of specimen slides, small flasks stuffed with cotton, and the makings of crude diagrams.

"It's our Dad's, really," Tony explained, "but he lets us show people back here, and often I help him."

"Help him do what?" Albert asked.

"Sample spores."

"Spores?"

"Yes," Tony said.

"Of mushrooms and toadstools and musty dusts," Mike said.

"He means smutty rusts," Tony said. "Our father is very interested in them. They ate up our mother's watering can."

"Yeah, and our two rifles, and some of our father's valves on his rocket motors."

Albert turned to Jenny, who was leaning happily against a doorjamb, a determinedly unobtrusive observer. She nodded silently to Albert's unasked question and shrugged as if to say, "It sounds whacky, I know, but it's true."

"You mean a fungus attacks plastic?"

"Our father says it is an As-cy-motes."

"He means Asot-my-cetes," Tony said, correcting his brother in his most brotherly manner.

"They both mean Asco-my-cetes," Jenny said deliberately.

"Dad says it is a mutation, a new kind," Tony resumed. "He says it is costing our space program more than a thousand dollars a day in lost time."

"Is that right, Jenny?"

The mother stepped into the room and something of the conspiratorial air of the scientists on the brink of new knowl-

edge receded, and instead, the colloquy became just another informal exchange in a bathhouse. "Hilton says yes. He says it is something wholly new. It resembles, he says, I believe he says dry rot. The government mycologist was down. He came for dinner one night."

"He's a friend of our dad's. He sent us this," Tony said, proudly motioning to the microscope.

"It's half mine, too," Mike said.

"A third; and a third mine, and a third Daddy's," Tony said loftily.

"And none for your mother?" Albert asked.

"Nope. None for women."

"Want to see what it does to spore, Granddaddy?" Tony asked.

Albert leaned forward as Mike switched on the light under the microscope, and Tony twirled the knobs until it was focused. "Here," he said, and Albert leaned over and saw the delicate tracery of cinnamon-colored powder, each particle slightly sickle-shaped.

"And that's spore?" Albert asked.

"Yes," Tony said with a proprietary air.

"Want to see the strings?" Mike asked.

"The what?"

"He means the hyphae," Tony said. "Those are the little strings that grow together when this fungus attacks us."

Albert looked back at Jenny, who was smiling as if to say, "I know it's rather advanced of them, but they take to it, and they seem to know what they are up to." Albert looked once again at the tangled skein of finely interwoven fibers, each gently wafting back and forth in the microscopic air currents that the boys' slight bodily movements caused, he imagined.

He resisted their attempts to show him the rest of the small laboratory, and just as Tony was launching into a description of the way a fungus could poison you, Jenny stepped forward with a protective gesture.

"Now, boys, your grandfather has had a long trip and it's hot, and I know I would like a moment's peace, and I imagine he would, too. So go play with your tape recorders, won't you? It's grown-up time now." And she edged the two outside in the mottled shade of a large Osage orange tree.

Occasionally, as they chattered away, Albert detected a look of concern in Jenny's eye, as if she wondered who was turning his collars for him now and how he was getting his meals, but she never asked directly. She was determined not to seem too motherly, not to baby her father as so many of her contemporaries babied their parents, with the result that the old folks became hopelessly dependent and then finally found themselves filled with self-hatred for their dependence.

Hilton was rising fast, and his assignment to Denver showed as much. "If things go right, Dad, we should be back East in no more than three years, permanently."

"If anything is permanent with the government, you mean."

"Yes. But I think this will be. You see, Hill has become the number-one troubleshooter now, and that's why he'll be coming East. Where he can act as a sort of consultant to the various bureaus that are having troubles."

After a while Albert rose to go with Jenny into the guest room where he unpacked his suitcase. "And, Dad, the bathroom's in here," she said, and then she let out a low moan. "Oh, I forgot about *these*." She came back to the door with the faint smile that signals the long-suffering mother. "The guest bathroom, Dad. I'm afraid you won't be able to take a bath there. The tub is full of their bell jars."

"What, Jenny?"

"Bell jars. Hill and the boys are growing things in there."

"Things?" Albert asked, slightly amused at his daughter's vagueness.

"I'm afraid they're cultivating funguses in there." A banging of the screen door and the thudding of small feet signaled the end of the outdoor play.

"Hey, Granddad, did you see our fungus nursery?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, did you?" his little brother asked.

"No," Albert said, laughing and following them into the room. They drew back the stiffened plastic shower curtain proudly. In the bathtub, the hot water spigot was gently dripping into a giant sponge and a small electric oscillating fan sitting in the soap dish, its cord linked by an extension to the outlet over the basin, moved back and forth. It was

a steaming man-made swamp. The boys were looking eagerly at their grandfather, who didn't know exactly how to react. "How interesting," he finally said.

"Like it, Granddaddy?" Tony asked.

"What is it, exactly?"

"If it eats plastic, it's here," Tony said proudly.

"Yeah," his brother said. "We got dusts and musts and . . ."

"He means smuts, rusts, molds, and mildews. Those are the kinds."

Jenny was on her knees then, next to the shower curtain. "Darn it!" she said, "that's another one of these. Look at it. Filthy."

"That's a shame," Albert said. "I could understand it in the city, but here, where it's so clean."

"That's another fungus," Tony said.

"Of course!" Jenny said, irritated. "Well, that's one good thing about packing up. At least we won't have . . ."

"Wait, Mommy. Daddy *wants* to keep these. Didn't you hear him?"

Albert was only half aware of the conversation that developed around him, but the outcome, when he heard Jenny's sweet voice summarizing it, came as something of a shock. "Of course, Dad, it's entirely up to you . . ."

"What is?"

"When we move. You *are* agreeable to having us for a few weeks, aren't you? Our lease is up here, of course. And Hill being in Ascension . . ." A question seemed to hang in the air after her voice trailed off.

Albert nodded his assent. "Of course."

"And you don't mind a few little experiment things, do you, Granddad?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, a few little things?" Mike echoed.

That was how the decision was made to move the whole Knapp menage into the Cartwright-Chickering house, pending the outcome of Hill's brief special assignment. And, of course, that would mean that all the bell jars, the fungus cultures, the microscope, the test-tubes stuffed with cotton on their hickory racks, the Erlenmeyer flasks filled with nutrients, and the various special lights, fans, humidifiers, and

other equipment would just have to take over the third bathroom.

"We never used it much anyway," Albert said, trying to be cheerful, "did we, Jenny?"

The Pym's at the Annual Meeting

□ The guy ropes holding the great expanse of canvas strained against the fresh wind that blew up the gently undulating valley and into the gates of the Hiram Benjamin Research Center of the United Metals Corporation, where Eli Zouver had chosen to hold the annual meeting this year.

The Barbella Brothers Circus had supplied and pitched the tent. The box lunches were stacked against the chairs drawn from the Dentonville Fire Department and the Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ social halls.

Now, as the ladies Pym walked through the meadow parking lot toward the tent, the crowd amounted to perhaps five-hundred stockholders, employees, and public relations and advertising men. Mailboys were acting as parking attendants and various trusted clerks were acting as ushers.

Gladys Bronislaw was at a small electric organ down front near the dais playing "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" with the stately rhythm that dapple-gray draft horses drawing a beer wagon might attain.

Millicent Axminster Pym loathed crowds only a little less than she loathed people she thought were trying to put something over on her. Three letters to Mr. Zouver had so far elicited only the most perfunctory of responses from his secretary. He was a terribly busy man, as she must understand, and in any event, questions relating to personnel were properly directed to the Personnel Department.

Ann had gotten the old Chrysler—"the last Chrysler before they gussied up the cars with all that folderol," as her mother was forever complaining—out, backed it down the driveway, and they had set out shortly after dawn for the long drive to Dentonville.

The whole way, the old lady had silently fondled her paper punch, which she had quietly brought along with her, until once, by mistake, she clicked it, and Ann's glance quickly fastened on it.

Millicent pitched her head at that slightly jocose angle that she always assumed at dinner parties or with the butcher when she thought he might be jollied out of a particularly good filet. "Mr. Cartwright-Chickering seemed so . . . alone at dinner, didn't he? And that perfectly splendid thing he said about machines, and all. Crowding us out. Turning our woodlands to dumps."

"He said, 'turning our woodlands into highways.' . . . I'll type up my notes," Ann said.

"Yes, I wish you would."

Ann peered over at her mother. The car swerved suddenly.

"You keep your eyes on the road, young lady, and I'll . . ."

"Do the talking."

"Yes, the talking." The old lady fingered the punch several times silently. "He's perfectly right, the blessed man. And I *shall* do something about it."

"What?"

"If I tell, will you promise not to oppose me?"

"Mother, if you do something that jeopardizes my job," Ann said, frowning so deeply that the furrows in her brow showed over the pink frames of her special oversized sunglasses.

"Pooh! You don't care a jot or a tittle about that job, and you know it, Ann."

"But it's . . ."

"Nothing! You don't need it. Sometimes I think you keep it just to avoid being with me all day, and I can't say that I blame you. But really, Ann . . ."

Their words went on, the usual mixture of badinage and tartness, until they had driven past Haller Valley and were nearing the Hiram Benjamin Research Center.

"Will you tell me now, Mother," Ann asked, with seeming apprehension, "exactly what do you plan?"

"No, Ann. If you don't know, it can't be blamed on you. If I am apprehended, you may say I am deranged. Yes. Deranged and senile, also, and I shall screech and act in an erotic fashion. . . . How will that be, dear?"

"I think you mean 'erratic,' Mother."

"Yes, of course I do. What did I say?"

"You said 'erotic.'"

"Well, you know what I meant."

Ann looked at her mother again, and a faint smile began to draw up the corners of her mouth. "I do now," she said.

"But you mustn't worry, Ann dear. If there's one thing they hate—with the representatives of the press on hand and all—it's any kind of unseemly outburst. So you needn't worry your head, my darling."

Ann slowly stroked her forehead and seemed to draw a curtain over her thoughts. Her mother, meantime, slipped her hand inside her reticule, withdrew the small punch, and pushed it quietly into her right-hand coat pocket, where she hooked one of her fingers after the other into the loop of wire on the handle.

She didn't know how; she didn't know where or when; but she did know that her own grievance, while petty by corporate standards, could find a way to express itself.

She would mutilate every punch card that she could find, and at the rate she traveled when angered, that might be a considerable number.

Buster Doyle was striding rapidly toward Ann and her mother, who stood at the head of the main aisle getting acclimated to the shadowed gloom of the tent.

Electricians were setting up a series of large spotlights, and a television crew was dollying its cameras into position midway down the right-hand aisle. Ann was not sure she approved of any of it.

Ann became aware then that her mother was off somewhere behind a crowd of people, and as she tried to glance back to see where the old lady had so suddenly darted off to, Buster Doyle was at her elbow, and in his staccato manner he asked her if she wouldn't give them a hand with the questionnaires that had yet to be distributed, and as long as she was here, would she act as a monitor in that part of the floor? Mr. Zouver would suggest which of the wagging hands should be given the microphone—the symbol of recognition.

"All right, Annie?" Buster asked.

Ann nodded passively, took the few questionnaires in her hand, and began to place them on the seats along the back row. A sound-crew member placed a small microphone in her hand and paid out a great length of wire to it.

Somewhere back of the barrier between the main arena and the walls of the tent, Ann could hear her mother's voice as one of her regal syllables occasionally came pulsing through the growing crowd. And then she saw Gerry Connaught. "Hija, Ann. I just met your mother. A wonderful old lady."

"Oh did you?"

Connaught looked around with some apprehension. "Terrible thing about Albert. I can understand why you're so upset—you and your mother. I hope . . ."

"If you don't mind, Mr. Connaught, I'd rather not discuss it," Ann said as she finished her brief task of distributing the questionnaires. Buster Doyle was coming back up the aisle, and she could tell that some unpleasantness was in the offing.

Mrs. Pym, true to Mr. Connaught's word, had found the place. He had blanched at first, as if he hadn't really heard her question aright. "What?" he asked, and his slightly opened jaw betrayed his shock at the boldness of her query.

"You heard me. The proxy cards."

"I guess they would be over there. In the utility section. That's where they're usually kept," he said, and then, suppressing his urge to question her closely, he could see that in her mind it was the computer that had done the damage to Albert Cartwright-Chickering, and it was to that machine that she would direct her hostility.

What better plan for him, then? What better way to give Buster Doyle a bit of a black eye with management? Gerry Connaught smiled and sidled out of that part of the tent, whistling innocently a bar of Bizet that veered into the Washington Post march.

Millicent Pym glanced surreptitiously around the small enclosure, and there, packed against the west deposit of box lunches, was a row of low steel drawers filled with carefully filed cards. She looked around once again, and then sank slowly to her knees and ducked under the card tables set up at the end of the small enclosure.

She seated herself gingerly on a tuft of grass there, and slowly drawing her paper punch from her reticule, plucked a handful of cards from the drawer, and began to add, at random, additional holes.

The Pinkerton guard, whose task it was to keep unauthorized personnel away from that part of the tent, had been

drawn elsewhere by the boisterous noise of three small boys—loud and disrespectful—who were trying to slip in under the tent to watch the show.

She continued, not knowing that her average point of contact was roughly at column seventy-six to eighty, depending on how she brought the card to rest. Those were among the columns that encoded the number of shares represented by that particular card.

The character positions of perhaps seventy-five cards had been altered by the instrument's short bites into the heavy oaktag by the time she heard the pattering feet of the Pinkerton man.

She could see his shoes closing in. They moved around a thicket of stacked chairs and came slowly up the aisle of card tables, shuffling, pausing, and resuming, with the uncertain air of someone who has heard something suspicious. The shoes paused at the box lunches diagonally opposite her position. She began, then, to breathe quite heavily.

She carefully repacked the rest of the cards in her hand into the drawer, and slipped her punch into her reticule, and it was then that she heard the voices suddenly right over her.

"Yes, sir. Why not right here?" a youngish and effeminate voice said. It was probably that of a man in his twenties, she judged.

"Here?" the gruffness signaled command.

"Yes, sir."

"How do you do, Mr. Zouver, sir," another voice—older and patrolman-like. That would be the Pinkerton.

"Hello . . ." Gruff and rather cold. "Don't know why we have to put on this pancake mess anyway."

The effeminate voice again. "The cameras, sir."

"Yes, I know. Well, make it quick, can't you?" The shiny shoes slid right up next to the table under which Millicent sat now, petrified that they would—but no, she would simply not think about it.

The young man was nervous. So nervous that he dropped the camel's-hair brush with which he had been applying powder to Mr. Zouver's cheek, and it rolled under the table right up to Millicent's hand. The flushed young face was down then, and Millicent simply picked up the stick-brush and handed it back to him, and he mumbled his thanks and stood upright again.

"Eh?" Zouver's gruff voice asked, and in an instant the young face had dropped back down and was peering, half in fright, half in bafflement, at Millicent. She pressed her fingers over her lips, and the boy rose again and speeded on to finish his job.

"I said, that's all, sir," and the shiny shoes made a move toward the flap leading toward the dais. As they began to move, Millicent did something that she couldn't have anticipated. It was a whim that seized her so powerfully that she yielded to it without question. She reached out swiftly, caught one of the finely woven black shoelaces, and yanked gently.

She heard the shussh of the canvas as the Pinkerton, she judged, swept back the flap for Mr. Zouver's triumphal entry. The organ resumed, this time with the Field Artillery song, and there was a smattering of applause that grew somewhat louder as the flap returned to its closed position.

As Millicent prepared to slink out of there, the young face was back down peering at her again, and she simply laid a hand on the young man's arm and said in her warmest way, "Thank you ever so much, young man. Now help me get out of here, won't you?" He unquestioningly sprang to her bidding.

"Where have you been?" Ann nearly hissed at her mother as the old lady slipped into her rear-row seat that Ann had been saving for her.

"Talking with Mr. Connaught."

"Not all that time, you weren't."

"Shhhh, I want to hear what's going on."

There was Buster Doyle making the report on the new computer system, and the pride in his voice was enough to make Millicent's rage rekindle. "The 8080 can handle words of twenty digits plus sign, and it has four basic units available. A core memory system of the finest construction is capable of storing and providing fast access to a hundred and eighty computer words at better than fifty-microsecond speeds. It takes us just two milliseconds . . ."

Millicent folded her arms over her chest, her wrath focusing on the sleek-looking gentleman, the one sitting directly behind the podium, who seemed now to be doing something with his left shoelace. After a time he came back to the podium to gavel down the motion raised by a man dressed in a uniform of Uncle Sam, complete with a long cotton beard.

The man wanted to know why management was paying dividends commensurate with the financial outlook prevailing at the time of the Articles of Confederation. Mr. Zouver said neither he nor management was amused, and if the man did not wish to return to his seat and a seemly silence, the guards would be instructed to give him somewhat more exposure to the fresh air. There was a mild tittering in the audience, and Mr. Zouver basked in the warmth of his fellow stockholders' approval.

Somehow, as Ann was working the back section with the microphone, she did not reckon with her mother, who simply seized the instrument at one point and said, "Mr. Zouver, I wish you— Oh, yes. Mrs. Millicent Axminster Pym, and I hold five-thousand shares of common stock. I wish you would explain to me why the corporation saw fit to dismiss a senior employee simply because his name would not fit your computer. I refer to . . ."

"Now, on that, may I suggest that your information is not complete?" Mr. Zouver was attempting a conciliatory tone.

"Not complete? I'll say it isn't. That's why I'm asking for an explanation of the personnel policies you men are developing."

"This is not a suitable subject for discussion at this time, as another motion is on the floor."

"You're evading the question . . ."

"If you please, Mrs. Pym. You're out of order." Zouver pointed to an upstretched hand. "This gentleman here—will you confine your remarks, please, to the motion on the floor?"

Millicent never did get a chance to ask her question, but afterwards the reporters hovered around her, and she was on the verge of telling them everything she knew when Doyle and Ann came up and swiftly got her away from there. Doyle was exceptionally pale.

He said something *sotto voce* about the proxy cards, and Millicent knew that she had made her point—or soon would make it. In absentia, perhaps, but indelibly, nevertheless.

A Fishing Trip

□ The transatlantic call from Hilton confirmed that everything was going well at Ascension Island and it looked as if he would be finished in a month.

Jenny clapped her hands and kissed everyone on the forehead.

Albert discovered that his tolerance for noise, for questions, for nonstop whimsy, was not infinite. He discovered that by midmorning of the day that the moving vans finally arrived, his patience with his grandsons was very nearly exhausted.

Still, by an act of will, he personally carried two large flasks and any number of bell jars to the rear deck of the Knapp station wagon. Hilton had not remembered to say anything specific about the transportation of the home laboratory, but his words had been Anthony's mandate. "Take care of all that for me, Tony. Guard it with your life."

Tony interpreted his father's command as meaning that he should never let any of the specimens of fungus, any of the slides and collection vessels, out of his sight.

The odd caravan began, with Albert and his grandsons in the rental car full of food and books and clothing leading the way and Jenny carrying the rest of the family's personal possessions and the home jungle in the Knapp station wagon. The humidifier and the temperature control were managed by an ingenious use of aluminum foil at the windows (to rebuff excess sunlight) and a pair of small fans affixed to the windows by suction caps and powered by twining lines sucking current out of the cigarette lighters. Jenny herself wore the mask that Hill used to use to keep out pollen when he mowed the grass.

The trip was little short of a nightmare from Albert's standpoint, but whether it was through positive thought or the quiet anticipation of a trout brook, he managed to bring the menage safely through 838 miles to his driveway, and no

sooner had Jenny and the boys begun to unpack than the telephone was ringing.

It was Nathan wondering if Albert might like to go on a fishing trip, as Susannah had gone off to a meeting of the national officers of the Ladies' Auxiliary. There was only a hint of drollery in his voice.

"Would you mind, Jenny?" Albert asked, hoping for an answer that would relieve him of the beginnings of a guilty conscience.

"Dad, it would be the best thing I can imagine. I know we've been getting on your nerves . . ."

"Not at all."

"A week, you say?"

"I'll be back Saturday."

"Perfect," she said.

He gave his blessing—it seemed for the forty-seventh time—to the use of the small guest bathroom for the establishment of the fungusorium, as Jenny had begun to describe it, and after checking his fishing tackle in his car trunk, he paused only long enough to leave a note for Jenny along with a fifty-dollar check on the kitchen counter:

Jenny Dear—

This for groceries and for whatever else we need to make the boys and you feel most at home. You can reach me—if you have to—through Palmer's Fishing Camp, where we'll be spending the nights. Daytimes, I guess you'll have to use telepathy. Love you.

—Dad

Nathan was waiting at the door of his house when Albert drove up, and suggested that they take his car. But Albert was adamant. "No, sir. Why not take my old junker? Be a shame to scratch up a brand-new Jaguar, now wouldn't it?"

Nathan seemed on the point of protest, but instead, he shook his head and smiled and climbed in beside Albert, and they drove off.

At the spot they finally got to late that afternoon, they began using Gray Gnats, working their way up a branch of a small river.

Nathan crept up to one spot, below a calm pool of water,

and working his line deftly back and forth, cast atop a patch of water shimmering yellow in the sun from the sand bar that lay underneath. There was an instant strike, but he yanked too fast, and the leader broke and his fish escaped.

He waved to Albert to come alongside and try the same spot.

Albert moved slowly out from shore until he was nearly next to Nathan. Suddenly his foot hit something that nestled under his arch and rolled suddenly forward, throwing him backward with a giant splash. He was conscious of the far line of green trees tipping wildly down to the bottom rim of his vision, and then, from behind him, drifting from atop down into his field of vision, came the bank behind him and the overarching trees flashed over him until he was aware that he lay on his back in the water and the wavelets washed over him. He gasped for breath.

Nathan laughed and so did Albert, even if it would ruin the fishing there for at least an hour. As long as he was that wet, Albert determined to find out why, so he slipped his hand down against the rocky bottom of the stream, and there his long fingers fastened on the object that had been his downfall. He slowly raised it to eye level. A soda bottle, sitting on the bottom like a rolling pin, had made his foot as mobile as a wheeled vehicle.

"Of all the inconsiderate, boorish . . . !" Albert was sputtering.

Nathan's voice came softly and his eyes were no longer alight with amusement. "Cost of progress."

"Progress indeed!" Albert said, flinging the bottle back into the water. As they scrambled up to the bank, Albert's eye—was it attuned, now, to litter?—caught another bottle, this one broken, on the bottom of the brook.

"People don't care, Nathan. They come out here, sate themselves with drink. Gratify themselves to the point of boredom. Then they fling their leavings down. Defile God's nature."

"That's right."

"Drink beer. Throw their cans by the side of the road. Eat their sandwiches, drop their napkins in the bushes. Bring bait, throw their bait cups and boxes down right in the water."

"That's right. Pride. They think the world awaits them. Receives their leavings like rain from on high."

They sat on the bank in the fading sunlight, and Albert

drained his waders of the water that continued to slosh around his ankles. "Nathan, am I crazy? I mean, you're not just echoing my views, are you . . . ?"

"You want to know am I sincere?"

"Yes. I guess so."

"The answer is 'yes.' I'm with you . . . General Ludd."

That name again, kindling the same memory that was slumbering. "General Ludd! That's rich."

They sat back there against the bank of the brook, where the small mosses lay like high-pile carpeting beneath them, and nothing more was said for a time.

Albert glanced often at Nathan, whose brow glowed from the exertion of yanking off Albert's waders.

In a few moments the warm spring breezes had turned cool. Albert knew that he had spoiled Nathan's fishing for him. He urged his friend back to the brook. "Otherwise, we'll have no dinner."

Nathan got up, shrugged, and smiled ruefully. "Supper, I presume you mean."

"Yes."

"You members of the white power structure are always using lofty words for simple concepts."

"Members of what?"

"That's a joke, son," Nathan said, moving off to his tackle box. He waved his hand in a disclaiming motion, and Albert scrambled to his feet and began gathering wood for a camp-fire. Within a half-hour, Nathan returned with four huge brown trout.

As the fish fried in the skillet and the coffee pot simmered on the sapling fork arched over the flame, Nathan began to talk in a way that Albert found curiously soothing and reassuring, telling him not to repine, his time would come. "Sometimes weakness is strength. That's what I'm saying."

"It is?"

"Often. Not always, but often enough to make life interesting."

As the fire flickered higher and the fish grew golden brown in the skillet, the talk veered around like a weather vane in a fresh breeze.

"Look at that old elm there, a proud tree. Decayed. Rotten from top to bottom. You know why, Albert? A micro-organism. Something so small and weak by everyday stand-

ards that no one would even know it was present. But look what it does! Or take the ziggurat."

"The what?" Albert asked, chewing slowly on his filet of trout.

"Eleventh chapter of Genesis."

"Didn't know you were a Bible scholar."

"Didn't know a lot of things. Tower of Babel. Strong. But strong as it was, it was paralyzed."

Albert felt a phrase form back in his memory. "Confusion of tongues."

"Exactly."

"What's that got to do with strength, or weakness?"

"Just that something so high and mighty, so all-powerful, can be brought to nothing by something it would never suspect could do that."

"I don't follow."

"Remember what you said about sending a message?"

Albert nodded silently, and Nathan took a bite of fish and gazed for a moment at his fork before turning back to face Albert. "Well, you can, that's all I'm saying. You can, if you go about it right."

"I want it to be a big message."

"Yes."

"A giant message, in fact."

"That too."

"How, then? That's what I want more than anything in the world, Nathan."

"I don't know. Not yet. But if we begin now, and think as hard as we can, before we fish out the valley this week, we'll have an idea. I'm sure of it."

The Conversion Problem

□ "Gladys, I can't stand mysteries," Buster Doyle said, shaking his head back and forth impatiently. He was seated alone at the end of a long conference table, and along its sides were ranged his immediate staff, including Ann Pym. At the op-

posite end of the table sat Henry Hackle. Gladys was flushed with embarrassment.

"We can't get the figures to reconcile," Gladys was saying.

"I heard that . . ."

"Yes, sir," she repeated, "and we think there's a chance of a clerical error in the input."

Doyle felt more hostile with each day that had passed since the promised end-date of the pilot program. Henry Hackle, for all his suavity, had simply not delivered.

"Hank?"

"Buster, we're still waiting for the hand-filing verification. I don't know what it is, but we can assure you it is not a generic error. In other words, it is not in the program. Some human failing somewhere along the line."

"Yah, some human failing. How many times have we heard that? And what are we going to tell the Board when they ask—they're always asking it—'Where's our saving, Doyle?' 'Where's the promised payoff?' Eh? How about that, Hank?"

Hackle had folded his hands together in front of him. "You've got to be sophisticated about this kind of thing, Buster."

"Sophisticated! Your machine tells us we've got one million, three hundred thousand more shares of common stock in circulation than our records show. That's enough to put effective control of the company in God-knows-whose-hands, and you tell us to be sophisticated!"

"I know, I know."

Doyle was aware, then, that he had spoken too swiftly and too graphically, and for the next twenty minutes he went into a tangled series of disclaimers ending with a long tirade that seemed to direct itself mostly to Gladys Bronislaw and her group.

"Mr. Doyle, if you're saying that you don't have confidence . . ."

"Gladys, would you have confidence in you if you were me?"

Gladys had her handkerchief out and was dabbing at her nose in nervous little bursts of wiping motion. The door behind her suddenly opened and one of her assistants came in, her hair piled atop her head.

Her charm bracelet jangled gently as she progressed, un-

der the muttered monologue that Doyle was directing, now, principally to Ann Pym.

As Ann tried her best to parry and counter whatever it was that Buster was saying, across the table the girl was nodding emphatically to Gladys, and showing her something in the small pile of punch cards before her.

Hackle's interest was also aroused, because he came around to stand behind Gladys and her girl, and to study the cards closely. He suddenly stood upright, one of the cards in hand, and interrupted Buster Doyle loudly.

"Here's the answer to your mystery, Buster."

"What?" Doyle asked, his eyes widening suddenly and his cigar coming to rest momentarily in the huge leather-enclosed ashtray in front of him.

"Someone has added extra punches to the cards."

"Extra . . . ? What's that supposed to mean?" Buster asked, shooting upright, pushing his chair back from the table, and standing rigidly erect.

"Just what it says. Someone has punched these proxy cards, around the eightieth, sometimes the seventy-sixth, row. Added extra punches."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Someone's been tampering . . ."

"Sabotage, you mean?" And the word, loosed, went out like a great black eagle to sit high in an overlooking branch and threaten to dive onto the first hostile being that moved down below.

"When? Where? How?"

"One thing at a time," Hackle said, studying the cards still more closely.

"Facts, Henry. We need facts. What does it mean?"

Hackle took the cards and pushed them together, aligning their angled corners and their edges so that they formed a tidy stack. He sighted along the punched openings, and seemed to be regarding several possibilities simultaneously.

Buster Doyle was standing at his elbow now, threatening by his posture to yank the whole stack out of Hackle's hands and solve the mystery for himself.

Ann Pym's chest was palpitating with the new knowledge, which had come to her so suddenly and with such overwhelming certainty that it was as if she had been walloped by a great wave at the beach and left to float in the undertow until she could regain her equilibrium.

She stole a glance at Buster Doyle, whose florid cheeks seemed to have turned a tulip red in the moments since he had stalked over to where Hackle was standing. There was a tension in the room that seemed tangible, and Ann could only clasp her hands over the scratch pad in front of her and study the spiral of wire that held the blue-white sheets in the binder.

"Somebody used an ordinary paper punch on these. At random, I would say," Hackle said.

Buster Doyle looked about the room, scanning every face in turn. "I want this to stay in this room, is that understood?" he said, and clearly from the ardor of his words, he had an idea. "Somebody's trying to make a monkey out of our efforts, and I'm not going to take this sitting down," he said. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mr. Doyle," Gladys said.

"Well, is it?" he asked the room in general.

"Yes," the voices responded.

"Ann, you too?"

"Certainly, Mr. Doyle."

"Not a word of this until we have completed our investigation. Right?"

The heads around the table nodded, and then Doyle and Hackle and Gladys Bronislaw went into a huddle, out of which Buster's head popped at length. "All right. Everyone can go on back to their office. Discreetly . . . right?" The heads nodded again as they filed out of the room.

Ann felt some relief that no suspicion seemed to have attached to her; her intuitions told her that Buster's thoughts ran in different channels entirely. It was soon apparent what those channels were. He began to ascribe the problem to the Special Fabrication Division.

"Trying to divert attention from their own shop. They're not fooling me. Find themselves three hundred and seventy-five orders behind. Lost a thirty-thousand-dollar order. Lost it! Ever hear of such a stupid thing? Couldn't find the paper. Customer called us up. Us! At headquarters. Lucky we saved the day. Gerry, you got yourself a bigger boy than you bargained for this time, ol' buddy. Bigger than you bargained for!" and Buster rubbed his hands together the way a man will when he stands next to a glowing stove.

"Yessir, ol' buddy!" Buster said, and he was smiling again, shooting significant glances over at Hank Hackle, and be-

ginning to revel in the conflict that was so obviously going to have a favorable outcome.

Shortly afterward, Ann was officially assigned to work with the young men who had occupied Albert's office, and she helped them draw a complete flow diagram of what had gone on.

She told Albert about it, in some detail, on the occasional evenings when he would come by for dinner. Slowly, as the weeks passed, she got very nearly a complete understanding of how the new program documentation, the manual, and the check points were to be set up.

It was something of a surprise to her to realize how much of the lore she had assimilated. One day she discovered an inversion in the run manual that helped the programmers remove an elusive bug, and there was a broad hint from Buster that a raise was in the offing for her.

"Ann dear," her mother asked her one evening, "don't you find all that most frightening? I mean, serving the great monster?"

"Yes, Mother. But I'm almost hypnotized. The logic of it."

"Oh yes, you always were the logical one," her mother said, returning to her silkscreen. "Here, dear, help me with this weegee."

"Mother, it's a squeegee," Ann said as her mother poured some more chrome-yellow pigment into the screen.

A Horrifying Discovery

□ Tony was knee-deep in pine straw, huddling behind a stake from his grandfather's old split-rail fence that had been propped against a hummock to make a fort.

There, with the small crystal microphone in his grimy hand, he spoke repeatedly to his tape recorder. "Two-four. Far field. Two-four. Over and under."

His little brother, across the pine grove some thirty feet away, watched intently as Tony's arms waved overhead, signaling the end of his transmission. Mike then spoke to

his microphone. "Over and under. Four-six-Q-jump-Calling-All-Cars."

Tony could hear him and was impatient to the point of acute irritation. Still, they had to remain silent, lest the surrounding enemy should hear them and wipe them all out. Not only Captain Anthony and Sergeant Michael (promoted despite his recurrent insubordination), but the entire missile battalion was endangered.

Then the small tinkling of a bell came to them from the house, and there was a groan from Tony, while Mike burrowed deeper into his pile of pine straw, as if to announce that he did not care what his mother said or threatened, he was not coming in to lunch.

Tony responded first, running briskly down past the bird-feeder and around the car, whose windows still showed marks where the small fans had been suctioned to the glass for the traveling fungosorium. His mother was setting the soup on the counter, where plumes of steam rose into the golden snapdragons clustered in a milk-glass vase there.

"Where's your brother?"

"Still outside."

"Get him. Right now."

She ignored the implied complaint of her older son, his elaborate shrugging. She also ignored his look of anguish—so like his father—that distorted his features. She brushed a wisp of hair back from her high forehead as she gazed through the window to where Tony was now striding to prod his brother out of his nest. And then—always the conscientious big brother—Tony returned alone to the grove to retrieve Mike's forgotten tape recorder from the base of a large white pine.

When they gained the house Jenny insisted that they both wash their hands for lunch. The cries of protest rose suddenly to a piercing wail. "I'm too tired," Mike whined, and his brother set his lips in a tight sulking line.

"Go on. Or you'll both go to bed for the day." She said things like that so often to them that there was the problem of credibility after a time. Today, those words surprisingly had their effect. The two boys moved off down the hall.

Both, as was their way, tried to get into the same bathroom, and she had to chase down after them and arbitrarily assign Mike to the upstairs bathroom—as he was the most disobedient—and Tony to the guest bathroom, the fungus-

orium, which everyone else was only too glad to avoid. Its humid air smacked into him as he entered.

He unthinkingly left his tape recorder on the hamper, next to the green and gold shower curtain, behind which the specimens grew. He swiftly washed his hands, leaving almost no smirch on the heavy turkish towel with the bold monogram, and came skipping back to the dining room table.

Mike, as was to be expected, was later and dirtier. He had made only the most half-hearted attempt to get his hands clean. His mother took one look at him and hustled him back down the corridor to the guest bathroom, where, over his protests, she soaped his hands and scrubbed them clean, using the stout pig-bristle brush with the handle shaped like brass knuckles to remove the fine rosined dirt of the woods.

It was on the way out that her eye chanced to fall on Tony's tape recorder sitting on the hamper, its surface sweated slightly with moisture. She sensed how bad such a place was for the recorder, and she quickly snatched it up and came back to the table with it. Tony was well into his soup, oblivious of his mother's frown.

"Mustn't leave this in there where it might rust, Anthony," she said as she put the recorder down on the sideboard. "What would your grandfather say when he gets back, knowing that the new toys are ruined already?"

"Wasn't ruined. Besides, it's plastic mostly."

"Don't be contradictory," Jenny said, feeling more than a little irritation at the boy's rigid ways. Just like his grandfather in that.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Mother."

The boys bolted their lunch, and were impatient to be up and outdoors again, to resume their game of Army. Jenny thought for a moment about asking them to take a nap, but she decided against it. Better that they get well worn-out now, so that tomorrow, when her father returned, they would not be so hyperactive as to make him nervous and irritable.

She began to wonder, then, about her father. About the state of his psyche. In that way that daughters know of their fathers' inner weather, she sensed that Albert would be coming back cleansed of the aggressions that she had seen in him.

A terrible thing, to have your company shun you, send you prematurely out to pasture, and with an insufficient settlement at that. Not that her father would really be in straitened circumstances. Of course he wouldn't. Even if he were, Hill and Jenny would of course take it upon themselves—but no. That was not a productive line of thought.

She was aware then that Tony was asking her something for the second (or third) time, as he was patiently tapping her wrist with his still-grubby fingers and looking airily up to the ceiling, as if to say, "Is anybody home?"

"Yes, Tony dear."

"Can we go out now?"

"Yes, dear."

The boys were instantly on their feet and clumping outside and Jenny sat there peering out the window, thinking of her mother, of her happy childhood, and of her pride in her parents, especially her father.

How he would always stand erect beside her in church, dressed in his neat blue-worsted suit with the handkerchief jutting rakishly out of his pocket.

That was the sort of thing that she especially loved in Hill when she stopped to analyze the similarities between her father and her husband. It was in some such reverie, thinking without particular pressure, that she began cleaning up the dishes.

When she had finished in the kitchen, she came back into the living room and sat down on the comfortable divan with a copy of *Good Housekeeping* open in her lap, and after reading all the stories, she began to cut out a recipe for nut bread.

The door sprang open and there was a great clamor from the boys.

"Mommy! Listen to this!" Tony said, running toward her with his tape recorder.

"Yeah. Listen to it!" Mike repeated, running after him.

"Close the door," Jenny called to Mike, and he turned, absently clumped back, and shut the door.

"Now what is it, Tony?"

"Just listen," he said excitedly as he rewound the tape spindle to play it forward.

"Woo-our. Arr iel. . . . ver and . . . der."

"What's that?"

"My message, Mommy. Don'tcha understand? My mes-

sage is being changed. Here, look," and the boy handed it to his mother. She peered at it, not comprehending what the boy was saying.

He tried to explain that the tape was somehow malfunctioning, but she could only shrug. He came forward then with the microphone and suggested that she say something into it, which she did. They played it back.

Both boys stood solemnly watching the small device. There was the unmistakable loss of much of the clarity of the signal.

Jenny shrugged. "I don't understand it," she said.

"Neither do we," the boys said, depositing their recorders with two shrugs on the coffee table, near where Albert's large stereophonic tape deck sat, and not far from his extensive collection of prerecorded tapes. "But we can ask Granddad when he gets back," Tony said.

"Yeah," Mike said, "or Daddy, when *he* gets back."

The two made their way back outdoors, and Jenny took up her magazine again, until the silence and the loneliness seemed so pervasive that she went to the cabinet where her father's collection of prerecorded tapes was stored and took down several albums, which she deposited on the coffee table, atop the boys' tape recorders. She shuffled through the stack, selecting finally a Brahms symphony, No. 3 in F, which she left behind while returning the others to their shelves.

She threaded the symphony onto the take-up spindle, guided the tape through the magnetic heads, and into the capstan, and sat back to enjoy herself.

Several hours passed. The boys continued their intricate and far-ranging game of Army, and Jenny now had plunged deep into the middle of one of her father's English mystery stories, and for the second time she chose to listen to the Brahms. There was something about it that drew her attention away from the book, and that something filled her with sudden dread.

Say what she would, and ignore it as she might, there was an unmistakable deterioration in the quality of the recording. The high violins were no longer so audible, and there were patches of the recording when the symphony sounded as if part of the orchestra had dropped out entirely.

She assumed that the speakers were responsible. A bad connection, perhaps. Made worse, possibly, by her too-vigorous vacuum cleaning of that morning.

She went over to the set and turned it off, fearing that if it played longer, somehow it might become worse. She couldn't bear to hear the symphony again, so she got down a Vivaldi bassoon concerto and put that on the machine instead.

She was much relieved to hear that the speakers, far from being in tenuous health, sounded their most robust and booming selves. There was clearly nothing wrong with the machine at all, and she would put the whole thing out of her mind.

It wasn't until late that evening, after the boys had been through their promised evening television, their bedtime story, and their prayers, that she came back into the living room, this time with still another mystery, and put the Vivaldi bassoon concerto back on the machine.

She threw the forward switch and adjusted the volume levels sharply downward, so that the boys wouldn't be disturbed. She settled back in her chair, the book open on her lap, her Ritz crackers and her Danish beer on the table next to her.

Several pages later, after a long description of a menacing mansion, she noticed that she could barely hear the music.

She put down her book and returned to the tape machine, and turned the volume knobs from their setting five—half-way up the volume scale—to seven. The sound was still weak. To eight, and then to nine. Still, it was hardly audible. She finally set the dials at ten, and only then did it sound loud enough for her tastes.

The next morning she tried to play the other side of the recording. There were two flute concertos she particularly enjoyed. She discovered then, with pounding heart, that the tape was no longer usable, and there was a sudden and urgent sense of emergency that enveloped her and made her hold her head and shake it in despair.

What would her father say? Two tapes—ruined! What dials had she set wrong? What key had she inadvertently depressed? She shrank at the thought of her father's return.

Albert's Resolve

□ Albert and Nathan, their hats drawn down against the damp chill of the day, plodded down the bank of the brook toward the last fishing pole that they would have time to try. It had been a long walk, and a full week, and Albert's spirit felt the refreshment that only a long stay in the woods could effect.

Yet it had not been an idyll free from the memory of computers and punch cards, of gears and drive shafts, and protesting metal shrieking against the tools that gouged and shaped it. Every few hundred yards, Albert's eye would fall anew on a beer can, or on a deteriorating milk carton, or on a fragment of tissue. Was his eye, he asked himself, now so jaundiced that he could see only that which confirmed his hostilities?

No. It was a qualitative change in this part of the country. The Schuylerky¹, the celebrated trout brook, honored by anglers for generations, now was crossed and recrossed by State Highway 809-A. The buttresses of the giant overpasses and the stone- and cement-lined sluiceways dived deep into the base of the river, disrupting for hundreds of yards downstream the natural flow of the waters. And atop these new bridges, the whine of tires, the thud, thud, thud of lumbering trucks.

As soon as they worked downstream far enough to begin to forget the highway, they could hear it in front of them once again, as it wound its way down the valley.

Nathan's face remained serene, as it always did, while Albert's, now, had become pinched and pale. "Damnit!"

"You really get angry don't you?" Nathan asked.

"I have become obsessed, Nathan. Utterly obsessed."

"With sending a message?"

"Yes."

"All right," Nathan said. "You want to send a message? Make sure it isn't trivial, because most messages are, you know." They pushed ahead, crunching through a clutter of

beer cans and discarded bait cartons around the remains of a doused campfire. Nathan went on at some length as they walked, likening the communication and transportation networks to the central nervous system of a human body. Albert found the idea intriguing.

"Then even highways can be thought of as a part of the central nervous system, can't they, Nathan? I mean, using your approach."

"Sure they can."

"And then litter and old beer cans . . . ?"

"Sure."

" . . . can be thought of as the equivalent of radio noise."

"Sure. Ten-four, ten-four. Can you read me? Over. Junk in the airwaves. Junk on the ground. Same thing," Nathan said, smiling in his placid, even beatific, way.

"Sure, Nathan, but this is all just talk. Just two old men walking in the woods. Talking brave."

Nathan stopped and looked up into Albert's eyes, and his own eyes crinkled into narrow slits. "Let me tell you something, Albert. It is all talk. Just as you say. But that doesn't mean it's prattle. Empty wind in the air. You know what they did at Göttingen with just such idle talk?"

"Göttingen?"

"Two young scientists, walking one day in the woods, wondering about the atom. 'Let's work it out as if the sun were part of the same thing,' they said. Sure. Just a walk in the woods. Just words. Sure. That was the Austrian, Houtermans, and the other fellow was an Englishman, Atkinson. Just talk, as you say. And you know what?"

"What?" Albert asked, and he was surprised to detect a quickening in his breathing rate.

"That's where they got the basic concept that made the H-bomb possible. From a stroll in the woods. So that's what I mean when I say you have power, and I have power, if we just approach it the right way. That night in Göttingen, one of these young scientists was walking with his fiancée, and they looked up at the stars and the girl said 'Oooh, how pretty,' and he said, 'Yes, and now I know why they gleam that way.'"

"How do you know all this, Nathan?"

"How? I was there. In nineteen-thirty. I was a Standish Fellow. Before the Nazis. And then back to America . . ."

Nathan's voice drifted to a pause, and he suddenly began—

they had reached the car by this time, climbed in, and were moving off down the access road to State 809-A and home. He poured out his story.

He told how he had come back to America, angered by what he had begun to see in Germany, and finished his graduate work and begun to teach. Then the war, and he became one of the mathematicians on the Manhattan Project. On his calculations, and those of his colleagues, were based designs for the trigger mechanism for the first Alamogordo device.

He became a section head and was repeatedly singled out for his contributions. "I was fired up, anxious to get back at Hitler for what he did to Jesse Owens in the 'thirty-six Olympics."

"I remember."

"But that was how it was then. There was fervor at the Mesa." Nathan went on to describe his shock at the aftermath of Hiroshima. "I've lived with guilt before, but never like that."

"We all have guilt."

"Not like that, you don't," Nathan said sadly. "I've been trying to work out of it ever since, in one way or the other. My friends thought I had gone soft. I didn't see it as just a question of weapons. I kept thinking of the methods, the tools that gave us the weapons. I mean Fat Boy and Little Boy were methods gone crazy. And all the time we thought we were doing it so Hitler wouldn't get it first. But then we drop it on the Japanese. Means ran away with ends. That's what I mean, Albert. That's what is happening in this country today, and I feel like it's a foreign country, even if I did help make it."

"But you're a member of a kind of establishment. A valued employee of one of the largest computer manufacturers in the country . . ." Albert said, glancing sideways at his passenger.

"Maybe I am. Still, I never gave them my whole heart, and they know it. They glory in their achievements, and they can't understand why I don't swell up alongside them. I swell a little, sometimes. But not like them. I just tell 'em they're fools, that those are hollow achievements. I just chuckle and tell 'em they're jackanapes, and one of them—he's a good enough fella—told me I'm the Uncle Remus of the Special Programming Department."

"Not really!" Albert said with a snort.

"That doesn't bother me. I tell 'em to go on, leave me alone. And mostly they do. Then my daughters come along and call me an Uncle Tom, so I guess I just have to be everybody's uncle."

"Except mine. You're too young."

"Except yours."

Albert's Return Home

□ Jenny was halfway finished thinning the King's Ransom from the Butterscotch chrysanthemums when she heard the wheels on the driveway, and turning swiftly, she saw her father's car inching up to the garage door. The boys also heard it; they were running at full tilt toward their grandfather, and there were whoops of joy at being reunited.

Jenny completely forgot her apprehensions, and was soon fixing coffee for her father while he took the accumulation of mail that was awaiting him on the front table out to the side porch where he sat in the sunshine, parrying questions from the boys and slitting open the envelopes with his penknife.

Tony wanted to know if that was the way you cleaned a fish, and then he wanted to try the knife on an envelope. Then Mike wanted to, and it was at that point that Jenny arrived with the coffee and shooed the boys away.

She sat silently across from him, knowing from his expression and his general bearing that the trip had been a tonic to him. His complexion had not seemed so ruddy for several weeks, and she rejoiced in his restored vigor. He opened a letter and frowned deeply.

"The rascals!" Albert said in that way he had of expressing himself when a Yale linebacker would force a Dartmouth quarterback to fumble. He took the letter and held it at arm's length, as if it were emitting a foul odor.

Dear Credit-Card Holder:

Credit is a precious possession, and a credit card is your most efficient credential. All the more reason why you will want to safeguard your fine reputation by remitting immediately the overdue balance shown below.

As we have paid the bills for which you owe us, it is imperative that you fulfill your corresponding obligations, to avoid the necessity of our placing this matter in the hands of our legal department.

Yours very sincerely,

*L. Todd Lloydlon
for Invicta Credit Corporation
International*

Account Number: 988-091-336-4

Amount Owed: \$10.50, Annual Dues

"What is it, Dad?" Jenny was asking solicitously. There was only an answering silence. The telephone was ringing before she could ask the question again, and she scurried off to answer it. She came back out on the porch, where her father was now gazing off to a dogwood tree. "It's for you, Dad."

All Jenny could hear from her vantage point in the kitchen, where she was rolling out a pie crust, was her father's testy tone of voice, growing somewhat more rasping and insistent as the conversation dragged on.

Finally she heard Albert say, "Clearly, Miss— You never did tell me your name. . . . Miss Birchard? Miss Birchard, your organization has no concept of what has taken place. . . . I do not care what regulations you say you are honoring, the simple fact is that I returned my card, voluntarily, some weeks ago, with a letter explaining that I was no longer employed by United Metals Corporation, and I have never had the courtesy of a reply. No acknowledgment of any kind. As I surrendered my card and had no intention of continuing in membership, clearly you will wish to adjust your records accordingly. . . ."

Jenny began to turn over in her mind then how the messages that she still held for her father ought to be parceled out. The bad news about the tapes, which again began to

weigh on her, could not be broached now. Not with this disagreeable call still upon them.

She listened again, and there were sounds of continuing disagreement in her father's voice, but the conversation, she could tell, was coming to a close.

Albert was muttering to himself as he placed the phone back on its cradle. "The impudence! The unpardonable impudence!" he said as he went out to the porch to his other mail. The phone was ringing again, this time for Jenny.

She came out smiling, with a fresh pot of coffee for her father. "Dad, that was Charles Banks. One of Hill's friends. He and Myrna and their children wonder if we wouldn't like to go on a tour of the new airlines computer center with them."

Albert looked up at her, his thought still so focused on the arrogant way the credit card company disregarded his wishes, and was unable even to acknowledge a letter . . . The phone call must have cost them something, and on top of that, the expense of having their legal department involved. Yet they went ahead blindly, determined . . .

"Eh, Jenny?"

"You didn't hear me, did you, Dad?"

"No," he confessed, reddening a bit.

"Come on with us to see the new United States Airlines Computer Center, won't you?"

He nodded and shoved the mail into his pocket, and rising, made his way inside to his desk, where he deposited the envelopes in a pigeon hole, and resolved at that moment to fight it out with the Invicta Credit Corporation International to the farthest extent. "Never!" he said quietly to himself.

"What, Granddaddy?" Mike asked as he slipped through the living room toward the guest bathroom.

Albert looked at him and mumbled, "Nothing."

They were gathering themselves to go, and Albert slowly became aware of Jenny's voice rising. The grandsons had been up to some mischief.

They had loaded their water pistols with grape juice and had used it to shoot each other. "Because it shows better than water," they explained. "So if I hit him in the bull's-eye," Tony said, pointing to his little brother's chest, "he's dead."

"Yeah, and if I hit *him* . . ." his little brother began.

Jenny sputtered, "You mustn't talk that way!" she said, and then she ordered each to change from his grape-juice-stained tee-shirt into a clean shirt for their visit.

It was some moments later that Albert went to the guest bathroom to wash. As he entered he became aware that the fan was silent now, and the fungus cultures had nearly dried up, except for a new line of dark mold that grew alongside the caulking at the base of the tile near the soap dish.

"Jenny!" he called out, and she came quickly to the door of the room. "The fungosorium . . . ?"

She seemed relieved, as if she had expected something else. "Yes, Dad?"

"It's closed down."

"Yes, Dad. Hill told us to let it go. He wrote that they found a new valve plastic that resists mildew. So he said just to turn off the water drip and the fan, and then we used some of the fungicide he has in that little aerosol can there on the window sill."

Albert turned to where his daughter was pointing, picked the can, which had one of those olive-drab labels on it, off the window sill. He read aloud, "Two-three, di-hydro-five-carbo . . . acynano . . . box . . . anilida . . . six, methyl . . ." He stopped and looked at her in bewilderment. "The world has become too complex for an old man."

Mike had slipped into the room and was loading his water pistol from the bathtub spigot. He had lost the plug that held the water in his gun, so he removed a small chunk of soap from the soap dish, indifferent to the slight discoloration it suffered from the strains of mold that had grown all around it.

He shoved the fragment of soap into the water hole, placed the gun back under his shirt, and ran to ambush his brother.

A small accident began to occur then. The dilute solution of citric acid, which was what the leavings of the grape juice in the water pistol constituted, and some compound in the lavender soap presided at the instant in which a certain strain of fungoid micro-organism chose to flourish.

At the moment, Mike wanted to keep his water pistol hidden, which he could accomplish best by slipping it in beside his belly under his belt. He would bide his time. As

he did so, the fluid was gently agitated by his constant motion and it was warmed by his body heat until it reached roughly blood temperature.

They all drove down the country road toward the United States Airlines' new center. It was a handsome building in the manner of campus industry that seemed to have been designed expressly to blend in with the landscape, but still, the construction had caused the rape of about ten acres of woodland and the end of the trout breeding in that part of Chandler Brook, as Albert had discovered some months earlier to his grief.

The Banks turned out to be buoyant and congenial company as the small procession wound its way behind their uniformed girl guide through the large airy rooms, traipsing slowly over the terrazzo floors, watching the whirring thinking-machines, the myriad winking lights, the dollies full of taped programs, the flow charts and the great input-output console.

It was somewhere along the line of the data correlator, near the core memory unit, that Mike saw his brother, unaware, glancing toward the winking panel of lights. It was there (secluded from a grownup's gaze) that Mike drew out his water pistol at last and shot three times at his brother's face, missing on two of his attempts, and bringing a yowl of protest on the third.

The third shot caught Tony right over the bridge of his nose, making it slightly purple from the remaining juice in the water.

A small wheeled rack with a pair of shelves sat behind the boys, against the stand-by computer. In its two shelves of racks were a dozen or more clear-plastic canisters enclosing large spindles of magnetic tape, the gray color of an angry sea.

A few drops of the moisture from Mike's water pistol flecked onto several of the canisters, and the boys moved on with their guide, their mother and grandfather, and the other children—the Banks—who were giggling and jostling and not really paying much attention to the droned explanations that the adults were engaged in hearing.

Albert listened now as the ticket-counter interchange was described. It coded reservation and flight information and seat availability, fed this information in by long-distance

telephone lines from Buffalo or Dallas, Toronto or San Francisco, and then the electronic memory unit could spew out directions for meals, car rentals, confirmations of space, a go-ahead to write a ticket, messages to connecting airlines, signals to dispatchers to prepare extra sections for heavily traveled flights, and comprehensive boarding lists for the use of stewardesses.

Tony and Mike were giggling and wrestling, and Mrs. Banks looked on indulgently, knowing that boys were far more raucous than her girls, far more likely to behave like perfect savages.

Tony was threatening to tell his mother about Mike's gun, and Mike was trying to block his older brother's approach to his mother. The older boy would free himself, feint as if to tell his mother, but at the last minute allow himself to be blocked again.

Finally, Albert lost his patience with the continual clamor at his back. He bent down, grabbing one grandson in each hand, and hissed at them to be quiet. "What's all the fuss about anyway?"

"Mike brought his water pistol" Tony blurted out.

Mike blanched, and guilt was written large on his features. Albert put out his hand and Mike passed up the pistol, and Albert not losing a particle of his dignity, carefully pulled back his coat, inserted the gun in his waistcoat, and then ceremoniously buttoned his jacket again.

"And in here we have the simulation programs running, which gives us a constant check on profitability, traffic patterns, and so on . . ." the guide was saying.

A Quiet Sunday

□ They were awakened the next morning early by the arrival of the cable, telling them that Hill was through at Ascension Island and would be coming right on home, and could they meet him in Washington, sending on the furniture from storage to their new assignment in Denver?

It was that sudden, and Jenny knew that her father would have mixed emotions. Glad that his house and his life would be quiet again, but sad, perhaps, to be left alone with his troubles. She made several attempts to find out if he felt like helping them move once again, but each time she met with a definite negative signal. He was happy to be on his own, thank you. From the general erectness with which he was bearing himself again, she knew that his wounds were already mending.

They all went to church that next Sunday, and for Jenny it was a renewal of one of her fondest memories. Even the boys seemed to enjoy it, despite their puzzlement over the sermon, which touched on a great tower built in the land of Shinar. After it was over, Tony turned to his grandfather:

"What's it mean, Granddaddy, that the speech was founded?"

"I think the word is *confounded*," Albert said. "I think it means that men better not get too proud and self-satisfied. They build great monuments only to have them nullified by the Lord."

"Is *that* what it means?" Jenny asked. "I never knew what the moral was."

"That's it, I think," Albert said. The small family walked down the sidewalk toward their car, under a bower of wisteria blossoming in the pale spring sunshine and attracting a chorus of bumblebees that hovered like fat grapes. Albert savored the moment, and suddenly a picture of his wife came back to him, walking down this same sidewalk with him.

The Pymys were coming for Sunday dinner. Jenny announced it as if she feared that her father might oppose her: she sprang the news on him. "I thought it would be a nice surprise, Dad."

Albert watched Ann and her mother coming up the front steps, Ann with her tidy small steps and next to her, in her regal way, Millicent Axminster Pym, her front hem slightly below her rear hem, giving her the appearance of a galleon moving up a placid bay.

Albert found himself moving swiftly down the stairs to meet their guests, and he was surprised to hear his own hearty greeting ring out to the Pymys.

The boys were glad to see the ladies, too, because some-

how they knew that if their grandfather had a lady to watch his efforts, their box kites would probably be aloft sooner than if he were alone.

The gabble of polite adult conversation went on, the boys thought, far too long. They began interjecting "Now?" into the conversation at almost every pause, until Jenny had to shoo them outside. Ann helped Jenny with her preparations and Millicent Pym and Albert sat and talked.

"It was simply hilarious," Mrs. Pym was saying, "from all that Ann said. This is Mr. Doyle's entire computer system being called into question."

"You . . . ?"

"Yes, I. With my own paper punch." Mrs. Pym sat with her hands primly folded on her lap, her eyes twinkling and her feet carefully crossed as she rocked gently back and forth.

Albert's heart involuntarily leapt within his breast, for there was a way to send a message, he suddenly was aware. "Was it—er—laborious?"

"Not terribly."

"But it does require a . . . *stealth*?"

"Certainly. Wouldn't be any fun if it didn't."

Ann and Jenny were back, calling everyone to dinner. "Oh, Mother, you promised! . . ."

"I am sorry, Daughter. I just couldn't help myself."

"I do hope we haven't given offense—"

"Not at all," Albert said. "Why should anyone be offended?"

Ann looked relieved. "I very nearly fell under suspicion myself," she said, "but I believe Mr. Doyle suspects someone in Mr. Connaught's division. It's too funny."

Jenny's puzzled expression receded with the painstaking explanation offered by the Pym's of their trip to the annual meeting and the aftermath. She could hardly credit her father's elfish grin, which he kept on his face through the mashed potatoes, the roast beef, and the string beans, all the way to the strawberry shortcake.

Jenny wondered if that might be the time for her confession, but before she could think what words to choose, her sons were jumping up and were bombarding their grandfather with new pleas. "Now, Granddaddy? Please?"

"What is it?"

"The kites," Tony said. "Remember?"

"I don't know much about kites," Albert said, trying to escape.

"You don't?" Mrs. Pym asked incredulously. "Well, then, Ann is the perfect guest."

"Oh, Mother, please."

"What's that mean, Ann?" Albert asked.

"Go on, Daughter. Tell him. How you used to sail kites with your sainted grandfather on Boston Common—go on."

"Is that true?"

"Yes," Ann said.

"And she got very good at it, too," her mother said.

That settled it, and the small procession—Albert and Ann, Tony and Mike—made straightway to the far fields, where they set about launching the boys' kites.

The phone rang as Jenny and Mrs. Pym—who would not be put off—attacked the dishes, and Jenny was surprised to hear the voice of Hill, already back in the country, telling her he had been asked to proceed right away to Denver, and could she and the boys possibly meet him there as soon as they could?

She was excited by the sudden shift in plans, and already in her mind she began cataloging what had to be done to be on the way, and it was at the end of that mental exercise that she again came to the tape question and decided now not to evade it any longer.

As soon as Albert came back, she would tell all. That was that. Meanwhile, she hurried to put the crockery in order on the shelves she had relined, and she wondered what would become of her father without someone to keep house for him.

A Query from Chicago

□ The phone was snatched off its cradle, and wedged against the blonde's clavicle by her jawbone. She rolled her eyes up to the customer's wide Texas hat. She hit the clearance key on the electric typewriter in front of her.

A flurry of keys, *ratattatatta* . . . She waited a moment as the device finished a line, then ripped the page out of the machine.

"Sir, we're showing only stand-by at this time."

The tall customer stiffened. "What do you mean, 'stand-by'? I got this ticket three weeks ago."

She took the piece of paper from him and ran over the blanks with her pencil. She compared the data there with the coded information on her piece of paper. "Well—" she said, sounding uncertain. She lifted the phone again.

"Control center, this is the field. We want a clarification on a segment here at location three-o-two. Reading 'FX.' Is that the same as 'DZ'? Stand-by?"

The voice at the other end came back almost immediately. Another flurry of keys. The girl ripped out the sheet once more.

"Control? This is three-o-two again. We're still getting 'FX.'"

There was a silence, and a confused sound at the other end of the line. She turned again to her customer. "Sorry, sir. We show only stand-by."

The answer was a sullen withdrawal of the ticket and a glowering gaze. The customer stalked off from the counter, picked up his bags, and despite the girl's call after him that she would be glad to inquire further, he made for the other airline counter across the lobby.

That same evening, the Renwick Catering Service received confirmation of 235 first-class meals for outgoing flights from gates eleven through twenty-four at the airport on U. S. Airlines. The wine steward asked the chef if the figures were right. "Doesn't that sound a little off? I mean, no tourist class at all?"

"It must be a special sales convention," the chef said. "It could happen," and he turned back to the savoring of the bouillabaisse that his assistants were ladling out.

A passenger who thought she was to make a connection at Boston for a continuing flight to Shannon, Ireland, found herself walking into Hawaiian music on the aircraft she had boarded.

"Boston?" the stewardess asked her incredulously. "Didn't you check the destination opposite the flight number?"

"Why, yes," the girl said, "but the flight number was correct. I thought *that* was the thing to check. I just assumed you had left the other destination from the last flight . . ."

"Let me see your ticket again, will you please, miss?"

The stewardess shook her head slowly. "Somebody sure doesn't know what's going on," she said quietly, and buzzed the traffic manager. There would still be time if she hurried.

Julian Curtice swung back toward the water cooler before putting on his jacket.

A phone was ringing in the nearly empty office, and Curtice—whose sharp tanned features gave him the acute look of an extra-clever member of the Triple-I Team—answered it. "Yes?"

"Is Dr. Osgood there, please? This is Public Relations calling."

"Gone, I think. I'll look," Curtice said, and he added, "Hang on, won't you?"

"Sure."

Curtice moved swiftly into Nathan's large corner office, but a glance confirmed that it was empty. The young man reached over to Nathan's ashtray, where a pipe sat. Still warm. Curtice shot a glance out the window, parting the drapes slightly to get an unobstructed view of the parking lot.

Nathan's low Jaguar was just then moving out under the raised yellow parking-lot gate, which swung down with finality just as the low-slung car revved up and raced out the access road to the arterial highway.

"Nope, Public Relations. Gone. Can I help? This is one of his assistants, Julian Curtice."

"Oh, Curtice. This is Lance Mumford. Lookit, we got a little, er, problem. Can't go into detail, but U. S. Airlines—system degradation."

"Bad?"

"Can't tell. You work on it?"

"Some."

"All right. Look, get through to Dr. Osgood if you can, and we'll be trying from here. Mr. Dunham knows about it and he's coming down. Stand by there, will you?"

"But we've got dinner plans. . . . My wife—"

"Look, Curtice. This is important. Mr. Dunham's personal purview. I'll call your wife for you. Better keep those lines there clear."

A hushed colloquy, but still no Nathan. He had not gone right home, and his colleagues, in his absence, were going on as best they could. A tall man in yachting attire stalked back and forth, addressing the half-dozen men there. "Now it's imperative that no word—not the first word—get out. U. S. Airlines is with us on this. It could be very damaging—to everyone. Understood?"

A tense, uniform nod, down once, held, and bobbed up again.

"All right. Let's move."

Lester Dunham, six-two and nodding with weariness, had just come from the Sunnyvale Yacht and Tennis Club, where he had been summoned from his sloop *Spindrift*. His wife Sheila had come too. She was waiting outside, ash-blond and gorgeous, tossing her luxuriant head in rhythm to the big beat coming over the stereo system in the sleek gun-metal-blue Bentley. After a bit of that, she opened the door, and with an imaginary dance partner, began a languid tango around a maple sapling in the parking lot.

Dunham struggled for self-control, while Julian Curtice stayed at his side, not offering any of the fatuous theories that Benjamin always seemed ready to inflict on his superiors.

"Mr. Dunham . . . ?"

"Not now, Benjamin."

"But I had this idea, going over the supervisor program manual . . ."

"Eh?" The procession had reached the input-output console, where a half-dozen dazed-looking U. S. Airlines clerks hovered watchfully. An older man rushed up. His frantic expression confirmed Dunham's worst fears.

"Julian, switch over to stand-by, right now, will you? We've got a master file extra here for today's transactions, haven't we?"

A nodded confirmation. "What is it, Benjamin?"

"I was going to suggest the parity tracks. . . . They may have gone off."

"Parity?" Dunham said impatiently. "Later. Right now

we have to get cracking. Reconstruct this sequence, you and Ross here. Avery? Patch here on the accumulator, parallel. We'll take the other side."

Nathan was reached later that evening, after dinner and a long round of poker with his cousins. He hurried right down to the office, where Dunham and his team had returned, flushed with their interim victory, but still showing signs of self-doubt and apprehension.

Outside, Sheila Dunham was smoking another cigarette and smiling at her reflection in the rear-view mirror.

"Nathan, where've you been?" Dunham barked.

"My cousin's. What happened?" Nathan asked, his eyes widening in surprise to see almost his entire staff as well as his superior on the scene. "My department goof something?"

"No. But U. S. Airlines had a flurry of drop-outs this afternoon. One guy with a confirmed ticket—national sales manager for a steel company, which doesn't help, as he okays the travel plans of a hundred and forty-five salesmen—gets only a stand-by designation. And he fumes over to Midcontinental and gets passage right away to Dallas. Our client's plane flew with only thirty per cent capacity. Midcontinental, as you know, uses Burrychamp data processing equipment. If they found out . . ."

A low whistle from Nathan, and the beginnings of a smile, which he was careful to suppress.

"It goes on," Dunham said wearily.

"Worse?"

"Much."

"Such as?"

"Such as two hundred and thirty-five bouillabaisse dinners prepared for flights with a total of sixteen passengers, of whom only four are first-class. Like no rental cars at Des Moines for a team of Bulgarian agronomists. Like 'Smith' spelled 'gee-four-five-asterisk-one,' shall I go on?"

"No."

"Nathan, I've got to get back to the yacht club. Regatta party. Sheila's waiting; you take over, won't you?"

"Right. Desk-checking . . . ?"

"Already begun. The first program is all right, anyway, but today's transaction file, that's what Curtice and Benjamin are working on now."

The door behind Dunham opened and Benjamin came in looking again as if he were taking his life in his hands. "Yes?" Dunham asked, and Nathan thought it sounded too cold.

"Chief, I know this sounds crazy . . ."

"What is it, Benjamin?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but it looks to me as if something has been eating at it."

"Eating at *what*, Benjamin? I can't stand faulty pronoun references."

"The file tape, sir . . ." Benjamin said, his large head wobbling slowly on his neck, as if to signal his humiliation. Nathan tried to shoot him a supporting glance, but Benjamin eyed the floor with an unmoving gaze when he wasn't speaking.

Now, as if trying to wrest a huge weight to shoulder level, he pulled his head back up and faced Mr. Dunham. "The accumulator, sir."

"What are you talking about?" Dunham asked, slapping his yachting cap back on his head, buttoning his blazer, and then propping one of his white-bucks up on Nathan's desk corner to retie the lace. Dunham's head craned around to regard Benjamin with cool disdain.

"You know they say high-grade mylar has perhaps one dropout in a million bits due to tape failure—"

"Not 'due to,' 'owing to,'" Dunham said, tugging impatiently at the peak of his cap, pulling his blazer down over his rather wide hips, and straightening his tie in the reflection in the great glass window behind Nathan's desk.

He was torn, obviously, between his desire to get back to the party and his wish to slay error wherever it raised its hydra heads. "Don't you ever read Fowler?"

"Fowler?"

"Yes. *Modern English Usage*. No, forget it. Go on."

"Well, sir, the coding. It looks like something may be eroding it."

An impatient wave of the hand, and a final smoothing of the lapels of his blazer. "Look, I've got to run. Nathan, handle this, will you?" and Dunham half danced, half pranced, out the door.

An Orchard by Moonlight

□ Albert could hardly believe that Jenny had waited until the last minute to tell him about the tapes. Two recordings ruined! There was no solace in her contrition, or in her offer to pay for them. Of course he would accept no such payment.

There was also the matter of the guest bathroom. Its paint was stained beyond scrubbing. Its caulking, between the tiles, and especially around the soap dish, was so badly discolored by the micro-organisms flourishing there that he would have to redo the entire room. What odd impulse, he now wondered, had told him to wave Jenny's question aside?

"Oh, Dad . . . the fungosorium . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, I wonder what should be done. Hill says discard it, the bell jars and all . . ."

"Never mind, Jenny. I'll take care of all that. You've got enough else on your mind."

"Oh *would* you, Dad?"

"Of course, dear. Now drive carefully, and take care of the boys. Tony? And Mike? I'm expecting you to take good care of your mother for me. She's the only daughter I have, you know."

There was a flurry of avidly waving hands, and a retreating car, and they were gone. He was alone with his empty house and his memories and his two ruined stereophonic recordings.

The afternoon seemed interminable, and midway through it he went down to the village and prowled through the bookstore next to the railroad station, where he found a colorful field guide to the stars. He determined, after a glance at the clear sky overhead, to relearn his constellations, beginning that very night.

He stopped at Gresham's Diner on the way home, where Ma Gresham fed him a cheeseburger and a chocolate malted

milk, and then, against his best intentions, a slice of blueberry pie with vanilla ice cream on it.

By the time he swung back into his own driveway, the moon was coming up over the pine grove, and he could see that it would be a glorious night for stargazing.

Orion was lying low over the cutleaf maple down behind his orchard. He took his field book with him down there, holding it over his head at arm's length.

It must have been twice, or perhaps three times, that he fancied that he could hear his telephone bell ringing faintly, but nothing could have dissuaded him from his scrutiny of the stars.

It was later, while trying to make out the more prominent features of the moon, that a sound of tires crunching on bluestone drew his attention to his own front porch. He could see a car roll up to the base of the steps, a figure get out, and a door slam.

He emerged from under an apple tree, and stood in full moonlight. The figure sensed Albert's presence down in the orchard, from the way it turned and raised its hand and waved.

The words were barely audible. "Albert, that you?"

Albert waved back. "Hello, Nathan."

There was a long silence as Nathan crunched his way through the small orchard. He came with a grin on his face, and Albert moved several steps toward him, his hand stretched out in greeting.

"Hello, Albert, I just had to see you."

"What brought you out? Full moon?" Albert asked, sliding back against a low bough of the apple tree near him and making room for Nathan.

"Gazing at stars?" Nathan asked, eyeing Albert in a peculiar way.

"Yes. What's up?"

"Funny thing. A problem at the office. Been going on most of the day. Started yesterday afternoon . . ." Nathan's voice drifted slowly to a pause, and he was eyeing Albert again in a way that the older man thought most peculiar.

"What is it, Nathan?"

"System failure at U. S. Airlines, Albert. Magnetic tape deterioration. Flights going wrong. Passengers ticketed wrong. Reservations ignored, or canceled. Rental cars and meals all mixed up. Lists of names garbled."

Albert found something amusing about the picture of a super-efficient airline depending on a super-efficient firm like Triple-I. Suddenly Albert caught himself. "That's the new control center, isn't it, Nathan?"

"Yep," Nathan said. "It's serious for us, and for the airline. I mean, if the competition should get wind of it."

A chuckle began low in Albert's belly and grew until it swelled and rolled across the floor of the orchard. Nathan seemed to withdraw a bit, alert to the sound that Albert could not hear: the slamming of two car doors up on the driveway.

At length, Albert's voice, less reedy than usual—cleared, it seemed, by the effects of mirth—began to intone one word again and again, "Strange . . . strange . . . strange . . ."

"What?" Nathan asked.

"My tapes, Nathan. A Vivaldi and a Brahms, one a New Byzantine and the other an RTC recording, have been attacked by a fungus. They are effectively useless. Ruined."

Before Nathan had a chance to react, there was a sound like a mourning dove. "Ooh, hool Oooh, hoo!"

There were two forms silhouetted against the moon, looking down into the hollow where Albert stood. "Mr. Cartwright-Chickering? Is that you down there?" The voice was that of Millicent Axminster Pym. Ann was with her.

They were making their way down the slope toward Albert. He got up and moved a few paces toward them. Nathan remained a half step under the shadowed canopy of the apple tree leaves, and he did not move.

Nathan's baritone was asking the question. "I've got this odd feeling, Albert, haven't you?"

"What kind of feeling?"

"Like General Ludd again. An orchard by starlight. Whistled greetings . . . It's wild." He folded his arms over his chest and sank back against the gnarled branch.

"Mr. Cartwright-Chickering?" Ann asked. "Were you saying something?"

"Good evening, ladies. Welcome to our little meeting . . ."

"Meeting?" Ann asked uncertainly. Then, brushing aside the question, she began, "Mother should have told you earlier, but she has been bashful. Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, I think she may have had something to do with your insur-

ance," Ann said, trying in the gloom of the orchard to accclimate her eyes to the darkness.

"With my *what?*" Albert asked, growing aware that too many words had been said without introductions, and Nathan sat there looking slightly uncertain.

"Yes. I saw this carbon copy of a letter—" Ann continued.

Millicent, who by this time had fully traversed the last few feet of ground to where Ann and Albert were standing, and who had had time to get her eyes accustomed to the gloom, let out a whelping sound.

"Ooh! Who's that?" she said, pointing to the branch where Nathan now sat, outlined by the moonlight that came through the murmuring leaves.

"My apologies," Albert said quickly, "Mrs. Pym and Miss Pym, may I present Dr. Nathan Osgood?" Albert bowed slightly in Nathan's direction and the mathematician rose gravely and bowed slightly from the waist.

His voice seemed to have dropped yet another octave. "How do you do?" he said.

The ladies inclined their heads in greeting. They all stepped out of the shadows, and stood in a small circle at the edge of the orchard. "How do you do?" Millicent said at length, and then, without awaiting a reply, she said, "Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, whatever are you doing out in the orchard?"

"I was looking at stars, Mrs. Pym."

"Ah. I should have known," Millicent said. "Stars, yes. Well, if I had anything to do with it, I want you to know how sorry I am. Bereaved! The insurance, I mean."

Nathan perked up. "What *did* you have to do with it?" he asked, and he seemingly anticipated Albert's question perfectly.

"Oh, Dr. Osgood," Millicent said without hesitation, the voice of the penitent pouring from her, "I feel so guilty. You see, after Mr. Cartwright-Chickering was cashiered and all—the unpardonable arrogance of it and all—well I just naturally felt it was my obligation to do something . . ." She paused, and seeing the glint of appraising detachment in Nathan's eyes, she suddenly seemed to take fright.

"Felt it was your obligation to do something," Nathan said gently.

"Exactly," she said, buoyed by a sympathetic ear.

"Go on," Nathan said.

"Well, as I was saying, the arrogance and all—"

"And you felt it was your duty to take steps," Nathan continued.

"Yes, and naturally I did what I could. I planned to sell my stock—but then didn't. Instead, I went to the annual meeting . . ."

"Don't tell me," Nathan said with joviality, surprising the others by his tone of voice. "I think I know. You slipped in and punched extra holes in the punch cards, didn't you?"

Millicent's eyelashes fluttered in surprise, and she seemed to shudder slightly, and her several chins wavered as if they were uncertain that they were attached to the right neck. She looked to Ann for support. "Me? Why?"

Nathan turned to Albert suddenly, in explanation. "Our Special Programming Department heard about that because some of the print-out equipment happened to be ours. The main frame was Randolph stuff, though." He turned back to Millicent, whose thunderstruck expression fairly cried for more explanation.

Albert stepped into the breach. "Dr. Osgood is with Triple-I's, Mrs. Pym. He's a mathematician there."

"Oh, you're not a *medical* doctor, then. Or a . . . a . . ."

"Psychiatrist?" Albert asked.

"Mr. Cartwright-Chickering! I wasn't thinking that!"

Nathan said he would have to be running on. He began to walk out of the orchard, up the incline toward the driveway, and Albert fell in beside him. Nathan wondered if Albert had heard about the extra punched cards at UMCorp's annual meeting.

"Only from Ann, some of it," Albert replied.

"Uh-huh," Nathan said, as if he didn't really believe. "That's why I came over, Albert. They found a kind of something on the tapes at U. S. Airlines. It hasn't been analyzed yet, Albert, but it sounds like what you've got on your tapes."

"I would doubt that, Nathan," Albert said with some puzzlement in his voice.

"But Albert, the guest log shows that you and your grandsons were there with your daughter and a couple named . . ."

"Banks?"

"Yes."

"Yes, that's all true, Nathan. But I don't know what you're getting at."

They had reached the parking area, and the Pymys had gone off to await Albert at the front door, after having made their good-nights to Nathan. "*Don't* you, Albert?"

"No, honestly!"

Nathan's expression continued to be a mixture of irony and sadness. "Well, I'll keep your secret, Albert, if you don't let it get out of control . . ."

"Nathan, what are you talking about?"

"Albert, a fungus has attacked the U. S. Airlines transaction tape. You were in the building. Your own home tapes have been attacked. Become nonoperative. Fungus attack indicated. A plus B equals C. The fact is, you've discovered a way to send messages, haven't you, Albert?"

"Me?" Albert asked, half jubilant and half baffled, a curious mixture of emotion that he had never experienced before.

Nathan was swinging into his low Jaguar, leaning out the window as he popped the door shut, and gazing up at the moon. "Lookit, friend," he said, bending around to meet Albert's gaze squarely, "just steer clear of Triple-I installations, or it's my neck. Okay?"

"Nathan, I honestly don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, you think it through. And when you're free of the ladies, we better talk further." Nathan reached down and fingered the key to start the motor.

It zoomed to life, and he backed a few feet down the driveway before stopping. "Brother," he said, "let me say this. I said you didn't want to send just any trivial message. I better revise that. You don't want to send too big a message, either. I mean this kind of thing can get out of control. You don't want to paralyze a whole way of life, now do you?"

Nathan jammed the gear into reverse, roared back down the driveway, turned deftly in the turn-around, and zoomed off into the night.

At the Yacht Club

□ The Sunnyvale Yacht and Tennis Club's June Regatta Ball was roughly halfway begun and the tide was now at flood. Buster Doyle, three martinis into the evening, sat somewhat forlorn.

There was a slight motion in the room as the tide canted the barge a half degree or so to port.

J. Malcolm Morton, chairman of the Iroquois Fund, was well into his prime ribs of beef, and declaiming to Buster about common stock equities and the need for a moratorium on most federal expenditures to damp down inflationary pressures. Buster had finished his meal entirely, and the waiter had brought him his fourth martini, and he had somehow extricated himself from Morton and had wandered over to the bandstand, from which Sam Binder and the Downriver Six were momentarily absent.

Buster took a wah-wah mute, thrust it into Sam's trumpet, and tried to hit a note. An anguished sound pealed forth, and Buster's wife Kate rose swiftly and came over toward her husband.

"Really, Broderick," Kate was saying, her "really" coming out as if the pharynx were the seat of the vocal chords.

"Come on, Katie. Lemme try."

"Brod, you're looking ludicrous! Please! If you have any respect for me whatsoever!" She was talking directly into his ear, and he heard her plea and came with her back to the table. Something was different, he saw in a flash, and his looseness, the relaxation that sat in the innermost parts of his joints, receded. There was a difference. The Dunhams were back.

"Hi ya, Les. Sheila," Buster said cordially. "Get your little problem ironed out, Les?"

Lester Dunham's long and aristocratic face turned placidly up to Buster and he asked, as if there were no other question on the floor, "How'd you do, Brod?"

"Eh?" Buster asked.

"I mean in the race. How'd *Bluebottle* come in?"

"Didn't Malcolm tell you? Second," Doyle said, hating to say it, and Kate pushed a cup of coffee, black, toward him.

When Buster was through his third cup of coffee, he returned to his *idée fixe*. He took a shot in the dark.

"Where was the trouble, Les. U. S. Airlines?"

Dunham's skin, just over his collar, turned nearly a rose color, but his manner betrayed no ruffled feeling whatsoever. "What 'trouble,' Buster?"

"Didn't you go out of here on a troubleshooting call?"

"Oh that? Sure, I guess you could call it that. But there wasn't anything to it."

"Nothing to it? And that kept you all this time?"

Sheila Dunham was lighting a long golden-tipped cigarette, and Buster watched her with admiration. Kate pushed yet another cup of coffee toward him. "Ah, not another, Katie."

"Yes, another. If *you're* going to drive home."

"Waiter! Brandy, will you?" Buster called out, and Kate glowered at him, but before she could say anything, Sheila was talking in her smoky voice:

"What a *marvelous* idea, Brod."

Dunham was through his *parfait* and was lighting up a small green cigar, and there was still no word from the commodore. They announced from the bandstand that he was still grounded, and there was a low murmur and Buster thought he saw Lester Dunham shoot a significant glance at his wife.

On the verandah, Buster and Kate moved slowly behind the Dunhams, Kate's beaded dress making a faint noise, exotic like a glass wind chime. The lights of the boats winked on the water below and a bell rang somewhere on a quarter-deck.

"Your organization get straightened out yet, Brod?" Dunham asked, turning back and facing Doyle. "If you standardized on Triple-I equipment, you wouldn't be in trouble."

"No trouble, Les. We're just debugging. What's your excuse?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean what's going on at U. S. Airlines? Our commodore, for instance. Isn't your equipment supposed to assure that no one gets bumped? Why *should* we buy Triple-I? I mean, we need reliability . . ."

A glance at Dunham showed Buster that he had scored, heavily. They were standing in a kind of circle.

"Really, Broderick, how much shop-talk *must* we listen to?" Kate asked impatiently, and then, as if in a silent compact between the women, they drifted back inside, and the men continued.

"Well?" Buster asked again.

"Your associate in Cleveland doesn't share your apprehensions."

"Who's that?"

"Connaught. We just got a very nice order from his division for a Radion A-13 unit."

"Our Gerry Connaught?"

"The same. We got the purchase order day before yesterday. Signed by your chairman. Sounds like left hand doesn't know what right hand is doing." Dunham, smiling slightly, knew he had returned the service sharply, for Buster was looking wan. Dunham flicked his cigar stub gently over the side and it hissed as it hit the water below.

Buster was trying to think fast. "There had been discussions, of course," he said, "and my recommendations were—to standardize on Randolph equipment. I may as well tell you frankly."

"I thought so. Brod, you wouldn't be having the problems you're having if you standardized on our equipment. For one thing, our Programming Department is second to none. Fantastic support right down the line there. Instant debugging."

"That right?" Buster asked. They moved inside then, and the next thing, Buster was overhearing a fresh rumor in the men's room and then he hurried back to the middle of the dance floor, where they were doing something called the Anteater. Dunham's head was moving in odd undulations over a barrier of hunched people. He was doing the Giraffe.

"Heard your equipment is degenerating at the airline, Les. That right?"

Dunham stopped the Giraffe instantly, thrust through the crowd, and took Buster by the elbow. "All right, that's enough, Doyle." The others watched the two as they talked intensely off to a side. "There's got to be an end to business competition somewhere, you know," and Buster found himself nodding in agreement.

"It's just that you taunted me about our problems," Buster said.

"Come on," Sheila was saying in Buster's ear. "Come on, honey. Let's dance," and his narrowed eyes widened and a broad smile spread over his face as she took his hand and led him out on the floor.

There, in the midst of a heady fragrance from Sheila's ash-blond hair, in spite of her warm arm draped around his back, the suspicion sprang into his mind. Connaught and Dunham on friendly terms. Did Connaught, then, plant the badly punched cards in the annual meeting tally to throw up a smoke screen over his own divisional thrombosis? To give him an inning with top management? To allow another kind of computer system to compete with Buster's?

"Come on, Broddie. You're not paying attention," Sheila said to him, her warm breath making his cheek hot.

The Cartwright-Chickering Society

□ "Mr. Cartwright-Chickering? Are you listening?" Ann was tugging at his sleeve.

"Aren't you going to ask us in?" Millicent asked, almost in unison with her daughter.

"Oh yes. How clumsy of me! Of course," Albert said, and his eyes still were fixed on the spot, illuminated by his front-porch light, where a small powder-blue cloud of stone dust hung over the driveway, a token of Nathan's surging car, racing off into the moonlight.

"Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, are you all right?" Ann was asking.

He turned distractedly toward his two lady visitors. "Of course, of course," he said, and he asked them if they wouldn't have something to drink, and as he got out the ice cubes, his thoughts went back over the sequence of his discussion with Nathan, and he realized that he didn't really know cause and effect. He said to himself, "I'm not even sure I can control it . . ."

"Control what?" Millicent Pym asked, puzzlement written over her features.

"Did I say that out loud?"

"You certainly did," Ann said, faintly smiling at him. He seemed perplexed and she was anxious to help. "But anyway," she said, sipping at her drink, "Mother has an admission to make to you."

"An admission?"

"Yes."

"About the insurance. You see, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, apparently I got so angry that I punched indiscriminately, and I'm afraid that somehow your insurance conversion was affected."

Albert was nonplussed. "Conversion?"

"Yes," Ann said. "You see, the papers that were supposed to be put through were never put through. Your card, I believe, the punch card with your account information—"

Albert waved his hand. "I don't care about that. Not a bit. Relax about it. Forget it, in fact."

"See?" Millicent was asking Ann, pleased and relieved at the same time. Albert moved over to the corner cabinet where his stereophonic tape machine sat, and he threw the switch to "on." The room was flooded with a sixty-cycle hum, distant and faint.

He waited for the music to begin, and when it did, there was a sievelike quality to the recording, a hissing from both loudspeakers on the shelves over the machine.

He shook his head ruefully, remembering then that this was one of the ruined tapes that Jenny had told him about, and he got another and put it on.

Unspoken in the room, as Albert studied the tape under the small lamp on his desk, was an awareness that something extraordinary was afoot. "Is that what Dr. Osgood meant?" Ann asked.

Albert turned around suddenly, facing the two women. They seemed startled by the rapidity of his motion. "Ladies," he said portentously, "I must ask that you keep absolutely quiet about whatever you may have heard here this evening. Is that understood?"

They both seemed to grow more erect in their chairs, as if getting ready for a photographer. They nodded solemnly.

"Yes, Mr. Cartwright—"

"Call me Albert."

"Call you what?" Ann asked incredulously.

"Albert. That's a sign that we're all in this together and that you will be utterly discreet about whatever you have heard."

"Ooh, goodiel" Millicent said, rubbing her hands together so vigorously that the rasping of her soft flesh on flesh made Albert stare at her hands involuntarily. "I love secrets! And, Albert—as long as we're all being so candid—we have another confession . . ."

"Yes," Ann echoed, "we have."

"Ann, you tell him."

"Mr. Cart—Albert. What you said about machines that Monday morning . . . that day you left . . ."

"Yes?"

"Albert, Mother and I have been studying it."

"You've been what?"

"Studying it."

"How?"

"Albert," Millicent said, pride in her voice, "Ann took it down. Every word. I think it is beautiful. 'Crowding us out. Bam, slash, crash. Slay a pine to make way for a road . . . ' You see, Albert, I've even memorized parts of it."

Albert gulped, and a smile of purest pleasure spread over his lips, and he felt at the same time a lump behind his Adam's apple that seemed to threaten to cut off his air supply. "I don't know what to say . . ."

"I know," Ann said, "but we want to help."

Albert closed his eyes and tried to clear his thoughts, but it was no use to expect perfect clarity to come, and at last he said quietly how much he appreciated their good wishes, but that he would need time to think.

"Of course," Millicent said, "to figure out what to do."

"Yes."

"Well, remember, Albert," Millicent said, an admonitory edge in her voice, "no weapon—as I discovered with my paper punch under that table—no weapon is any good without a good carrying system."

"Yes?" Albert asked, surprised to hear the old lady's analytical remark.

"But, Mother, we *must* let Albert work this out as he wishes. And we'll be available, Albert. That's all we wanted to say."

"Yes, precisely," Millicent said. "Available for duty. But,

Albert, just remember that the carrying system is as important as the weapon itself . . ."

"Of course," Albert said.

"Mother, I think it's called a 'delivery system,' not a 'carrying system.' Dad used to use those phrases all the time. All the reserve artillery officers did."

"Yes," Millicent said, rising, and the small tinkling noise of her charm bracelet signaled that they were ready to go. "We'll be on hand."

"Mother, I think we ought to let Albert call us if he needs us; but otherwise . . ."

"Of course. How wise of you, Ann dear. Yes, I agree perfectly. Meanwhile, we shall call ourselves the Albert Duane Cartwright-Chickering Society, a secret organization for the humiliation of machines that think they think. That think a highway is worth more than a pine forest. Right?"

"Right!" Ann said.

"Ladies, I am honored," Albert said, bowing in his most courtly way from his waist, one hand in front of him along his belt and the other behind. "But again—"

"Discretion," Ann said.

"Graveyard quiet!" Millicent said. "We won't say booturkey." They soon were gone and Albert stood holding the screen door, bemused, and he knew things would never be quite the same for him again.

Nathan's Counsel

□ The remnants of the fungosorium were still in the garage, and it was late that night before Albert had reassembled the entire thing, as well as he was able, in the bathroom.

He remembered that spores could remain dormant for months, even years, until the right conditions for their propagation arose, and now he was determined to create those conditions once again.

Once he had got the hot water dripping into the sponge and the small oscillating fan attached and running and the cultures floating again in simple syrup—he had to buy an extra five-pound sack of sugar—he began a careful scrutiny of his ruined tape, and there, faintly, he could detect a brown-lilac dust. His excitement now was almost more than he could control.

The microscope was no longer there, he discovered after a frantic search. Obviously Jenny and the boys had taken it, and now Albert knew he would have to replace it with a new one of his own.

He would have to recover the skills, also, that had lain dormant since his separation from United Metals Corporation: the meticulous record-keeping and analysis of tiny distinctions.

At first he attached no importance to the object he found behind the clothes hamper in the guest bathroom. A child's water pistol, still half-full of a murky fluid having a generally ochre cast to it and emitting a disagreeable odor. He was ready to discard it when an idea occurred to him.

The next afternoon he was ready for his experiment. He withdrew about forty feet of blank tape from a spindle in his cabinet and scanned it with his magnifying glass. It would be a three-day wait until he could get the microscope, because that was when his next pension check was due and he did not wish to touch capital.

He took the strip of tape into the bathroom, where he rigged up a clothespin on the shower-curtain rod. He attached one end of the tape to this clip, looped the rest over the towel racks, and shot along most of the length of it with the water pistol.

The next morning it showed a faint brown-lilac mottling similar in appearance to that on the ruined Vivaldi tape. Albert's chest was pounding rapidly now, the excitement of discovery exalting his thoughts with a vision of mastery, of power within his grasp.

If Mike's single shot, at random, had caused such havoc at U. S. Airlines, what might a concentrated stream of this same rich nurturing spore-fluid accomplish if directed right into the capstans of the tape drives at UMCorp? Right between the eyes, so to speak, of the Randolph Datatronic 8080?

A plan sprang nearly full-grown into Albert's mind, modi-

fied immediately by some warning inner voice. There was, after all, no assurance that the mere presence of the fungus on the tape interfered with its magnetic properties.

He would have to satisfy himself on that point first. And even at that, there was only an ounce or so of the ochre fluid left in the water pistol, and he would have to husband each drop carefully until he could brew up some more. That, in turn, would have to await the arrival of the microscope, so that he could compare spore structure carefully.

Nathan's knock at his door that evening surprised Albert. There was an awkward silence, after which Albert rushed about too eagerly, he feared, as if to make Nathan feel at ease.

"I thought you were going to call when the ladies had gone," Nathan said.

"I was, Nathan. But—well, I just didn't understand the implications of what you said. Not fully." Nathan took the indicated seat and Albert sat opposite him.

"And you do now?"

"I'm not sure. About the fungus, yes. But what did you mean 'don't send too big a message'?"

Nathan smiled and spread his hands before him as he spoke. "Albert, you and your grandsons brought a great airline to the point of collapse with three drops of an *Asco-basidiomycetes fungus*."

"A what?"

"I just memorized it. *Asco-basidio-my-cetes*."

Albert whistled. "Yes?"

"It propagated, Albert, in the binder that holds the iron oxide particles to the mylar. It got in there and ate. That's the only word for it. Ate like crazy."

Albert shook his head in bewilderment. "But I didn't think . . ."

"That plastics were susceptible? Neither did we, until we retained a microbiologist. He came in with his report this afternoon. Albert, did you know that certain fungi can eat any glue—natural gum, starch, casein, soybean? We discovered that a new kind can eat our binder too. This new kind that you seem to have developed can."

"Look, Nathan, I didn't know the first thing about this, not the first thing, until you told me. Don't you believe me?"

"Yes, of course I do. And you better believe me that I

haven't told a soul that I happen to know the gentleman who has cooked up all this trouble. . . . It's over now, by the way. At U. S. Airlines, anyway. But, man, you've got to think twice about this. You could paralyze whole cities. An *entire civilization!*"

Albert began to smile. His eyes were twinkling and his nose wiggled a bit. "Really?"

"Look, wherever they use electromagnetic tape. . . . Once I told you to go for the central nervous system. It was an easy analogy. Too easy. I didn't know it could be done. But that's what you've got. A fungus that does to a machine civilization what potassium cyanide does to a man's central nervous system. Goes right for it, and wham! That's all, brother. Paralysis. And then—death."

"No!" Albert said, abashed, but electrified at the same time.

"Yes! You've got to get it under control. That's what I meant, Albert. You've just got to!"

"Nathan, you can count on me. We took an oath together, remember."

Nathan seemed to calm down, to put himself deliberately in a lower state of anxiety, for across his features spread that beatific expression that he so frequently assumed and that had such a disarming effect among his colleagues at work. "All right, Albert. I just meant to say that it won't do either of us any good if you indiscriminately go around spreading havoc. I'm sure you know this."

"Nathan, you're serious?"

Nathan's hand rose up to hold Albert's threatened earnest advance off. "Sooner or later I'll lose my job, when people find out."

"What? Find out *what?*"

"That we're friends."

"Nathan, I don't understand. You have always talked perfect sense before this. I don't even grasp cause and effect. I haven't even begun to learn what fungus is the cause of the attacks. You give me a name, but that's nothing to me. Besides, there's always a fungicide."

"Sure, and you know what our microbiologist says? There's always a chance of mutation, too. Like bacteria that get resistant to penicillin. This fungus feeds on minute spots, attacking single places where the adhesive is a bit thick. It does just what dust does to a tape. Causes reading errors.

But instead of one dropped bit per million, we're getting hundreds, and thousands! It even eats our parity tracks, so we can't get warning in time. Slows down operations at best. Or degenerates them entirely at worst."

"Like at U. S. Airlines."

"Yes," Nathan said wearily.

"Believe me, Nathan, my objectives are limited."

"Are they?"

"Sure they are!"

"To what? You who resent every copy of a newspaper that's printed because, as you say, each copy throws a jay out of its nest. Slays a pine to make paper pulp."

Albert was on his feet now. His hands came to rest grasping his own lapels, and his stance, for all the world, looked to Nathan like that of a senior director of a large insurance company addressing the board about the prevailing mortgage loan policies. "That's *one* me. The visionary me. There is the practical me, too."

"Is there? You who believe so intensely what you believe?"

"Yes, but we agreed, I thought, on some things, Nathan."

"Who says we disagree? That was philosophy. Viewpoint. Our secret selves. But now, Albert, this is the real world. This is my livelihood, too, you know. I got somewhere. I stand someplace. I *am* somebody. A man is what he does, you know, Albert. Especially if he doesn't have the family background you have."

"Pshaw. New England bourgeois. That's not background."

"Yes it is, too. And you know it. China trade, Dartmouth, bishops in your family. You know it is."

"All right, I do."

"Well then?"

"Look, Nathan, there's the practical me, too. My severance money, for instance, and my pension. In other words, I have a vested interest too. Those things make me more down-to-earth. I assure you, Nathan, I have limited objectives."

"I heard that before."

"It's true. Quite limited."

"Lookit, Albert, okay. But within reason, man. I'm sitting on a volcano."

"The most I would ever aspire to might be to become a kind of Johnny Appleseed. Go from place to place—if this thing works at all—and just . . ."

"Leave a calling card?"

"Exactly."

"A calling card of havoc, devastation, confusion—"

"Wait a minute, Nathan! You sound like you're really against me."

Nathan got up and began to stride the floor next to Albert, his sturdy feet thumping quietly on the rug, but with such force as to make the floor beams tremble with each pace. "I'm against you, Albert, and I'm for you. You must know that. You say you're two yous. Well, that's me—two mes or even three. Hell, does any of us really know himself?"

"No."

"No indeed," Nathan went on. "Johnny Appleseed didn't stop with just one medium-sized seed. He planted everywhere he went. Scattered seed all over . . ."

"Yes, and that's what I meant, but not in just that way. It was only a dream. A remote dream. I mean, if a single man—Albert Duane Cartwright-Chickering—could prick a herd of sacred cows, why think of the beneficial exercise they'd get!"

"No! Think of the stampede!"

"Now wait, Nathan. Just think how much good would come from a small voice—just loud enough to be heard—to say no to all the big shots that run our industry. A small voice that walks behind them—remember that slave behind Caesar?—and tells them, 'Remember, O Mighty and August Ones, O Rulers of All Terrain and Makers of All Law, remember that strong though you be, you too are mortal. You too may be humbled, no matter your pride. You too may feel the bite of nemesis on your plump hubris!'"

There was a silence in the room, and Nathan was staring at Albert with a cool eye, and a smile was gathering at the corner of his lips, and his head began to shake, and he thrust his hands into his rear pockets, clenching his pipe more firmly in his teeth. Then he removed the pipe. "I've heard everything," he said quietly.

"What will you do? Call the police?" Albert asked.

"Talk sense! Of course not. Lookit. Why not just *one* message? And be done with it."

"U. S. Airlines was a mistake, if that's what you mean."

"No, that's not what I mean. Look, Albert, just do me one favor. Stay clear of Triple-I installations. . . . One of your visits was enough, thank you. And consider what power you

may have in your grasp, and just remember my livelihood is involved, too."

"Just one medium-sized message, then?"

"What kind of message?" Nathan asked, chary now.

"To my former employer."

Nathan began to laugh and he threw his arm around Albert, and the older man looked up at him and smiled. Nathan invited Albert to come on home with him to dinner, and that was what Albert did, and his thoughts were more confused when he returned home late that night than they had been in weeks.

The Assault on Fortress UMCorp

□ The morning was exceptionally clear as Albert left the subway and reached the street. He must have felt his right rear pocket fifty times. That was where the water pistol rested. A slight coin-size drop of moisture spread on the silk lining of his trousers and felt chilly.

The building was directly across the wide avenue, towering upward from the small plaza in front of it, and he could see at a glance that the morning he had chosen was not the best. A maintenance crew was replacing the defunct tulips in the polished black marble planters with geraniums.

As the crew unloaded peat moss and cow dung and topsoil from its small truck, a pair of men uprooted the tulips and cast them into a wheelbarrow in front of them, and Albert could only think that that was how they treated you inside, too. When the bloom was past, out you went.

"But, Albert," he said aloud to himself, "you mustn't think that way." He gazed up and down the avenue, so lightly traveled at this early hour, and he was relieved to see that no pedestrian could have overheard him—even if it had mattered.

In that city, it wouldn't have mattered. "Nothing, Albert, was ever accomplished by bitterness—except of course the

French Revolution, which is not exactly what I have in mind." Then a smile involuntarily crossed his lips. "Or is it?" he said, and he patted his rear pocket again.

A frontal assault, he could see, was out of the question. The guards and the elevator starter—an impossible martinet of a man—were hovering over the flower crew, and he could not hope to get past them, through the revolving doors, across the spacious red-marble lobby, and unnoticed into one of the robot elevators.

He tried to keep a light pole between himself and the elevator starter, as the man would instantly recognize him, and then there would be exclamations and awkward lies. If there was one thing Albert did not do well, it was lie.

At that point a new tactic suggested itself, for halfway down the block was the service entryway to the building. If he were stealthy about it, he could slip in that door—they were probably dragging out wastepaper from it right now—and then move around to the elevators from behind.

His plan formed rapidly. Once upstairs, he would slip into the computer room first, shoot the capstan, and hide in a men's room. Or would a fast getaway be best? Those things he could work out as he went along. The important thing was to get to the eighth floor unobserved.

There was something at the service loading dock. A truck with the same green hood as the maintenance truck sitting on the plaza. Albert could see a pair of giant planters sitting in the truck's slatted body, with longleaf pine saplings perhaps six feet tall growing in dense thickets. Immediately he knew where they would be going.

They would be destined for the eighth floor, in the reception area, to replace the tired plants that had languished under the hot incandescence of the lobby since Christmas-time. He edged his way in the entryway, slipping in quietly next to the truck. He walked up the three stairs to the loading dock, and he could see that the door was standing open.

The service elevator was running, its relays sputtering and clicking. The hum of the motors was audible, but they did not obscure the rapidly growing sound of voices: several boisterous men descending in the car.

Albert calculated whether he could get past the service elevator, down to the end of the corridor, and out into the rear of the lobby before these men spotted him.

He broke out in a small trot, and nearing the lobby door,

he heard the voice—could he ever mistake it?—of the elevator starter on the other side. He was trapped.

He moved swiftly back down the corridor, and the service elevator now seemed ready to come to rest, to pop open its doors, and to reveal him to the gardeners. He had to think fast, but there was no time to think.

He put his hand on the broom-closet door, swung it open, only to discover it was entirely full of large composition barrels of the kind used to collect trash. There wasn't even room for a child.

Albert's chest was pounding, and he had no choice now but to scurry out to the loading dock and hope to get clear of the place before anyone saw him.

It was at that instant that he saw how much protection the pines in the giant planter would provide, should he be able to get himself into their midst.

He bolted out the door, onto the tailgate, and into the first giant planter, disappearing behind the trees just as the door of the elevator snapped open and the loud voices came steadily upon him, coming to rest right at the other side of the pines.

"All right, this one next," a gruff voice said, and Albert sat down, hugging his knees to his chest, and waiting to feel the planter lurch under the prodding of the planting crew.

It skidded protestingly across the crosshatched metal flooring of the truck bed and out onto the hydraulic lift, which whined quietly down to the loading-dock level.

"All right, who's the wise guy that stepped here?" the voice asked. "Tim? George?" a hand came perilously close, brushing the dirt to cover up the footprint close to Albert's right hand.

It was then, as the planter jostled down the hall and into the elevator, that a pine needle chose to prickle Albert's nose and to set in motion that complex reaction of trachia and lung, of esophagus and sinus, that results in a giant sneeze. But he thrust his finger, straightened and firm, against his upper lip, and slowly fought back the urge.

The car doors slid closed and he could feel the closeness of the slowly moving compartment. That voice again. "You guys ever sleep with a pine tree before?" and the answering laughter.

The doors opened, and he could feel the planter sliding

out into a corridor. "All right, right over here. And get these old things out before you bring that on the carpeting, hear?"

There was jostling and adjustment and Albert visualized the spot where the planter might go—the reception area that had been in the throes of remodeling when he left. The jiggling stopped, and he heard the voices recede, and he knew, then, that he was alone in the area.

He cautiously peeped out between the branches to see any sign of life. Nothing. He crept out, brushed off the pieces of mulch from his pinstriped pants, straightened his Phi Beta Kappa key in his waistcoat, brushed off his coat, and made his way down the corridor, not noticing right away that the familiar gleaming ingot against a beaker, the trademark of UMCorp, was nowhere in evidence.

He was so pleased with his feat, in fact, that he hardly realized until that moment that he had no idea where the computer would be, except that it must be behind one of the doors facing the corridor. He withdrew the water pistol from his pocket. To his distress, he found only a little more than an ounce of the fluid left. The rest had apparently leaked away.

It was while absently moving down a corridor that he was suddenly shocked to see a pair of eyes right opposite his own, and to feel the water pistol drop with a small sound on the vinyl tiling at his feet.

Below the face was a sky-blue uniform, on the chest of which gleamed a square silver badge. The lettering "Federal National Bank & Trust Company" appeared. As the guard reached down to pick up Albert's water pistol, his eyes did not leave Albert's face.

"This belong to you?" the guard asked.

"Why yes," Albert said, embarrassed, but deciding to brazen it out.

"A dangerous thing to be in a bank with a gun. Even a toy gun. Don't you think?"

"A bank?" Albert asked.

"Yes, sir."

"But isn't this United Metals Corporation?"

"Oh no. That would be on the eighth floor. This is *eighteen*. The Estate Department of Federal National."

"Oh. I wanted United Metals Corporation."

The guard nodded to a niche in the hall next to the bank of elevators in the center of the building. Without letting his

eyes leave Albert's face, he lifted a wall telephone and dialed a number. "Jimmie?", and for a moment his gaze drifted onto the phone in front of him. "No? Well, let me speak to Jimmie, please."

Albert glanced around, and just around the corner was a red light over the word "EXIT." He calculated how quickly he might get there. He figured it as five long strides.

He assumed his friendliest tone of voice. "You say this is eighteen?"

The guard nodded, and made that motion of the hand that signals that he cannot divide his attention between two incoming messages. "Hello, Jimmie lad? This is Brian. Up on eighteen . . . Fine, how're you?"

Albert began to edge toward the door, trying to move with deliberation and with dignity.

"Jimmie, there's a gentleman here. Says he wants United Metals Corporation. . . . Yes, I know it's early, but that's what he says . . ." the guard said, turning to look again at Albert. He saw his man was gone. "Wait! Sir? Wait!" the guard called, but Albert was by now moving swiftly down the fire stairs, grasping the railings and swinging his legs beneath him with the agility of the gymnast that he once had been.

The door on the landing above opened, and the guard poked his head out, but Albert was safely out of sight, moving swiftly down, as silently as he could, in the crepuscular light of the stairwell. "Sir? You can't get out that way, you know, until the lobby . . . Sir?"

Albert kept on, heedless. Finally he paused for breath and leaned out into the narrow stairwell. He looked up to where the small head was peering down toward him. "I can take care of it. Thank you for your help," he called up. "You've been very polite indeed!"

"But you're not *supposed* to use the fire stairs, sir."

"Tut, tut," Albert called out. "Surely no harm's done."

The answering silence from above seemed to signal agreement.

There was no indication of trouble, in Albert's judgment, as he passed the eighth floor and continued on down to the bowels of the building. He could hear a door slam above him somewhere, but that was all.

The lobby-level door was standing open, and Albert's

watch said just 8:20 A.M. He would be bold. That was the only way. If the martinet should challenge him, it would be embarrassing. But if not, his escape would be made good and that would be that.

He was just four paces into the lobby when the challenge rang out over the hard surfaces of polished stone. "Sir? May I help you?"

Albert recognized the voice, and decided to turn and be his most self-possessed self. He was quite unaware of the water pistol that he still forgetfully held in his right hand.

"Why Mr. Cartwright-Chickering!" the officious voice said. The face was ruddy and the manner that of a reserve Army sergeant Albert had once known.

"Hello."

"What are you doing here?"

"Leaving."

"And with a—it *is* a water pistol."

"Of course. What did you think it was, a howitzer? Now if you'll get out of my way, I really must go."

"You'll have to sign out."

"Tut. You know my name. Sign it there if it's all that important."

"But Mr. Cartwright-Chickering—"

"Tut, tut. Now stand aside."

The man stepped back, and Albert walked in his most upright way to the door, slipping the water pistol into his rear pocket, and moving swiftly and a bit thankfully through the revolving door and out into the sunlight.

The Ajax Cleaning Company

□ Albert secluded himself utterly, refusing to answer when the occasional phone calls came, as they did those next three days. Another registered letter arrived from the Invicta Credit Corporation International. He discarded it with a snort.

His spirits began to revive with the arrival of his monthly pension check. He got a microscope promising five hundred magnifications. It came in a velvet-lined cherry-wood cabinet with brass fittings.

It was that afternoon, while watching a spore glide across another of his specimen plates, marveling at the variety of color and shape, that a picture sprang back into Albert's mind. He remembered, as he had passed the street a block down from the United Metal Corporation's building, a sign reading "Ajax Cleaning Company." Why couldn't he get into UMCorp by posing as a cleaning man?

He put away his microscope, snapping shut the brass cinches, and he got out his gardening trousers and his oldest shirt. That same afternoon he presented himself at the office of the Ajax company, slouching a bit and fingering the stubble of gray on his chin.

There was a large room with a shelf on one side where applicants filled out a rudimentary application form. There were rows of cheap metal chairs facing a door marked. "No Admittance" from which, periodically, a man with a frown would emerge, post a notice on the bulletin board, and then bawl out its substance to those in the room (assuming that they could not read).

"Next three numbers," he would say, and three sad-looking women would stand, shuffle up to the man, and receive from him curt instructions and a nod that propelled them through the forbidden door.

That afternoon as Albert had come downtown, he was conscious that several people stared at him in the subway. He seemed to exert the same kind of magnetic attraction on the collection of rag-tag old women and men in the Ajax Cleaning Company's hiring hall. His entrance was watched by everyone, even the man with the clipboard.

"Register and fill out your application over here, you," he called to Albert.

Albert remembered to hang his head and he shuffled over to where the man was holding out a small card on which Albert was required to give his name and social security number. The man was eyeing him suspiciously.

"Drink?"

Albert deliberately tried to coarsen his voice as he answered, half rasping, "Not much."

"Had one yet this afternoon?"

"Of course not," Albert said, his voice inadvertently reverting to its natural accent, and its effect on the man was to make him take two quick small steps backward.

"All right. Take a number and have a seat."

There was little doubt in Albert's mind that he would get to UMCorp, although he had no exact plan. He knew Ajax had long had the contract with UMCorp, and as it was so close to his old office building, he assumed that it was only a matter of time until he would be assigned there.

It was past five forty-five when his number was called. The man took his card with a yank and studied it.

"What's this, a joke?"

Again Albert remembered to use his rasping voice. "What?"

The large hand held the card up to the man's small eyes. "Cartwright—*Chick-er-ing*. What's that, a joke? Please, no aliases. Just your own name. We got no time for jokes."

"You got my right name," Albert croaked, remembering to be a bit ungrammatical.

"All that name for a little guy like you?"

"It's my name," Albert said, trying as best he could not to sound too dignified.

The man let out an exasperated sigh. "All right. We'll get you straightened out later. Through that door. See Miss Jones for your badge and stay there for the bus . . ."

"Bus?"

"Sure. Bus. And no more questions from you," And he waved impatiently to the door.

Albert felt his rear pocket, and the slight bulge of the water pistol remained. He walked down the corridor, and he learned there that the assignment was as a member of a floor-waxing crew at Federal National Bank & Trust Company. He was crestfallen.

The small spot of moisture in his pocket told him that he was still losing fluid from the gun. He was not going to get inside UMCorp before the last of the spore potion had dribbled away. Defeat stared him in the face.

As the bus moved downtown to the giant tower of the Federal National Bank & Trust Company in the heart of the financial district, Albert considered the averages.

The odds, it was plain, were against him. He probably

could never again recreate the fluid in Mike's water pistol. Scan micro-organisms as he would with his new microscope, he had yet to see any possible avenue by which he could reproduce the brown-lilac-colored mildew.

His depression deepened as they thrust an electric buffer into his hands on the thirty-seventh floor of the Federal National building and directed him to follow the man who was applying wax.

Albert's arms ached from the bucking and swirling of the moaning waxer, and by midnight, when the shift was supposedly over, he was thoroughly exhausted.

Still, his foreman ordered him to the fortieth floor, to aid the crew there as it finished up its work. As the elevator doors slid open on the fortieth floor, Albert's heart gave an involuntary leap in his chest.

There was a glass wall, as far as he could see, and behind it, where the waxing crew was at work, was a giant computer with nearly sixty tape units.

Behind them, he could see, was a massive console, and any amount of support equipment: magnetic drums, line-at-a-time printers, card-sorting machines, auxiliary power units, and dollies with clear-plastic canisters that would eventually enclose magnetic tapes of one kind or another.

There, shimmering before him, was the heart of the record keeping of the trust company, the vortex into which, with each transit of the sun, a billion symbols were sucked to be compared, processed, and re-ordered.

"All right, don't stand there like a dope," the foreman said testily. "Into the bay there with the rest. Step on it."

He moved into the room, and bent over his polishing machine, swirling, swirling, and bringing the floor under him to hospital brightness. He edged his machine toward what he took to be the main cluster of tape units, and he glanced about nervously to see if he could by any chance get in a shot without being observed.

He was in the clear. He reached into his rear pocket and began to withdraw the water pistol. Quite without warning, the foreman stuck his head right around the corner of the computer. "All right, you. Come on. This has already been done, this part!"

Albert never was able to approach the main frame again, and he had to settle, a half-hour later as they were about to

leave, for a short shot at a set of empty plastic canisters in a storage room. There was a chance, a remote chance but still a chance, that the spores, sitting there and waiting their time, would do their work, somehow, someday.

The Pym Ladies Make a Call

□ "Why are you going so slowly, Ann?" Millicent Pym asked, a trace of impatience in her voice.

"Look there," Ann said as she eased the Pym Chrysler down the Cartwright-Chickering driveway. Ann's outstretched finger guided her mother's gaze to the orchard, where a form was standing with what appeared to be a piece of bright-colored plastic in its hand.

"What ever is it, dear?"

"It's Albert."

"Yes?" straining to look. The old lady withdrew her lorgnette from her purse. "With a—a water pistol!"

"Yes. Hush. Let's watch," Ann said as Albert drew his new practice gun from his side pocket and acted as if he were bound to get it to shoulder-level with the swiftness of an Old West gunslinger.

"Ann, doesn't that seem odd?"

"Very."

They continued to watch. Albert gamboling through the orchard, drawing and aiming his water pistol at all the stubs of branches, at the small pot of patching paint that hung in the crotch of an old tree.

"He seems to be quite frisky," Millicent said, lowering her opera glasses and putting them back in her lap.

"Yes."

At about that time Albert became aware that someone was watching, because he slipped his gun back into his pocket, assuming the stance of a resolute protector of private property. He came striding up the slope toward the Pym.

"Ooh, hoo!" Millicent called out, and her hoot—far from putting Albert in a foul mood, as Ann thought it might—brought a broad smile to his face and a quickening in his pace. The ladies got out of their car and walked to meet him.

"We've come to ask if you need any—er—help," Millicent said, and Ann had to cringe at her mother's utter directness.

"Hello," Albert said, motioning to a set of summer chairs that were set out on his terrace. "You haven't been . . . talking to anybody?" he asked, uneasily.

"Of course not," Millicent said. "But we have been wondering . . ."

"Yes, Albert, we really have. If we might be of any service," Ann said.

Albert kept them at bay for only a few moments before his attempts at preserving distance failed completely. Then he found himself telling them every detail of his frustrating attempt to enter the UMCorp offices, and of his miscalculation that landed him at the Federal National Bank & Trust Company headquarters instead.

"That sounds very exciting," Millicent said. "A disguise, in other words?"

"Yes," Albert said.

"So that is why you were target-practicing? To be able to deliver spores—in disguise—from a distance? Is that it?"

"Mrs. Pym, you really mustn't ask so many questions," Albert said.

"Ooh, I knew you'd say that. I don't blame you. Security and all. But still, mighty clever if you ask me. Yet, Albert, the point, if I may say so . . . ?"

"Please do," he said.

"Thank you . . . The point is that nothing can happen without a really good vector. I was reading, was it in Rachel Carson's book? No, I think it was in *Town and Country*. Or was it *Holiday*?"

"Mother!"

"All right. Wherever it was, this article said that without a vector—that was the word—that there would have been no elm blight. Without a carrying agent, in other words. So what I suggest is that we become vectors. Ann and I. We both could. And you continue. I presume you are being a vector already? No?"

Albert was silent for a moment. Then he said, "It is premature, after all. And I am frankly concerned about absolute discretion."

"Discretion, to be sure. That is certainly important," Millicent said. "But beyond that, what's needed is fervor! Militant fervor!"

"Mother!" Ann said. "I didn't know you felt like that."

"Well I do."

"Mrs. Pym," Albert said, "I have no idea how the fungus works. I've been trying to do some experiments—"

"Experiments? What kind? Why can't we help?"

"Spore prints. Examinations of various varieties of fungus. Trying to test them against mylar and acetate types. At various temperatures and at various humidity levels. That kind of thing."

"Oh, it sounds so exciting. I just love experiments. And I want to be a laboratory technician!" Millicent leapt from her chair, standing in the shifting shade from the trees overhead, and her eyes fairly blazed with her zeal. "The Cartwright-Chickering Society will please come to order," Millicent said. "In fact, Ann and Albert, I want you to hear something I've written!"

"Written, Mother?" Ann asked, feeling queasy.

"You've *written* something, Mrs. Pym?" Albert asked, half-way rising out of his seat.

Millicent withdrew a small folded piece of blue notepaper from her purse and held it at stomach level, waving Ann back into her chair and pushing her hand gently against Albert's chest, and he, poised halfway back into his seat, riveted his gaze upon her round features before sinking slowly down, his hand grasping his forehead with what seemed extreme gentleness.

Millicent pushed her reading glasses up to the bridge of her nose, and gazing through them, owl-like, raised her voice in song. The tune, *affettuoso* and even stirring, came tripping out of her throat with a fluency that left Albert speechless:

We'll smite the hated foe with heart and hand,

Emancipating folks throughout the land!

We'll in-tro-duce our spores—

Whoosh! Through windows. Whoosh! Through doors—

"Oh, Mother, please!" Ann said.

"Hush. Where was I? Oh yes:"

Through windows and through doors—

"You forgot the 'whoosh,'" Ann said.
Millicent ignored her.

*Abolishing all wrongs from sea to sea
We'll act as vectors evan-es-cent-ly!*

Ann was on her feet now. "'Evanescently?'"

"Yes," Millicent replied, unruffled. "Now you see us, now you don't . . . Now hush, there's more."

"There isn't!"

"Certainly there is. The chorus:"

*Ever onward, ever outward, where tawdry commerce fills
the air with dickering.*

*Ever onward, ever outward, we're bearing messages from
Cartwright-Chickering!*

*Smite, in-tro-duce, whoosh! through windows and through
doors,*

Smite, in-tro-duce, whoosh! We'll scatter forth our spores.

Albert was standing now, and his gesture was one of intervention, but Millicent simply waved him back down into his seat. "Here comes the smacko finish," she said.

"Mother, the word is 'socko,'" Ann said.

*Smite, in-tro-duce, whoosh! Through windows and through
doors,*

"You said that already."

*Smite, in-tro-duce, whoosh! We'll scatter forth
sprinkle out
prop-a-gate
dis-sem-inatē
our spores!*

Millicent's arms were raised, like a diva, and her strong soprano was holding onto a note near to B-flat with a tenacity that Albert thought would be admirable were the note more pure.

His look of distress had changed into something else. Even he would have been hard-pressed to assign an exact name to it. All he was certain of was that fate had granted him a formidable force in the person of Millicent Pym, and all that he could hope was that there would be some way he could harness, and thus contain, her vast energies before his entire plan ended in a shambles.

It was that sudden conviction that propelled him into the mood of a commander, assuming the peremptory demeanor that compelled obedience. Millicent, it was decided, would be chief of research and laboratory technician, and to her was assigned the task of running comparison experiments on two particularly promising strains of spores.

Ann, he commanded, would take the remaining ounce of fluid in the water pistol that he would withdraw from the icebox, slip into UMCorp with it, and shoot the Randolph 8080 at her first opportunity.

Ann's nose wrinkled as she caught a whiff of the murky fluid in the toy gun, but she did not protest.

A Tête-à-tête with Broderick Doyle

□ "Who's got a nine-cent stamp?" Buster Doyle asked as he suddenly made for his secretary's desk. It was unoccupied. He veered across the reception area and into Ann's office, quite unexpectedly.

She had the water pistol in her hand, halfway to her purse as he entered, and a spindle of magnetic tape sat next to her on the desk.

His flickering gaze signaled his immediate suspicion. "What's that, Ann?"

"Nothing," she said, slipping the gun toward her purse, but not quite making it.

He seized her wrist gently but with a firmness that told her that resistance could become painful.

"Ann, you've taken a tape out. What tape?"

"Nothing."

He squeezed tighter.

"Mr. Doyle!"

He slackened his grip, and she slipped the pistol into her purse and decisively snapped it shut. He stood silent for a long moment, watching her, and her gaze fixed on her lap.

"Come on, Ann, hand it over."

"Mr. Doyle, I can't. It isn't mine."

"No, I know it isn't," Doyle said. "Ann, you've been put up to this, haven't you?"

"Up to what?"

"Ah, come on, Ann . . . Look, just let me look at that thing," he said in a coaxing voice. He had picked up the tape and was mopping the moisture off its canister with his pocket handkerchief.

Ann swiftly got up and walked to the window on the far side of the small office. She swiftly worked at the clasp, threw open the window, and taking the pistol, cast it out. Buster rushed over to the sill to gaze after it.

"Now why did you want to do that?" he asked plaintively as the small green speck of plastic hit the pavement eight floors below. Almost immediately, a large truck drove directly over it, crushing it to the macadam and wiping out all but the smallest trace of moisture.

"Ann, why?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Doyle, I can't speak about it. It was just a . . ."

"A what?"

"A whim."

"You carry water pistols often? To spray tapes with? Come on, level with me. Connaught had something to do with this, didn't he?"

She could hardly follow the branching trails of his suspicion. But there was no mistaking that he knew that something was afoot. "It has something to do with Gerry Connaught, that little pistol, doesn't it?"

"Please, Mr. Doyle," she said.

"Doesn't it?" he asked, this time nearly barking the question at her. She began to weep silently, and Buster made an intuitive leap that left Ann breathless. "Or Cartwright-Chickering. Which one?"

"Oh, not Cartwright-Chickering . . . Not *him!*"

Buster's eyes did not leave Ann's face. He reached down, picked up the telephone, and it seemed nearly to disappear in his large hand. He was placing a call to Albert.

In a moment she heard Buster's voice begin in its silky way, before she could possibly imagine how to deflect him with a new and effective evasion.

"Ah, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, this is Brod Doyle at United Metals. We've wondered if Miss Pym should bring your water pistol back to you or if you want us to hold it here for you?" Buster's sharp glance swept over Ann's face, and he was surprised to see her suddenly bring both hands up to her face, cup them beneath her eyes, and begin to sob. He abruptly slammed the phone down.

"So it *was* Cartwright-Chickering, eh?" he asked.

She looked up in perplexity. "Yes, but—"

"Yes?"

She nodded her head silently.

"So my little trick worked. I had my finger on the hold-button, you know," and Buster was very proud of himself. Now, however, he ostentatiously did dial the operator. "This is Mr. Doyle. Please put through a call to Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, if you will . . . Cartwright-Chickering, a former employee. . . . No listing? Just a moment, please. . . . Ann, what's his number?"

Ann gave the number in a low monotone, and her throat felt parched and her back laden with the weight of a hundred stones. Here she had been given her first assignment, her first real duty for the society, for Albert and her mother, and—

"What's a matter? I mean why bawl? It's just a little lark, isn't it?"

Ann was shaking her head emphatically.

"You better take some time off, young lady," Buster said. "I'm not going to ask for your job; I don't think that's what we want here. Not yet . . . Ah, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering? Broderick Doyle at United Metals. You free for a meeting? . . . About what?" Glancing broadly at Ann and smiling, Doyle said evenly into the mouthpiece, "It's about a water pistol."

The meeting was arranged at an address in midtown and Albert was surprised, when he arrived, to find that it was a

brownstone with gaslight lanterns flanking the front door.

As he gazed out his taxi window, a symbol of a small bird embroidered on the cinnamon-colored cape of the doorman came to rest before him. A hand was on the door of Albert's taxi, flinging it open.

Albert alighted with an air of perplexity and stared up and down the facade of the building. The doorman cooed something toward Albert and acted as if he were parting the warm air between the sidewalk and the recessed front door with the highly polished brass knocker, like a beaded curtain in a seraglio.

The door swung open inwardly, as if by itself, and there, in the gloom inside, were two young ladies with hardly anything on, to greet Albert. He was somewhat alarmed by their rapid motions toward him, and one of them redoubled his apprehension by rolling a small television camera up to him. She aimed the lens directly at his face. "Your name, sir?"

"Mr. Cartwright-Chickering."

"Announcing the arrival of Mr. Cartwright-Chickering," the girl said. Albert could see from her costume that she was a bird, because two gauze and metal-wire wings were attached to her deeply tanned back by what appeared to be flesh-colored adhesive tape.

"And your number, sir?" the other asked.

"I am not a member. I was to have met Mr. Doyle here."

A wall box was humming on the red velveteen wallpaper. "This is Broderick Doyle," the voice said. "Number twenty-three-fourteen, Charter."

"Yes, Mr. Doyle," the first girl said toward the box.

"I'm up in the Gold Coast Room. Send Mr. Cartwright-Chickering up, won't you?"

The taller of the girls, and the one whose looks appealed least to Albert because of her unintelligent chin, took him by the elbow while slipping her partner a bored look. "This way, sir," she said.

Albert shrugged off her hand, and instead of going to the elevator toward which they intended he go, he made for the main circular stairway. "But it's four floors!" the prettier girl said.

"Tut, tut," Albert said airily, beginning to climb without holding onto the velvet-covered banister. As he left the gloom

of the lobby, he became conscious of a brighter lighting scheme in the floor above, where a ragtime piano was tinkling relentlessly and a large buffet table, staffed by three young ladies with hardly anything on, sat in the middle of the room.

Albert ignored the calls from the piano player, in whose light Albert apparently walked for a few feet before finding the continuation of the stairs up to the third floor.

There, the decor was that of a whaling ship, and the room was built slightly on an angle, and the bar there was overhung with fishing nets, and the barmaids, while as scantily clad as those below, all wore sou'wester hats and shiny black boots. He had to push back a scrim to find the narrow set of stairs that led up to the fourth floor, where the sound of a banjo came twanging down to meet him.

The man at the top of the stairs had to be Buster Doyle, Albert knew, from the perfect wedding of name and physiognomy. Buster had a triple-decker sandwich in one hand and a drumstick in the other. "Mr. Cartwright-Chickering? Welcome. Came up the hard way, eh?"

"Yes. . . . Mr. Doyle?"

"Come on in the house!" Buster roared, and he slapped at the rear of a bustle girl with his drumstick. She handed him a mug of amber fluid. "Right over here," Buster said through a full mouth, and he nodded to a corner near the band where a table sat with a crimson table cloth, several plates of cold cuts, and a pastry tray, alongside a bottle of twelve-year-old scotch.

"It's nice to meet you at last," Buster said. "I've heard your name often."

"Really?" Albert asked as he took the indicated seat. He shook off Buster's offer of food. "Now what's this about a water pistol?" Albert asked, trembling slightly, yet angered at the same time by Doyle's deliberately mysterious style. "Come right to the point, won't you?"

Buster's eyes narrowed and he took a bite out of his drumstick. "You're getting things a little mixed up, aren't you, Al?"

Albert disliked the sound of his first name rendered that way. It made it sound short and crude.

"Let me tell you something. I caught your ex-secretary trying to tamper with our tapes. I haven't told anybody be-

cause I wanted to talk with you first. I had to put Annie on leave—"

Albert began to rise in his chair, but Buster's hand restrained him.

"—at full pay. And with a re-assignment, I think we can use her."

"And the—"

"Water pistol? That's your secret, isn't it, Al?"

"Where is it?"

"Not so fast. I'll level with you if you level with me. That's your secret isn't it? An acid. Something that eats out tapes. Right? That's you, isn't it? Worked it at U. S. Airlines several weeks ago, too, didn't you? Didn't know I would guess so much did you? Check up on your whereabouts? Even retain a—er—service to get certain bits of information."

Albert felt sudden panic. "Such as?"

"Such as your expense accounts for several months last year have no receipts to back them up. Could prove embarrassing if the Internal Revenue Service were to ask about some items. Eh?" He watched Albert's eyes for any reaction.

"Where's the water pistol?"

"Crushed by a truck. She dropped it out the window. So we can't get your secret formula. Not yet. But then, I say to myself, once you hear our deal, I think you'll want to play ball. Al, lookit . . ." the voice became more friendly and soft. "Don't do it to me. Do it to Connaught. He's the cause of your trouble. I mean if he hadn't screwed up his division so royally, Zouver would have waited until we could get Burrychamp equipment."

"What does that have to do with me, Doyle?" Albert asked, growing restive.

"Everything."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Burrychamp can take up to twenty-two characters. Could have accommodated your name, even. But with Connaught's screw-up, we had to accelerate. Get what equipment we could. That meant Randolph. . . . You didn't know that, did you?"

Albert shook his head wordlessly.

"In other words, Connaught is the man you should be after, and let me tell you something . . ." A bite into an eclair. "Here, have one."

"No thanks. Go on."

"Lookit, Al. You're no dunce. You've got a nice pension, right? You wouldn't want to do anything to jeopardize it. In fact, I wonder if you might like to do some consulting work for me. My division. Pay nicely. Easy work. Congenial to your—a—interests."

"Go on."

"Look. Why not work that acid spray stuff at the Special Fabrication Division offices? They got a new computer there. No good anyway. Unauthorized. Lookit, I even took the liberty of getting a plane ticket. And several expense checks. Of course your regular retainer would be extra. Under whatever arrangement you want." Buster reached into his pocket and drew out the ticket and thrust it toward Albert.

Albert hesitated for a moment, until Doyle's voice came back to him low and imploring. "Look, Al, don't do it to me. I'm ready to be your friend. Do it to Connaught! He's the cause of this, anyway! Do it to Connaught!"

Nathan to the Rescue

□ "So you're not much of a conspirator," Nathan said, pushing his chair back from the table a bit and dabbing at the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

"More coffee, Albert?"

"No thank you, Susannah," Albert said, gazing out Nathan's dining-room bay window. "No, Nathan, you're right. I am not a conspirator. At least not until I learn to lie."

"Lie better."

"Yes, better."

They rose and went into the living room where Nathan picked the brandy decanter from the hunt board. "And what then? After your experience as a forester?"

"Then I tried to hire myself out as a cleaning man."

Nathan began to smile. "Never work. Status incongruity."

"What's that mean?"

"I mean, New England Yankees of distinguished appearance and of distinguished names, like Cartwright-Chickering, are *ipso facto* suspect if they try to disguise themselves as menials. I mean, people must have thought you were a management spy. Didn't they?"

Albert's mouth fell open a bit. "Why yes. How . . . ?"

"Elementary," Nathan said. "Okay, then what?"

Albert was trying to withhold the news of his visit to the Federal National Bank & Trust Company and he remained silent.

"Where'd you get to, in other words?" Nathan asked.

"Not to United Metals," Albert said.

"Yes," Nathan said, "so I gather. Where, then?"

"Federal National."

"No!" Nathan jumped up excitedly, "and you . . . ?"

Albert remained silent as long as he could. Then his incurable compulsion to divulge was upon him and he told Nathan everything. His assignment to the thirty-seventh floor. The floor-waxer bucking under him like a disobedient steed. His midnight ride to the fortieth floor and the massive data processing center there.

"And then?"

"And then I got close to the tape units."

"Albert, did you shoot them?"

"No, Nathan. All I could do was get in a shot at an empty canister."

Nathan sank back into his chair.

"That isn't a Triple-I installation, is it?" Albert asked, suddenly aware of an odd expression on his friend's face.

"Yes," Nathan said. "The biggest one in this part of the country . . ." His voice seemed to be strained and thin.

"Well, I failed there, too."

"Failed?"

"Yes. Nothing happened."

"Yet."

"At all," Albert said.

"Yet, you mean. All right. So then Ann Pym . . . ?"

"Got caught, but you heard that part already. And Mrs. Pym, meanwhile, keeps badgering me about this vector idea, and she says she has discovered a new medium—not liquid—so the water pistol is not needed, she says. That was after the loss of our one water pistol with a live charge."

"Live charge?"

"Yes, we begin to get a kind of vocabulary."

"What do you have, Albert, a gang?"

"No."

"Well, you got something."

"A society," Albert said, reddening.

"A what?"

"Society. They call it—Mrs. Pym does anyway—the Cartwright-Chickering Society. It's really quite an embarrassment."

Nathan threw his head against the antimacassar at the back of his chair and began to laugh deep down in his belly. At length he slowed down and dabbed at the corners of his eyes with his shirt sleeves. "See? Just what I thought—ever since the first day we met," Nathan said.

Albert was baffled.

"You've got charisma." There was a momentary silence. Nathan slowly stoked his pipe. "All right, Albert. I'll tell you what. You give me some of that stuff, and let me see what I can do."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, I believe I can take a leaf out of your book. But not get caught."

"How?"

"You just wait here," Nathan said, pulling himself forward in his chair and bolting upright.

Nathan called to Susannah to bring some more coffee for Albert and then he disappeared. When he came back in, it was in the attire of a janitor, a long push broom in hand, ancient shoes on his feet, and wearing faded overalls.

Albert felt a deep sense of shame, then, as he saw his friend. "No, Nathan, I can't . . ."

"Shush."

"I can't tolerate it, Nathan. Please," he said, averting his gaze. "It doesn't mean that much, nothing does."

"That's why I'm going to do it, Albert. You see, I'm aiming to count myself a member of the society. This'll be my initiation stunt."

"But your livelihood . . . You said that yourself. Your job . . ."

"Calm, Albert. This is a matter of principle. And besides, this is also a matter of—how shall I say it?—self-service. You

yourself told me that your Mr. Connaught has bought Triple-I equipment. This job in Mr. Doyle's division is a Randolph, an 8080, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Well then?" Nathan asked, a broad grin on his face.

A Distress Call from Denver

□ The new note from Invicta Credit Corporation International was more menacing than anything that Albert had received of its kind:

Dear Customer:

We must insist on prompt notification of your payment plans on the overdue balance on your account to avoid legal action. Your account is now 60 days past due. Also we must insist on immediate return of our credit card. Call Mr. Lloydlon without fail today: Area Code 987 433-9845.

*Legal Department
Invicta International*

His anger now rose well past his normal simmering testiness, and he was confirmed again in his belief that organizations like Invicta never considered any messages that did not come by conventional electronic means. The fact that he had sent in his credit card weeks ago did not yet seem to have registered on them.

The phone was ringing again, and he was sure that it was another tormentor, and thus when he yanked the instrument off its cradle, his voice was already edged with that steely sound of disdain that he occasionally affected. "Yes?"

"Mr. Albert D. Cartwright-Chickering?"

"Yes."

"Hold on, please, for long-distance. . . . All right, my party is on the line."

Albert had visions of a puff-cheeked Harvard Business School graduate, an assistant credit manager at Invicta, preparing to threaten and cajole him.

Another voice came on the line. "Go ahead, Dr. Knapp."

"Hello, Albert?" It was the direct and unaccented voice of Hill, and Albert's demeanor shifted immediately from apprehension to buoyancy.

"Hill! How are you, and how's the family?"

"Fine. Everyone's fine. Jenny's right next to me. Wants to talk to you when I'm finished."

There was a silence, and it seemed awkward even from that vast a distance. "Ah—Albert, I know this is crazy, but tell me, did you keep those tapes of yours? Those stereo tapes?"

"What tapes were they, Hill?" Albert's chest was suddenly shallow within him and he felt that he was gulping air, as if he had been doused with a bucket of icy water.

"Jenny was telling me about—what was it, dear?" A muffled conversation off the mouthpiece ended abruptly. "She says Vivaldi and Brahms."

"Oh yes," Albert said. "And what did you want to know?"

"Did you keep them?"

"Keep them? Well, now, let me see. Ah—gosh, Hill, I don't think I did. . . . Seems to me I threw them out . . . Useless."

"Yes . . . There's another thing I wanted to ask. Were they—ah—*entirely* useless, would you say? Or sort of buckshot with dropouts?"

"What?"

"Skip it. Never mind. Look, I can't say much because it's classified, but—er—there's another question. Those jars and flasks. You wouldn't by any chance still have the residues, I don't suppose?"

"Oh, let me see. You mean those bottles?"

"The apparatus. You remember? The hot water dripping, the fans—"

"Oh yes. I have to redo my bathroom, in fact. Jenny tell you that? Molds running up my soapdish, down the caulking, onto the window sill, under the plastic tiling. Nasty stuff—"

"Yes, right. Albert you—er—haven't repainted—er—yet, have you?"

"No. Why?"

"All right. Don't." There was a tone of surprising urgency in Hill's voice. "Albert, you don't by any chance still have the residues, do you?"

"Residues, Hill? I don't know . . . Some of the things are still around, I think . . ."

A sharp new tension came into Hill's voice. "Look, Albert, this is a matter of highest importance. One of our intelligence teams will be coming by, probably this afternoon. Be coming in by helicopter. Just save everything you have, will you? Until they get there? The agency will be glad to compensate you for your bathroom. Double compensation, in fact. Okay . . . ?"

"A 'team'?"

"Experts. Connected with our Washington office."

"Is that necessary?"

"Vitality. I know how you value your privacy, Albert, and believe me, I wouldn't ask it if it weren't a matter of highest importance. Of national proportions, in fact."

"National proportions, eh? Well, all right, Hill, but it doesn't make much sense."

"Don't touch a thing, right?"

"All right, Hill."

"I mean of those molds and smuts, don't even go in there, all right?"

"Into my own bathroom?"

"The government will compensate you double, Albert. I'll make it a special voucher and get it through by all means . . . Okay?"

"Well . . ."

"All right?"

"All right."

"Good! Look, I better make another call. Then Jenny will be getting back to you. Okay?"

"All right, Hill, if you say so."

When the phone went back into its cradle, Albert began to think faster than he had in weeks. There was obviously a strain of fungus in that fungosorium that had migrated West. How? And what might have happened? It was then that he remembered the other water pistol, Tony's, and considered the likelihood that it, too, had become a vector. A plan sprang into Albert's mind and a memory came surging back.

There were three keys that he had forgotten until that moment. There had been a remainder of grape juice in the water pistols, and Mike had used a plug of lavender soap, and there had been some use of the aerosol fungicide in the fungosorium in the weeks before the incident at U. S. Airlines.

A New Delivery System

□ Millicent had a plan almost before Albert could describe his own scheme. There was a silent relay of trips between the Cartwright-Chickering and the Pym houses that afternoon, and by the time that they settled down after three for a drink on Albert's quiet terrace, a small duplicate fungosorium had been established in Millicent's basement.

With her Waring blender she had set up a whole new series of dilute grape-juice solutions, into which a trace of lavender soap had been introduced. To be on the safe side, she had also brewed up solutions of dilute orange juice with nutmeg admixture, of pineapple with confectioner's sugar, and of simple syrup with a pinch of oregano.

Ann had said hardly anything all afternoon. As she finished her drink under Albert's dogwood, where the three of them were sitting placidly, she quietly raised her head. "Don't look, Albert," she said, "but there's a man on the far side of the orchard."

"A man?"

"Yes. He doesn't think we see him. He's standing in a small shaft of sunlight, Albert, and he has a knapsack on his back and a little thing that is probably a directional microphone on a stick. He's . . ." Ann's voice dropped to a whisper ". . . probably trying to hear what we're saying right now."

"Well, in that case," Millicent said in her loudest voice, "I certainly think we *should* support split-sessions. New classrooms are so beastly expensive. I mean what is the taxpayer to do with constant new demands on his resources?"

"Yes," Albert said. "I can see your point." There was a silence, and from the bottom of it a sound insinuated itself into their consciousness. It was not the low rumbling of the tractor-trailer trucks on the highway, nor the whizzing sound of low-slung passenger cars. It was the pop, pop, popping of a motor, high in the sky, that grew louder and louder, and hovered, finally, over them all, and grew suddenly larger until the sound became utterly deafening. It was the helicopter.

The whirring of the rotors fluttered the branches of the dogwoods and knocked the remaining lingering fragments of their spring blossoms to the grass beneath, and by the time the rotating blades had come to rest, Albert was thoroughly indignant. He rose to meet the invaders.

A stout form, topped by iron-gray hair and a hawk-like visage, appeared in the door of the helicopter in Air Force blue with major's leaves on his shoulders. "Good afternoon. May I present the compliments of Dr. Knapp and the entire Denver Complex? My name is Major Strudwick Buxton. You may wish to call me Strud. And you would be Mr. Cartwright-Chickering?"

"Yes," Albert said. And with hardly a change in tone, he added, "Now get that thing out of here."

"I beg your pardon?" Major Buxton blinked, and rubbed his nose.

"That helicopter. Get it off my property. And get your man out of the orchard."

"But, sir . . ."

"Now. Or shall I call the police?"

Two other faces appeared behind Major Buxton, their eyes forming the same calculating glance as that of the major.

"But Dr. Knapp authorized . . ."

"Nonsense! No one authorizes trespassing. Invasion of a citizen's rights. How dare you! Snooping in my orchard . . . Probably tapping my wires! Out!" Albert's voice was raised in quivering fury. "You may examine my premises if, and only if, you come on foot. Is that clear? Now out!"

The major shrugged his shoulders, turned in perplexity to his passengers, and gestured them back into the helicopter.

"Don't forget that one over there," Albert called out, pointing to the orchard with indignation.

The major pretended not to see his man in the orchard, but finally, as if wrestling with his conscience, he raised a walkie-talkie to his lips, mumbled a few words into it, and then disappeared into the door of the helicopter. He popped his head back out. "Please stand clear of the rotors during takeoff. . . . We shall be coming back," he called to Albert.

"On foot!"

"Very well," the major said, and his head disappeared, the rotors began to groan, to circle slowly, and finally to explode into their pop-popping sound. The machine moved slowly down the lawn, into the driveway, until it paused, revved its engines, and leapt into the sky, kicking up a tremendous cloud of dust, and then disappeared behind the ridge overlooking Albert's land. The man in the orchard, meantime, was seen trotting along the outer access road to a place where his vehicle was presumably parked.

"Oooh, Albert!" Millicent said. "That was splendid. . . . I'll have to write a new verse! The society will hand down this tale as part of its happiest heritage, I assure you."

"Nonsense."

"Now what are we to do?" Ann asked. "I mean if the CIA is angry with us."

"Air Force, Ann," Albert said. "Not the CIA."

"Not yet," Millicent said, and Albert's gaze fastened on her face. Her remark, he knew, was not at all an idle one.

Albert then badly wanted to call Nathan to warn him. To tell him to stay away from UMCorp until the local investigation had completed itself. As he lifted the receiver and began to dial the number, he knew that his line had been tapped. In fact, when he went down to the orchard just after Millicent and Ann left, he saw what seemed to him evidence of tampering with the manhole there over the underground telephone-wire conduit. The appearance of a light-green vehicle in his driveway cut short his investigation.

He admitted the investigation team when it arrived. He showed them the fungosorium, let them take away the bell jars and cultures that remained, and watched as they scraped the traces of rust and smut from the plastic shower curtain and the plastic tiles.

"You have been using fungicide, Mr. Cartwright?" Major Buxton asked.

"Cartwright-Chickering. It's a hyphenated name."

"Yes. Sorry," the major said. "Have you? Been using fungicide?"

"Yes, of course. This—er—stuff. Dr. Knapp left it," Albert said, handing over the aerosol bomb with the olive-drab label.

The investigating team remained for several more moments, taking great pains to let no part of the bathroom escape its scrutiny, probing into corners with high-intensity miniature lights, and plucking at particles of dust with tweezers and examining them with magnifying glasses.

They put samples of each kind of culture in their own miniature flasks and jars that were enclosed, in turn, in large, double-locked attaché cases borne by two sergeants.

Albert eased them out of the house after six, and after making sure no one was trailing him, went then directly to Nathan's. The Osgoods had company, so Albert remained in the garage, where he warned his friend not to try anything at UMCorp.

Nathan shrugged. "I already got there."

"You did?"

"Yes. But I couldn't get at the main frame. I had to do what you did at Federal National. I had to leave my spores in the sweeping compound. I guess some day it might spread."

"Oh," Albert said, and after a few more moments and an apprehensive glance out the open garage door, he began to leave.

"Come on in and have a drink," Nathan said. "Meet my cousins."

"I can't, Nathan. I really can't."

"What's the matter with you?"

"They're on my trail, Nathan. And I don't want you implicated too."

Albert went on to the Pym's, where he had to get past a pale-green microbus that was parked diagonally across the street from their modest two-story frame house. He found Ann awaiting him on their side porch with iced tea and a light spring supper. Millicent joined them for dessert.

"Albert?" Ann asked in her slightly dreamy tone of voice, once the dishes had been cleared away.

He glanced over at her, noticing for the first time what fine cheekbones she had. "Yes?"

She did not respond, and he shot another glance over at

her, and then one more for good measure. Still no reply. He glanced over at Millicent, and shrugged.

"Ann dear, that's a most maddening habit you have," her mother said.

"Albert, I was thinking."

"Yes?"

"Well, yesterday I happened to see this article in the public library."

"Yes?"

"It said that in France they were growing yeast on petroleum. Growing enough yeast so that it can actually be harvested for food. If you can stand yeast."

"Yes?"

"Well, yeast is a fungus, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is."

"Yes," Millicent said, hitching forward on the table, "it is any of a family of minute unicellular fungi having . . ."

"Oh, Mother, please!"

"Sorry, Daughter," she said, "I just thought the Research Department should help out. Technical aid, so to speak."

"Go on," Albert said, nodding toward Ann.

"Well, I was thinking that every computer capstan has to be oiled, doesn't it? I mean eventually?"

"Sooner or later, I imagine," Albert said. And then his brain danced and he leapt over three intervening steps. He had a plan, a new plan, a bold plan. "I've got it!" he said. He began once again to command.

Mrs. Pym would harvest as many of the best powdery funguses as she could. Ann would go to the first dime store she could find that was not being observed.

"Observed?" she asked in alarm.

"Yes. Major Buxton and his team."

"I see. . . . And?"

"Get a box kite, Ann. A big one. And a thousand feet of cord. Better get two. And meet me, you and your mother, at the junction of Nine-H and State Seventeen at eight tomorrow morning. All right?"

"Right."

"And what shall I do?" Millicent asked.

"Harvest spores. As much as you possibly can. And bring your binoculars."

"Will a lorgnette do?"

"Sure!"

"Smite, in-tro-duce, whoosh! . . ."

"Oh, Mother, please!"

The radio whined at the major's elbow. He turned from the small writing desk in the pale-green microbus.

"This is zero-nine-forty-four, Sergeant Valeria, calling Apple Green."

"Right. Go ahead, Sergeant. This is Apple Green."

"Major, this sounds crazy, I know—"

"Go ahead."

"Lookit, we trailed these three. We have them in sight now."

"Uh?"

"Yes, sir. Been trailing 'em ever since this morning. They've been all over, and now they're going over the Channel Bridge."

"Yes?"

"Yes, sir; should we continue surveillance? Or should we ask Group Zed to support from South Brunswick? I mean, I've got a cookout tonight, sir, and if it were all the same to you . . ."

"Over the Channel Bridge, huh? I want you to trail them, Sergeant, until you get a destination fix."

"Until *what*, sir? They're just going around in circles."

"Just stick with 'em."

"But that could lead almost anywhere, sir. I mean they're acting in a goofy kind of way, like."

"Continue surveillance. Call me back at eighteen-hundred. Over and out."

The major took the call from the helicopter at precisely 1800 hours. His jaws were working busily on a large wad of chewing gum. "Yes, zero-nine-forty-four, this is Apple Green. Go ahead."

"Major, this is Sergeant Valeria again. Lookit, sir, this is really hairy. I mean we still got 'em in observation, but you couldn't believe it."

"Go ahead."

"Well, Group Zed is over on the other side, and they got this other thing under observation."

"What other thing? Come to the point, Sergeant. Where are you? What's going on?"

"Major, we're down here in the salt marsh near Newville."

"Yeah?"

"Yessir, and the traffic is backed up on the turnpike. They're all watching."

"Watching? Watching what?"

"Well, sir, there's this big rock that sort of juts out of the salt marshes, and it's like an island. And right on top of it, sir, is this like billboard. It used to say 'Drink Coca-Cola,' but it's bare now. And, sir, I know it's crazy, but that old lady is up there sort of waving her hands around, with binoculars—sir, they look like them little hoity-toidy glasses—and acting sorta crazy."

"Uh. What else?"

"That's it, sir."

"That's it? Where are the others?"

"Group Zed has them. We can only make out the kite from here."

"The what?"

"Kite, sir. They got this box kite up about a thousand feet, and it's sort of hanging up there. And they're out there somewhere in the marsh grass, but we can't see them because the grass is hiding them. But Group Zed said they were just sort of flyin' the kite. I mean, frankly, sir, I think you got a bunch of loonies here."

"Flying a kite, huh?"

"Yes, sir. It's yellow and red, and it's about maybe a mile off now, over by the Pelemco Refinery and the junk yards."

"Okay, Sergeant. Sign them over to Group Zed, and get on home to your cookout, why don't you?"

The three were on their way back across the bridge when Ann turned again to Albert, a pleased smile on her face.

"This may all come to nothing," Albert said, "so don't let's get our hopes up."

"Of course," Ann said.

"But still, the idea. Your cleverness, Albert. That little matchbox. Hinged that way to drop out the powder. All at the yank of a nylon thread—a thousand feet long. The audacity of it!" Millicent said. "In fact, I've even written an ode to the occasion."

"Mother, you haven't."

"Indeed I have. Hush now," she said as she drew a small

piece of paper from her purse and leaned over the front seat between Albert and Ann . . .

*Discouragement, discouragement, go hide your sullen face!
We've figured out a strategy to save the human race!
Smite, intro-duce, whoosh! We've flown aloft our kite,
And spores come sprinkling down, tra-la—*

"I'm stuck there. What rhymes with kite?"

"You call that an ode?" Ann asked.

"How about this for a last line?" Albert asked. "*And success will crown our efforts just as sunrise follows night!*"

"Splendid!" Millicent said.

Ann looked with squinted eyes over at him, and patted his hand, which lay on the seat between them. "I think it's catching," she said.

"Come, coal tar and asphalt . . . come, paraffin and fuel oil. Fume, gasoline and kerosene; belch, naphtha and sludge. Pour forth, all ye riches of eons, piped, bottled, distilled . . ." Albert intoned.

"What's all that?" Ann asked him.

"An ode. Not as elegant as your mother's, but we needed an ode, and that's it."

"I think it's a good start," Millicent said. "Not up to Wagnerian standards, perhaps—"

"To be sure," Albert agreed, "but I saw it as a folk ode. To be accompanied by a guitar or perhaps a bottle choir."

"A what?" Ann asked.

"A bottle choir," Albert said. "But never mind that. Let me try again." They were nearing the Channel Bridge toll-gate and Albert was fishing in his watch pocket for a quarter. The attendant heard Albert's signsong rendering of his ode as the car went through the gate, and he wrinkled his forehead as if the sun had brought on an apparition that he hoped a wrinkle and a shrug might efface.

*Oh, you riches of eons, all bubbling down,
Since the Pleistocene epoch you've heard not a sound.
Tur-ala-tur-ala,
'Tur-eela-tur-eee,
We flew up a kite o'er your oil re-fin-er-eeel*

"Doesn't scan."

"Hush, Ann! You're the most critical child! Go on, Albert. I think it's simply splendid."

Fume, gasoline and kerosene, surging in toil.

Flow, esters and olefins and number-two fuel oil.

Tur-ala-tur-ala,

Tur-eela-tur-eee,

You've just now been sprinkled by a secret so-ci-et-eeel

Ann started the clapping, and Millicent joined in instantly, and Albert began to turn red. The blush spread with its characteristic swiftness to his ears.

They stopped after sunset at a restaurant, and as they ate their dinner, the winds down over the Pelemco Refinery brought the last of the airborne spores to rest in a reservoir of crude oil from which a roof had just been removed by a team of process engineers. It was almost as if an infection had entered a bloodstream.

"But That Isn't Odessa . . . !"

□ Who can say what combination of blind chance and coincidence might account for great results? For life itself? The Cartwright-Chickering Society, viewed in cold objectivity, could not claim a single success. Not one willful attack had succeeded. By accident, one. By design, none at all.

That awareness seeped into Albert's thoughts and tempered his first optimistic estimates.

Then, denied optimism, he put the subject out of mind. He occupied himself with the Invicta Credit Corporation International, dispatching two long and, he thought, effective letters, and that kept his attention off the fungus.

The weeks passed and Albert had more than enough on his mind to drive out the memory of Major Buxton. He had begun systematically to reduce his debts with his severance

pay. He paid off the car, made a large prepayment on a loan, and even bought another acre and a half of land adjoining his own property.

It began to happen with a swiftness that defied all expectations and with a randomness that defeated analysis. It centered—as was discovered long after the fact—in machines more than seventeen months of age, which were subject to their year-and-a-half overhaul that included repacking the capstan bearings. It was confined, with two exceptions, to machines using Pelemco Satin-Grade Lubricating Oil and private-branded oils supplied by Pelemco's No. 3 Channel Refinery.

Ibn A'Hab'am, twenty-four years of age, darkly handsome, screeched onto the beach in his canary-yellow convertible, kicking up a cloud of sand. Next to him, their long hair streaming behind them from the sea breeze, sat two girls in bikinis with dazzling teeth and golden down on their arms, laughing and taking sips from their cans of beer.

From behind the palmetto next to where the car lurched to a halt, a police officer, bearing a piece of paper, strode purposefully. "I've got a warrant for your arrest," he said to the driver.

A look of disbelief. "Me? What for?"

"For passing a bad check."

"Bad check? My good man, you must be joking. Obviously you are not in command of your senses. You speak to Ibn A'Hab'am, Lion of Bar'hab, Emir of All the Kingdoms of the Eastern Iqui, and cultural attaché at His Highness my father's embassy. If it is a question of money—"

"It is. A check . . ." A glance at the warrant. ". . . cashed the day before yesterday at the Surf and Pine Club in the amount of five hundred dollars—"

"Yes?"

"Bounced."

"But you are mad. My accounts—I have three, not counting Switzerland and Barclays in London—are replete."

"It bounced."

"Miss Bronislaw?"

"Yes, Judy," Gladys said, looking up at the slightly quaking form in front of her desk. "Come in. What is it?"

"Miss Bronislaw, I was talking with other girls—" The girl stole another harried look outside the glassed office, nervously fingering her paycheck.

"Yes?"

"Yes. And I go, 'Girls, yikes, this is a mistake. Eighteen overtime hours.' So I go, 'Wow, I better tell Miss B.' And they go, 'Don't be a creep, Judy, we all got some extra . . .'. But I go, 'That's not right,' and they go, 'So you gonna tattle?' So Miss B.—I mean, Miss Bronislaw—I don't think it's right that you should not be told."

Alex Ross, a brightly scrubbed salesman, with shoes clicking across the floor, a crease running knife-sharp down his trousers, moved to the desk of prospective customer J. Palmer Cutler. The sales talk was easily launched.

"Yessir, we see Randolph Datatronic teaming with your organization, Mr. Cutler, to really solve the problems of industrial laundering."

Mr. Cutler, nearly bald, rubbed his head in the midday heat. "Industrial laundering? Mr. Ross, this is a bakery."

Ross took a reflex glance at a card in his pocket. "A bakery? Are you sure?"

Cutler rose, his cigar scissored in his right hand. "Well, it was the last time I looked. Let me check." Heavy sarcasm hung over the desk.

Walking side by side, they went over to a set of double doors on the far side of the office, which Cutler threw wide open. There, arrayed in white aprons, with the sweet and fresh odor of flour permeating everything, a dozen bakers scurried around, shoveling loaves into an oven, whipping dough in great metal bowls.

"It certainly *looks* like a bakery," Ross said, glancing for a second time at the card in his hand.

It had been seventeen years since Senior Partner J. Hemphill North had taken a vacation from Russett, Clapp & Noyce, of Forty Wall Street. He had been especially busy of late with the memory tapes of R.C. & N. street accounts, and it remained to audit them before dividend checks were prepared for all customers.

North bent to his labors, alone there except for the ancient cleaning woman who had mopped that floor each night

for more than ten years. For those years and several before them, North had been silently crediting to his own account the odd pennies from transactions that would otherwise have been routinely absorbed in management fees, brokerage commissions, and the like.

His own account, which he was on the point of selling out, approached a quarter of a million dollars. Like gold leaf swept up from the gilder's floor, it was all taken from the leavings of others.

A last run through the machine would analyze the accounts. A good thing that the service people were through, at last, and that the high-speed printers were back in top working order.

Let him print out his analysis, take it on home with him that night, be ready at market opening tomorrow to extract his nest egg without a sound from the hen still sitting on it. A rising market, easy out. *Rattarattarattarap*—

The printer sped across the page, flashing out a line at a time. Hemp North fixed on the summary there, and the cleaning woman heard what she took to be the shriek of distress, but it was only the man weeping in the room there.

"Could I help you, mister?" she asked several times, but there was no answer. Only a slowly shaking head.

Babette Royce, twenty, had hair that hung straight down her back and was held there by a blue velvet headband that contrasted perfectly with her silver Artley flute. She was going to orchestra practice at McLendon College's new auditorium, her schedule in hand.

She consulted the card on the steps of the auditorium, expecting to see "Orchestra" scheduled in that period, as it had been the last quarter. Instead, the notation "Strngth Mtrs. Lb." appeared.

There was a perplexed pause, and Babette turned to a boy coming up the walk behind her, trundling a double bass. "Bobby? Can you tell me what *this* means?"

"Sure, Babs, what?" He took the card and frowned. "Means you're scheduled for a lab in the Engineering Building. Strength of Materials."

"A lab? Engineering?"

"That's right. Seems weird for a fine arts major, but that's what it says."

A slight moan escaped her lips.

"Gentlemen," the voice came from the end of the polished table like a sacerdotal echo through a vaulted chamber in a pyramid. The meeting was at the topmost floor of the Federal National Bank & Trust Company. The diaphanous curtains rustled quietly under the high-speed jets of cooled air gushing up from the window convectors, and outside, dimly seen, rose the towers of the great city.

"It is a time of gravest crisis. Our checking accounts . . ." A sobbing sound emitted from the upper chest of the distinguished older man with the handsomely angular profile. ". . . are erased!"

"Erased? How?"

"But that's impossible!"

"The duplicates, Chauncy, in the caves?"

"No," the chairman said, brushing back his questioners. "Those, too, have been erased."

"How? When?"

"Don't ask me how. They just are."

A stunned silence from his deputies, whose memories of this room were happy ones, for it was here that the year-end bonus checks were passed out.

"Mr. Dunham from Triple-I is on the way. We expect him at any moment."

"What does it mean, Mr. Beauville?"

"Yes, Chauncy, couldn't the bank be ruined?"

"The only way . . . the only possible way . . ."

"Yes, Chauncy?"

"Yes, chief?"

"What is it? Tell us!"

"To hire enough casual labor to reconstruct the accounts. To go over every check by hand. And to implore the customers to co-operate. To ask for stand-by assistance from our—competitors."

"But, Chauncy, we just instituted our new policy of minimum balance uppage."

"I know, I know," the chairman said, holding his head. "The computer analysis told us we should."

"Exactly. Well, let's just put it right back in Mr. Dunham's lap."

"We'll have to hire all the casual labor in a town the size of Peoria to do it."

The piping songs of cardinals through the quaking aspens hardly paused for the four men, slide rules swinging at their belts. The oldest of them was dressed in khaki hiking clothes and old-time leather jodhpurs. Around him was the rustling of a large folded sheet of paper, and expansively swinging arms describing arcs, highway curves, cloverleaves.

Stakes had been driven alongside the woodland trail and this man, the chief engineer, George Vanderpol, stood with legs spread wide, arms akimbo, sniffing the agreeable scent of power.

"Yessir," he said to his nearest companions. "My brother's place is around here somewhere. Nice little place . . ."

"Yessir, Mr. Vanderpol. This ridge here, you can see, our simulation showed us, right down here against this face—" His assistant parted the undergrowth and revealed a little pond. "And that's it. Across this little pond, we make our connection with one-thirty-four."

Vanderpol's eyes were drawn to the line of his assistant's gesture. Directly in the line was a house. There was a sudden gasp and a hand smiting a forehead.

"But that's my brother's house. . . . Wait a minute, there's got to be some mistake."

"We Burrychamped it, Mr. Vanderpol, from every standpoint. Of course we can do it again, but that's how the route is indicated."

Rosemary Viggio, thirty-nine, leaned against her inspector's stool at Ajax Bindery, the paragon of the automated bookbinding. Everything flowed automatically, right down to the casemaker machine, through building-in, and on to Rosemary's table.

The yearbook for Castleton High School was coming down the line, and she examined the lushly padded cover, the purple and white headbands, and she remembered her own days at C.H.S. Her cheerleading, the football team, the Cider Mill after the game.

Her oldest daughter, beginning next year, would be a cheerleader too. Rosemary opened the cover and made her inspection: endpapers nicely laid against the boards; crash well in place; no glue leaking out the spine; gilding on edges uniform and of good quality. She riffled through the pages—no blanks. Then, a sudden chill. Few pictures, either. And

several diagrams and maps. She opened the book. It was a geology textbook.

Down the gravity-feed conveyor from the building-in machine poured scores more of the books, one after the other, and as she feverishly glanced at them, each one was mistakenly wed, the wrong innards to the right cover.

"What do you mean, laid off?"

"Just what I said," the foreman said, moving back to pluck his burning cigarette off the strut under the back shelf of his lathe. "No more material on hand. Been none for three days. Mowrer says management ordered materials, but can't get delivery. Some kind of mix-up."

"But should *we* suffer?"

"Lookit, alls I know is what Mowrer says, and he says I got to get down to skeleton crew by the twenty-fifth and that's tomorrow. So here's the list, and that's all. Strictly by seniority."

The foreman moved to the bulletin board over the drinking fountain and drove a thumbtack through the paper into the soft wood, and the machinists crowded around to read the bitter tidings and to exclaim.

"That's what ya get dealin' with a bunch of stiffis like the bosses."

"I say let's strike."

"Yeah, if they're going to lay us off again, let's strike. Right, Waldo?"

"Right."

"Yeah?" the little man behind the counter asked. "What kind of cheese? We got no Swiss. American?"

A mumbled response from the customer, and into the door came a truckdriver, wafting a waybill in his hand. The truck driver leaned over the counter. "You Polara-Machine Company?"

"Polara-Maxime Company. Lemme see." The counterman leaned up and glanced at the waybill. "Yeah, but they spelled it wrong. What's UMCorp? Five hundred Number Two? What's that, the olives? I don't know what the boss ordered, but all right, I'll open the cellar, you wait a minute. Sam?" He called again behind him. "Sam? Front, Sam."

The counterman lifted a trap door in the floor and went

down to the cellar, unbolted the iron latch, and flung the street doors upward. Then he hurried up the stone stairs to the sidewalk.

A giant truck stood at the curb, and from its rear, coil after coil of copper wire descended to the sidewalk.

"What? You gotta be jokin'."

"No joke, mister. Lookit the waybill for yourself. Five hundred Number Two."

"And that's Number Two?"

"That's Number Two."

"The boss ordered all this?"

"Where you want it? The cellar?"

Ursula Ness, twenty-eight, of a Friday evening, reflected on her five-dollar investment. For that sum, three new names had been matched to her own in a partners-by-computer scheme.

The doorbell was ringing. The young man standing there was a redhead, but she ignored that. It took only a moment more to establish that he was late because of an exhibition football game on television, which he had not wanted to miss. She couldn't stand football or television. Also, he said, a beggar had accosted him on his way down the street toward her apartment building.

He was seated by then, and had a glass of iced tea. "Also, I'm surprised, but I guess you gotta go along with the machine . . ."

"Surprised?" she asked, remembering what her mother told her about asking leading questions and always seeming to be listening. "At what?"

"Well, frankly—may I speak frankly?"

"Please do."

"Well, I have never been in this part of town. I mean, Greenwich Village is my idea of outsville . . . I mean, these people look like they haven't taken baths in weeks. I mean, I can't stand to see dirt glorified. Why don't they wash up? Clean up? Stand up straight? And stop panhandling?"

"Panhandling!"

"Exactly—all they want to do is smoke pot, ban the bomb, and beg!"

Ursula was on her feet now, and her heart was fluttering.

"Really! Well, I think maybe the computer has made a mistake," she said, "if there's one thing I can't stand it's a boorish, self-satisfied . . ."

He was already moving toward the door.

". . . Oaf!" she flung at him.

"Oaf?"

"Yes, oaf!"

The door was open. It slammed directly behind him.

Eli Zouver was frowning deeply and Buster Doyle was squirming. At the other end of the room, for once, Gerry Connaught was smiling serenely. "All right, Doyle," Zouver was saying, "all you've established is that not only has your machine got us four weeks behind in shipments, but it has also fouled up the payroll accounts. Now we got half again as many casual clerical help as we've ever had, and inventory is so high we're ready to float, and you ask for one more chance. . . . Connaught?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can your machine help?"

"Yessir. As it happens, we have duplicates of all master records. All the things that Brod—to take nothing away from a really fine team—that Brod's group has—er—had trouble with."

"Good thinking, Gerry."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Zouver," Buster said, moving his chair closer to the president's. "You want to make this a fair evaluation? Let us run side by side. Sure we've had some degradation. Frankly, it's part of a wider pattern. It's cropping up all over."

"I don't buy that," Zouver said snappishly.

"Let us run parallel. See which machine you think performs best."

"What about it, Gerry?"

"Gladly."

"Okay. Let's test the new automatic shipment policies. Ask your machines what happens if we ship T-Bind linkage units up to—say, a ten-day's supply to the two dozen big customers who give us seventy-five percent of our T-Bind revenues. All right, feed that to your machines." Zouver leaned back in his chair.

Buster approached the input typewriter, over which the

technicians were hovering, and they rapped out their question. There was no answer. No answer at all. Before Connaught could switch the input device over to his leased wire to the Special Fabrication Division computer, Gladys Bronislaw came into the room, and what she had to report to Mr. Zouver brought the meeting to a rapid and disorderly close.

The missile command post subterranean control site had room enough only for the lieutenants and the sergeant besides Dr. Hilton Knapp as they checked through their codes and their attack simulations.

As they began to plot the trajectory for the eight-tenths-megaton Minuteman-B, Hill could hear the matter-of-factness that he had come so much to admire in the missile men. A voice was droning off to his left as the first spindle of tape reeled through the desk computer.

"Eight-tenths of a megaton yield, check. . . . On projected target plus or minus eighty seconds, indicated latitude forty-six degrees fifty minutes . . ."

"Latitude forty-six degrees fifty minutes," came the antiphon from the other lieutenant at the matching console.

"Check. And indicated longitude projected for west ninety-two degrees zero-eight minutes."

"Ninety-two zero-eight?"

"Right. West ninety-two zero-eight minutes."

"West? You sure?"

There was a silence so deep that the small alarm clock in the bathroom shelf between the two batteries of electronic equipment came ticking clearly over their intently concentrating heads. "Let me check it again. . . ."

The silence seemed to be extruded to infinity as they waited. "Yes," the voice finally resumed, "that's what we're getting."

"What target sequence does this weapon have?"

"We're deskings Sequence Blue. I don't know exactly, Lieutenant, but if it's like most of 'em, it would be Russia, I guess, and maybe China on stand-by."

"Let me check the manual." There was the sound of a wall-safe lock whirring, a metal door clanking, and a riffling of pages. Hill could feel his lungs become entirely emptied in his desire to keep from adding to the tension in the small metal-lined chamber.

"Sequence Blue . . . Odessa."

"Okay. This is Sequence Blue . . . But that isn't Odessa . . . ! West ninety-two. That's more like . . ." The ticking of the clock grew louder, and it remained for the sergeant to consult the atlas at his elbow.

"Sir, that's *Duluth*."

"Duluth?"

"Yes, sir, Minnesota . . ."

"Hold everything! Call the colonell!"

Agents of Several Powers

□ The men wheeling in the green blackboard had to jostle their way through the crowd at the main door, and they tried to tread carefully, so as not to upset the table at which the attendants were punching out plastic name tags for the participants.

This was the Tank, where great decisions were made in windowless silence. There had been some dispute over whether the Pentagon or the State Department auditorium would be best, until the President decided the Pentagon.

There was a U-shaped table of dark cherry wood. A hush fell around it as the last delegates filed in—colonels and generals, lean men wearing expensive tweed and deep frowns—a hurriedly assembled conclave of Government and Industry.

Delegates there came from provinces of unimaginable wealth: petrochemicals, steel, food packing, data processing, transportation, auto manufacture, electrical machinery, finance, nonferrous metals . . .

Alongside them came men from the Congress, the major governmental agencies, the Departments of Commerce, Treasury, State, and Defense; from the Bacteriological Warfare Center, the Air Force, the Army, and the Navy.

A flip-chart and yet another wheeled blackboard were put in place as a three-star general with a great unlit cigar that he kept putting into and drawing out of his mouth, took up his gavel against the murmuring voices of greeting.

"All right, gentlemen," he said, his voice authoritative and resonant. "First, we have our orders. The White House has asked that this inquiry be launched with all possible swiftness." A murmuring of assent.

"All right, shall we begin with our findings to date? First, all our continental defenses are in prime condition, so let that be the end of all the rumors that have circulated. Second, on the fungal attack itself—leaving aside for the moment the exact technical details—General Norval, will you give us your findings?"

A sharply upthrusting chest came from behind a drape and moved rigidly up to the podium. "This can be very brief. We have no evidence, no solid data of any kind, to suggest that this was an attack launched by a hostile power. The Joint Chiefs of Staff is taking the position now that only further study can establish any meaningful pattern."

"Thank you, General. All right now, Dr. Saltzman and Dr. Zegen? Just a moment, gentlemen. May I remind everyone of our extremely tight schedule here. May remarks, therefore, be kept to their absolute essentials?"

Two nods came from the men approaching the blackboards. Myron Saltzman, a bushy-haired young microbiologist, had just been whisked from Crete by Air Force jet. He had been vacationing, and for a lark, his entire family had been teaching themselves Greek. Even a celebrated microbiologist, reluctant though he was to leave the villa on the quiet cove, could not ignore a summons from the Secretary of Defense, issued in the name of the President.

"The trouble, gentlemen," Dr. Saltzman said, "—based on the samples I was able to examine aloft and in the laboratory since landing, a very cursory examination, I wish to stress—is that we're dealing with an essentially organic substance in your mylar-like plastics. While resistant to fungal activity hitherto, we are apparently dealing here with something new."

"I agree," the other man said. Dr. Harold Zegen, whose work at Marburg had earned him a doctoral degree at age twenty-three, was said to know more about plastics than even the chemical industry leaders in the room. "From a chemical standpoint, your terephthalate polyesters produce your toughest fibers. That is especially the case with your glycol-terephthalate kind of compound. Here, however,

we're faced with a multifaceted attack situation, where not only the body, but the binder as well, the glue so to speak, is sustaining attack."

"And deterioration," someone volunteered.

"Yes," Dr. Zegen said, "and deterioration."

"Yes," Dr. Saltzman agreed, "and to back that up just a bit, if you'll follow this diagram on this board here, this is what we're up against. When the trichogyne comes in contact with the antheridium, the walls between them break down at once, as does the wall between the trichogyne and the oogonium." They paused and gazed around the room.

Dr. Saltzman sensed that he had missed. The chairman leaned forward. "Could you give us that in plain language, Doctor?"

"Of course. In plain language, we're contending here with saprophytes and basidiomycetes, a combination—so to speak—a one-two punch. One converts the carbon in the tape to sugar and then flourishes on the sugar. The other appears to attack the coating on the tapes, with deleterious results. Even with effective fungicidal action—at least our preliminary findings point in this direction—even with effective fungicides, there remain at least two and perhaps three enzymes, so powerful that they continue to decompose the adhesive that bonds the particles of magnetic material to the mylar."

A man in a blue suit had his hand up. "It sounds as if we're dealing with a fiendishly clever attack—"

"Yes," someone else said.

"From the Commies?" a third asked in a strident voice.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," the chairman said. "Let us rest for now with the best intelligence judgment, which General Norval has given us." He turned and nodded to the two scientists, who were joined then by a third scientist, a boyish-looking man who walked on the balls of his feet. He began drawing a series of benzene rings on the blackboard. The others continued to address the attentive delegates.

"We seem to be dealing with a whole new generation of micro-organisms," Dr. Saltzman went on.

"These things don't just happen, do they?" someone asked.

"I'm afraid that sometimes they *do* just happen," Saltz-

man said. "Sometimes a hitherto unknown fungus is linked to a new vector, a carrying agent."

The chairman leaned forward. "We should stress here that no pattern has emerged. No pattern whatsoever."

"Right," Saltzman said. "It's as if a great hand had taken a shaker and dumped a blizzard of spores—like red pepper."

"Thank you, Dr. Saltzman," the chairman said. "Now, Dr. Zegen, will you continue, and perhaps you could introduce Dr. —er?"

"Lenning," Dr. Zegen said, gesturing to the man at the blackboard, who was just then finishing his last diagram. Peter Lenning had flunked organic chemistry two times in college, and his father, a prominent cardiovascular surgeon, despaired of his son's intellectual development in a Sigma Chi fraternity house. That was the year the boy was shipped off for a year. The father used all of his influence, and succeeded in getting him admitted to Marburg against all expectations. The boy blossomed, making such rapid progress, despite his imperfect German, that he graduated with high honors in Chemistry from Kansas State three years later.

"It's a devilishly difficult fungus to eradicate," Dr. Zegen said. "However, my young colleague, Dr. Peter Lenning here, has come up with a promising fungistat."

"A *what*, Doctor?" a colonel wanted to know.

"Stops fungus, doesn't kill it," Lenning said. He stepped, bright-eyed, forward and rested his hands on the U-shaped table, then swung his pointer back to the blackboard behind him. "I think we can say we've got something that will give at least good fungistatic service, with limited fungicidal action. We have been working around the clock on this, and testing every viable alternative. We have this promising compound, RT-598, we're calling it, with the Style *Abadido-stat*, but it is chemically 2, 4 dihydro, 8 caroxanilido-9, butyl-1, r, oxathin."

"Yes," Dr. Zegen interjected, "results have been most encouraging, as Dr. Lenning indicates. But there are several difficulties that we should mention right here."

"Is it available now?" a voice asked.

"On that," Lenning said, "I don't know just what to say. Is Mr. Chappell of Consolidated-Western here? . . . No? . . . Well, I guess that's a bad sign. Consolidated was about to go on stream in Houston with a loop of their plant there,

but we had some trouble with batch-mixing. You see, the plant is entirely computerized, of course, and—" Lenning's voice stopped. There was a round of nervous laughter in the room. "A minor attack, I would say," Lenning added.

"But then even the plant making the fungicide has been . . . P"

"Immobilized for the time being," Lenning said. "But we expect news momentarily."

"And the second problem," Dr. Zegen began, "we expect to be able to solve. But for now, it's a bad one."

"What is it?" a voice asked.

"The fungistat tends to weaken the tapes by undesirable reaction with the plasticizer . . ."

The chairman made a gesture of interruption. A courier had just brought him a message. "Good news from Houston!" he called out. "Consolidated is on stream!"

A cheer broke out in the Tank, and men began shaking hands and slapping each other on the back.

The gavel was rapping on the chairman's stone block and he called forward the next team of experts, who would describe how the application of the fungistat would most efficiently be accomplished when it was generally available. Priorities had to be worked out, of course, and that would put first stress on defense, on the Continental Missile Command, and then on essential industrial complexes that suffered system degradation.

After that another messenger came in with a note that the chairman read with audible excitement making his voice throb. "We have a report here now from the CIA, which has just within the hour completed an intensive simulation in co-operation with Triple-I Incorporated. There is—and I'm quoting from this Teletype—'distinct pattern emerging. Degradation associated with specific lubricants applied on preventive maintenance cycle.'"

There was an excited jabbering in the hall, and another round of applause. "It goes on to say—"

"General Borland?" a voice asked, and a tall man stood to address the chairman. "Rhett Judson with Petal Petroleum. May I ask if that report goes on to single out a single industry or company?"

General Borland scanned the Teletype message quietly. "It does."

"May I respectfully request that any corporate name be omitted until the investigation is completed? I ask it in the interest of sparing the reputation of whatever organization might be involved."

Another louder murmuring in the hall. The chairman seemed to be thinking aloud. "Let's see," he said. "No pattern has come to light on the make of equipment, so I see your point."

After a pause he continued: "At the same time it should be said that we have rather impressive circumstantial evidence of the role of an aggrieved employee of a large corporation—who may be responsible at least for certain computer failures."

Albert heard his phone ring just as he was watching a slow-flying Piper Cub that was circling overhead. Dark limousines had occasionally nudged up to his boundaries in the past few weeks, arousing his suspicions, but this was the first aircraft since Major Buxton's helicopter.

He had maintained absolute telephone silence, and thus the call from Nathan seemed to him risky in the extreme. Nathan made it quick: would Albert go immediately to a certain movie house and await further word there in the seventeenth row of the orchestra?

Albert drove downtown to the movie theater, parked in a shady spot, bought his ticket, and entered the ancient building. He was almost alone in the audience, except for a few old people who seemed to have gone there to get out of the midafternoon heat.

Halfway through the feature he was aware that someone was behind him. "Don't turn around," a low voice said, "can you hear me?"

He could recognize Nathan's voice anywhere. "Yes, Nathan."

"No names! Don't turn around. There may be someone here—watching."

"All right."

"Listen: The CIA suspects you. May be on your trail right now. When the storm scene comes on the screen—that's . . ." A pause and heavy breathing came then, as if he was trying to make out a faintly luminous watch face. ". . . about twelve minutes—walk down the left-most aisle,

and out Exit Number Six. There will be a car there. Now I have to go. Don't turn around!"

Albert sat in his seat, watching the action on the screen with unseeing eyes, remembering how, as a boy, one bright June evening he had been caught at the Strawberry Festival slipping ice cubes into the pockets of the girls.

He thought of the voice, then, that had just come to him through the darkness. Nathan's unquestionably, but a different Nathan. A voice slightly altered: stripped, perhaps by anxiety, of its usual warmth; almost as if it had been a recording.

But that would be impossible. Who could have calculated the way a conversation might have flowed? The pauses? The dynamics of give and take? No, the idea was absurd, and he was a bit ashamed of himself for thinking so deviously.

Then Albert's mind went back to incredible reports, fragmentary and without newspaper or TV confirmation. A communications blackout, Mrs. Pym had insisted. Word-of-mouth reports came that the Strategic Air Command had had to put more bombers in the air because of missile-system failures.

The Russians had taken that as a provocation, and the Americans had then grounded their planes as a gesture of good will, but there were excessive apprehensions in Washington, nevertheless. Then there had come Hill's and Jenny's stilted and unnatural phone calls.

Mrs. Pym was certain that the Cartwright-Chickering Society had landed a stunning blow, but then Albert began to wonder if the result of his work with fungus was merely to increase international tensions. Or to cause layoffs of the working men who could ill afford payless paydays. Or even to make his own daughter and son-in-law alienated and disaffected.

That voice again. Now Albert was sure it was not really Nathan's. Rather, it was someone hoping to fool him. Major Buxton? No. That was not likely. The sideways glance he had had from the periphery of his vision ruled out anyone built along the major's lines. A member of his intelligence team?

The movie was unreeling before him, and there were all the foreshadowings of a storm scene coming up.

He would get up and go to Exit Six. There was nothing

anyone could do for him, he was now certain, and thus he had to trust in that single offer of help. Doubtless he would soon be spotted, perhaps even arrested. Or perhaps one of the murkier intelligence groups might simply eliminate him.

The storm scene crashed upon the sound track with howling palm trees and pounding surf, and Albert got up with almost no hesitation and edged his way to the end of the row, out into the center aisle, treading steadily along the pink and gray carpeting to the rear lobby, which was lit by amber lights and populated by a sole carbuncular usher.

A teenage couple was locked in a passionate embrace in the shadows near Exit Six.

He paused, pushed at the bar, and felt the door yield before him. He stepped out onto a high fire escape, and hearing the door latch behind him, realized that he could not turn back. He looked beneath him, through the grating of iron, and saw nothing below but a long alleyway giving onto the theater parking lot. Not a soul was in sight.

Sloan Emerson

□ A whirring, and the quiet rumble of an expensive vehicle starting; the slight whistle of the power steering mechanism rose to meet him. A limousine sat in the deep shadows of late afternoon, and as he reached the bottom step, the car quietly rolled forward and a rear door swung open.

"Hi, Al! Step in!" It was Nathan's voice. Albert hesitated a moment before taking the step. For a moment he could only see the form on the far side of the back seat, and something about it did not look right. His eyes swiftly adjusted to the gloom.

The face confronting him was one he had never seen before. Its mouth was moving—in a purse-like way—once again, and the sounds were clearly audible. The voice was Nathan's, but the person was a total stranger.

There was a merriness about the man sitting there that belied the menacing appearance of the car, the stony silence of the chauffeur, and the double-thick glass partition that separated passengers from driver. "Well, close your door!" the man said in his own voice. Albert did so.

The man depressed a button on the armrest next to him, addressing a spot in the ceiling overhead. "North Bank Marina, please, Reginald."

"Very good, sir." The words came out of the ceiling over the fat man's head. The car began to move.

The large man, Albert could see, had a leonine head with luxuriant hair that flowed winglike over his ears. He was obviously a gourmand, and being plump, inspired in Albert that unspoken belief that one can trust fat men.

"Sorry about our little ruse," he said, the accent cultivated and quiet. "I was frankly afraid that they would get to you before we did, so I hope you will understand?"

"They?"

"Ah yes. I am getting at things a bit backwards, am I not? Forgive me. My name is Sloan Emerson—at least that is the name you will know me by. I'll come right to the point. You are a highly sought-after man, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering."

"I am?"

"Indeed you are. To speak bluntly, I represent a principal who is most keenly interested in your fungus research and your—how should it be said?—your applications."

"A principal?"

Emerson waved a warning hand at Albert, as if to rebuff too acute a line of questioning. There was a momentary lull. "I don't suppose you care for a bit of a drink, do you?" Emerson asked, opening a small refrigerator recessed in the panel in front of him.

"I seem to be your prisoner."

"No, not at all. My passenger, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering. We're just out for a small talk and a drive, in an atmosphere free of electronic surveillance. . . . scotch? How?"

"With water. Not much."

"Very well." Emerson mixed a pair of drinks. Albert slowly began to feel that lulled sense of well-being that trust officers and other fiduciaries had always induced in him. Yet, at the back of his mind there was the lingering suspi-

cion of anyone clever enough to imitate another voice so flawlessly.

Albert would ask Emerson about that at his first opportunity. The drink was relaxing him, and in a moment he realized his folly in taking anything from that man. What if it were drugged? He resolved not to take another.

"I have a dinner engagement," Albert said, glancing at his watch.

"To be sure. We can talk about that," Emerson said. "I thought it would be well, meantime, to go on over to the marina, as my principal— Well, let me begin again. A most puissant personage is interested in securing your technical know-how," Emerson said, rubbing his hands down the gray wings of his hair, straightening his tie slightly. "Shall we talk dollars or pounds sterling?" he asked blandly.

Albert wished now, as his indignation suddenly kindled within him, that he had never been so gullible. They were moving swiftly down the esplanade toward the marina. "Or rubles?" Albert asked, seized by a sudden suspicion.

"Surely. Or yen, rupees, francs, or zlotys. It is a matter of perfect indifference as to how remittance is made, as that merely concerns—ah—technical adjustment."

Albert studied the man's face, the puckering cheeks, the wily gaze, and the shrewd, high forehead that he now saw moisten slightly, as if from a sudden sweat. Emerson took a large, starkly white handkerchief from his coat pocket and mopped his brow and returned the cloth to his pocket with a flourish.

"I should explain, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, quite frankly, that my hopes are that we might induce you—this is entirely a matter of free choice—to meet a higher representative of our principal, who happens now to be riding at anchor out on Whitehead Shoal."

"Past the three-mile limit?"

"To be sure. We would prefer, of course, to use swifter modes of transport, but the airports are being watched. And to fly in—well, as you know, every cubic foot of air is monitored by radar, computerized, despite your most imaginative efforts. So we must resort to this—ah—primitive means of transport. But we wouldn't want you to think our scale of operations is in any corresponding way behind the times."

Albert now had visions of a submarine of some foreign

power waiting to swallow him up, and for the first time he began to appreciate the deadly danger that these comfortable surroundings portended.

Emerson was waving his hand in that gesture of disclaimer that again, in spite of his new apprehension, served to calm Albert momentarily. "Let me explain, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, so that you do not interpose—forgive my bluntness—your prejudices here. You see, I am an agent, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering."

"I daresay," Albert said testily.

"I find buyers for desirable services. Yours, for instance, command the keenest attention from several quarters. From several quite puissant personages indeed. Quite puissant and outstandingly solvent as well."

"That's the important thing to you, isn't it, Mr. Emerson?"

"Solvency? Indeed! And for you, too, I should say."

Albert would draw out Emerson as far as he dared, look for his opening, and then—

"For instance," Emerson said as he groped in his side pocket, and withdrew a small black book with pages of blue air-mail-weight English paper, "either of two large manufacturers of computers would love to have your services on an exclusive basis."

"What for?"

"Well now, I make it a policy never to ask a client what specific use he intends to make of a consultant. But if I were to take a stab at it, just between friends . . . ?" He nodded toward Albert, and his eyes seemed to lose most of their sleepy look and to become weasel bright. "I would guess that each of these manufacturers would wish for you to disable certain competitors."

"It figures."

"Yes, doesn't it? But that's all very unimaginative and boring, and I hate to be bored, don't you? Now, then," Emerson said, riffling the pages of his little book until he found what he was seeking.

"The Government of the People's Republic of—but no names—is prepared to pay up to a half million, but their credit is so abysmal that not even the Albanians will do business with them. Then, let me see, ah yes, an African nation is most interested. We think they would probably go to per-

haps seven hundred and fifty thousand. Now, that brings us to a large American motorcar manufacturer. The amount he offers is equivalent to one point four million. These have been ranked by dollar value, you understand, quite irrespective of—ah—ideological outlook.”

He gazed at Albert to see what effect his words were having. “Still no smile, eh, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering?”

The car had come to rest, then, in the parking lot of the marina, under a large oak, and Albert saw a taxi standing at the entrance gates. He put his hand on the door. “No,” he said.

Emerson smiled slightly, and Albert turned from him and pushed open the door and began to slide forward from the depths of the comfortable divan-like seat. The voice came cold and softly from behind him.

“Mr. Cartwright-Chickering, can you believe that a pistol is pointing directly at your spine at this moment? That on impact, the bullet we have selected will doubtless fracture, I should think, the sixth—or perhaps the fifth—dorsal vertebra, driving bone splinters before it, and doubtless disabling several vital organs, resulting in death . . . ?”

Albert turned around swiftly, but no pistol pointed at him. Emerson was smiling again. “There *was* no gun. That suggests the power of little things like words, doesn’t it? Now, consider the power of little things like dollars, won’t you? My principal offers seven point five million dollars, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering. . . . Consider that sum. . . . Seven point five million. Deposited to a numbered account in Kronisburg-Nationalische, Zürich. We already have taken the liberty of preparing the cards of deposit, requiring only your signature.”

Emerson’s large hands snapped down a small desklike panel from the seat. He withdrew a card from his coat pocket, flopping it down on the desk with a gesture that said, “Here, it’s all very plain to see.”

Albert slid back into the car, but the door next to him remained open. “You arouse my suspicions, Mr. Emerson.”

“Doubtless,” Emerson said. “And your curiosity, too. Not to mention your greed.”

“If your principal offered you anything,” Albert said, suddenly feeling his most aggressive, “he offered you ten and

you figure that I'll accept seven and a half, which leaves you two and a half, doesn't it?"

"Don't be silly, Mr. Cartwright-Chickering. If he offered me anything, it was fifteen, and I intend to halve it. My organization has very high overhead. It must pay my salary and emoluments."

Albert studied the placid face opposite him, and from some reservoir of calm calculation within him, a plan sprang to mind. "I'll be glad to meet with your principal, Mr. Emerson, but first, I am allergic to sea air; it makes me asthmatic. In fact, I already feel an attack coming on. You must take me back to my auto in the theater parking lot for my adrenalin spray."

Emerson nodded. "That's easily arranged," he said. He gave the command to his chauffeur and spoke several other words to the ceiling in a language that Albert did not understand.

They were back at the parking lot within ten minutes. Albert slipped slowly out of the limousine, across the few feet of macadam pavement into the front seat of his own car, and sitting cautiously in the passenger seat, he edged over toward the steering wheel, trying all the while to appear perplexed and uncertain. The chauffeur was watching him, and so, he imagined, were the two ferret eyes deep in the back seat.

A crowd of shoppers emerged just then from an alleyway, jabbering and talking and aiming for a large station wagon right behind Albert's car. They would have to walk directly between the limousine and Albert's own car, and that was exactly the time he awaited.

As they approached, he fished his keys out of his pocket, inserted them stealthily into the ignition switch, and swiftly leapt behind the wheel. He turned the key, started the motor, jammed the car into gear, and raced out of the parking lot, slamming the door belatedly as he went.

The great dark limousine roared out behind him, the chauffeur's face a grim mask.

"Apple Green, this is zero-nine-forty-four. Look, we've got our subject vehicle under surveillance again. It's moving out the Belt Freeway at a very high rate of speed and there's this big black car chasing it . . ."

"Have you a license number of the big car?"

"Can't make it out. But it's out-of-state. Looks like maybe District of Columbia or Maryland maybe."

The plans were swiftly made, and there was a call from Major Buxton to Troop K of the State Highway Patrol.

"This is Sergeant Valeria again to Apple Green."

"Yes?"

"Our boy has given us the slip."

"But you got tricky voice?"

"We got him, but the old boy is gone."

"Where?"

"He took the road north."

"All right. Alert Group Zed. And better inform Mauve Erick, too."

"I don't care, Mother. I know where he might be, and even if it is dangerous . . ."

"But, Ann dear. We really ought not to be involved, do you think? This is strictly man's work."

"But Mr. Pierce's call, Mother."

"All right, dear. But for heaven's sake be careful. And call when you get there."

"Don't be silly, Mother. They're probably tapping our lines, too. Let's do what Mr. Pierce suggested."

"It's all too confusing," Millicent said, sinking quietly into the terrace chaise longue. "All right, dear. But do be careful . . . Still, I don't see why the President cannot carry his own messages."

"We've been through that a hundred times, Mother!"

"All right, all right, Ann. Please don't be cross with me."

The Headwaters of the Nanagowonady

□ The logging road was so overgrown with daisies and jewel-weed that its outlines were all but invisible. Albert shifted down to first gear, wobbled over the planked bridge,

and eased up the slope until he came to the cut through which the old garnet-mine road had run.

Now that the chase had abated, a sense of well-being flooded him. Gladness that corruption had been so close, yet satisfaction that he had not been entangled by its fragrance. Male perfume, now that Albert thought of it, was what Emerson had worn.

How much the bumpkin he had remained—and he knew it—in surroundings calculated to corrupt. Albert never had liked the big expense-account luncheons of his thirty years at UMCorp. He always had scorn, unspoken but real, for those heads unduly turned by the tinkle of coin, the rustle of bank-note paper.

The thought of a huge payment, of limitless wealth, came back to him. But all that remained in his memory was the sickly sweet smell of the man's perfume. Was it odor, then, that set him apart? That restored Albert's rectitude just when he thought it was lost?

In his mind's eye, as he eased around a large boulder that the spring snows had dislodged and dumped onto the primitive road, a new picture: a cloudless day, and the sweet smell, again, of anointed bodies and licentious pleasures, of suntan lotion.

In his mind, the odor was associated with the easy life. He had seen it once so authentically that the image would not escape him again. A day on the Riviera, where Beth and he had gone with one objective. She wanted to see if the light there, the way the sun slanted down on the water and the rocks, as Corot's and even Van Gogh's work seemed to suggest, was really so distinctive and benign as to permit an entirely new range of color relationships in landscapes.

While Beth trudged to scenic vantage points with her easel and paints, working against the progress of the sun, laying on her ultramarine cut with zinc oxide, her chrome-yellow flowers braced with sienna and terre verte, Albert spent his time below, observing with an almost obsessive singularity of view the rich folk lolling on the beaches.

His thoughts returned to Emerson: The effrontery of the man! Tricking him that way. Albert did not believe for a moment that anyone would pay such a vast sum for his fungus research. It was a way of fooling him. Of getting him

to agree to sailing offshore, and then, once in the power of whoever his principal was—

Besides, Emerson had as much as asked Albert to be disloyal to his country. Emerson had virtually boasted of his indifference to patriotic considerations—yen, rubles, pounds sterling, zlotys indeed!

Albert knew then for the first time how successful he must have been in getting the fungus into computers, including those that governed missiles and perhaps into those that oversaw the continental air defenses of the nation.

Some foreign nation—it was suddenly clear to Albert—sensing a way to force a giant power to its knees, was trying to get Albert's co-operation. The idea was more shocking than anything that Albert had run through his mind in months.

Under his growing sense of delayed outrage, Albert could remember the police closing in. At first he thought that they were coming after him, but instead they flagged down the limousine at the toll station, and the ineffectual struggle of the chauffeur and then of Emerson, as he was wrestled out of his plush back seat, filled Albert momentarily with an irrational desire to go back there and help Emerson. But then he remembered that the underdog was really himself, in the circumstances, not a man with a large international organization. He stepped harder on his accelerator.

They did not even look after Albert's car until the helicopter came hovering so close that he thought they might be trying to take his picture. He darted off the parkway, into a back road, and off that to a dirt roadway that ran next to a rocky lake. He shook the helicopter, even though he could still hear its pop-popping somewhere off behind him.

He waited until nearly dark and then crept stealthily north, heading for the mountain road where he and Beth had discovered their idyll, opposite in almost every respect from the easy Riviera.

He left the car in an abandoned shaft of the garnet mine and after strapping on his knapsack, taking his fishing rod in hand, and putting on his plasticized hiking boots, he moved up the trail by starlight.

There was no mistaking the sound of the plane droning off at the horizon, but the car door slamming—if that was

what it was—was so faint as nearly to elude him. Whoever it might be, Albert was fairly sure that it would not be Emerson. But, he thought then, it could be one of Emerson's confederates—younger and sleeker, no doubt.

He wondered if it could be Major Buxton's team, or even the CIA. Then he began to wonder which of his acquaintances would know of his secret place in the mountains, at the headwaters of the west branch of the Nanagowonady. Would Jenny have remembered? And if so, could she have told Hill? The river had a difficult name, and memory was not one of her strong points. Might Ann remember his few references to his hideaway? Again, he thought no.

He moved higher along the trail, past a face of granite down which small waterfalls trickled, through a giant stand of hemlocks, and higher still, through scrub growth in a kind of meadow, over which a large gibbous moon now was rousing itself.

Finally he hiked up the steep valley trail to a lean-to, his goal for the night. He and Beth had discovered it years before, and it still remained, frail and wobbly from the winter snows, but still it stood.

As he spread his sleeping bag out and began to secure it with mosquito netting that he had in its zippered pocket, he heard a distinct pattering sound below him on the trail.

He peered intently into the darkness. A form appeared at the edge of the woods, and it began to move toward him, and in his throat was a dryness and a sudden constriction that left him nearly breathless. Another picture sprang into his mind: of a CIA operative with an infrared snooperscope, training a silenced high-powered rifle at his head. If they just decided to end it right then, all it would take would be a squeeze of the trigger.

He virtually could see exactly that scene unfolding across the expanse of faintly moonlit, rock-strewn ground. That would be their tactic: to shoot him and then to let it pass as a hunting accident.

The form came closer. A steep trail led only to the summit, and he was too weary to run farther. He was caught. There was no other conclusion. "All right," he called out, barking each word with the timbre of bravery that surprised him for its vigor. "All right, who is it?"

Silence. He knew he was violating the rules of camouflage,

prime of which was that you kept your mouth shut and did not move to betray your location. Yet he had broken the silence, and now he would take the consequences like a man.

Still, there was a hope that a gesture, a sane word, might inspire a rational, even a merciful, response.

"Albert," a sweet feminine voice called. "Albert? Is that you?"

There was an involuntary surge of joy in his breast. "Ann! What are *you* doing here?"

"Albert," she said, running now toward him, and he could see her fine cheekbones in the moonlight, and he was strangely warmed and excited. "Albert, there's such good news!"

Return to United Metals

□ The story, as it tumbled out from Ann, was more than common sense or the law of averages would admit. In the first place, the effect of their expedition to the salt marshes had been powerful and widespread beyond belief.

At the very time that the fungus was proliferating in the fractionating towers and spreading slowly through the Pelemco complex, at a hospital on the west side of the city, some forty miles north of that spot, David Pierce confounded all the prognoses of his doctors. He sat up in bed and talked.

"Astounding," said his doctors. "Wholly without precedent in our experience." But there it was. A will to recuperate so powerful as to have swept all contrary diagnoses aside. David Pierce was mending. He had regained control of his motor functions until he was shortly asking his friend Eli Zouver for reinstatement as executive vice-president of United Metals Corporation.

That was the day that Zouver learned that the electronic data processing system of United Metals Corporation had

gone into what appeared to be terminal shock. And that was the day of the celebrated confrontation, when Buster Doyle asked for another chance—in public. When Gerry Connaught dialed a number, spoke a few words to his operative in Chicago, and with that calm assurance that usually bespoke triumph, challenged Doyle to resurrect his system.

"First," Ann said, "Mr. Zouver asked David Pierce to come back in and make a study."

"And?" Albert asked, easing the car up to a tollbooth.

"Mr. Pierce asked me to come back the very next day, and when he heard what Mr. Doyle had recommended on your severance pay—"

"Yes?"

"Well," Ann said, smiling, "Mr. Doyle is now with the Antofagasta smelter."

"Antofagasta? I didn't know we had a plant there."

"Neither did Mr. Doyle," Ann said, smiling faintly.

There were a few moments of silence before she resumed. As news of the computer paralysis began to spread, it became clear that a quiet disaster had threatened the entire nation.

"You seem to have struck a nerve," Ann said.

"We, Ann."

"Yes, Albert. 'We,' as far as we're concerned, but 'you' as far as United Metals is concerned. You see, they regard me as an emissary with a particularly delicate mission. You seem to be a highly desirable person, Albert, and a powerful one."

"Me? Powerful?"

"Yes, Albert. The President of the United States knows about you. Not only the President, but the First Lady."

"No!"

"Yes. And that's where my delicate mission comes in, Albert. You see, I'm supposed to give you a short briefing of what is in store for you if you will come in to see Mr. Pierce and the others. Mr. Zouver, too, if you'll see him."

"If I'll see him? You mean if he'll see me, don't you?"

"No, Albert. Things have changed. You see—I don't know the details—but the First Lady has had this idea. You know, Beautify America. Clean up the eyesores. 'Make Democracy Safe from Rubbish,' Mr. Zouver calls it."

"Never mind him. What did she say?"

"She got the idea from—you remember that campaign back in the sixties?"

"Yes indeed. Hide the junkyards. Spruce up, paint up. A flop as I recall."

"Yes, but there's a new plan now. And it's all organized around you, they say."

"Me?"

"Yes, Albert. That's why they want you to come in. It seems the government expressly planned that you should be approached through your former employer. They wish—Mr. Pierce explained it all very carefully—they wish to leave this up to private enterprise."

"Leave *what* up?"

"The project you'll hear about if you'll come in to the office."

"Can't you tell me more about it?"

"Only that it would involve you—involve us both—in a very interesting assignment. Interesting and remunerative, Mr. Pierce said. They would be prepared—here, I have it in my notes—'prepared to provide a most generous consultant's fee, under a grant from the government.' But that's all he said. No details."

Albert felt his knees tremble as he and Ann went into the UMCorp building the next morning. They passed the black marble planters, full now of begonias and ivy, amidst the gathering throngs of morning workers streaming into the giant structure.

Several people recognized Albert and hailed him, and he returned their greetings. The doorman went out of his way to bow elaborately, and the elevator starter was holding a car for them. Albert and Ann were on the eighth floor within seconds.

The carpeting beneath his feet filled him again with that forgotten pleasure of corporate corridors, where the sounds were muffled and the feeling of power, of decisions about to be made, animated even the slight breezes that might be stirred by a suddenly opened door or a momentary surge in the air conditioning.

David Pierce was on his feet, looking fit but thin, and he came forward with his hand extended in his usual formal way. "Albert! What a great pleasure!"

Albert nodded, smiled with embarrassment, took the proffered hand, and made some remark about how lucky everyone was that David was back in the pink. There were excited glances about, as if the portents were so great that they would soon proclaim themselves. Pierce talked fast. First, a ghastly mistake about the severance thing. Surely it never would have happened if—

"I know," Albert said.

"No hard feelings?"

"Not many," Albert said.

"Well, I hope not, because the finance committee has agreed to meet your original terms, the ones I said I would recommend. In other words, you have another two years' salary coming to you."

Albert smiled. "Good," he said, and Pierce leaned forward as if he expected something to be added, but Albert said nothing else.

"I guess Miss Pym has told you what we have in mind?"

"In a general way. No details, though," Albert said, glancing over at Ann, who was sitting with her hands folded in her lap, twisting her clean linen handkerchief quietly and gazing mostly at her own ankles, which were locked demurely in front of her.

Pierce depressed a button on the box sitting on his desk, and spoke a few low words into it. Then, rising, he suggested that they go to a nearby conference room. On the way there, the explanations began. The Department of the Interior had been directed to establish liaison.

"With what?" Albert asked. "I don't understand."

"Oh, then you have heard nothing at all?"

"That's right. Something about a presidential plan, but that's about all."

"Well then," Pierce said, as they neared the conference room. He swung open the door, and Albert walked into a large room with various display panels on its walls. "You see, the Beautify America program anticipates great applications for your fungus research, in a more—er—constructive context. They see a chance, for instance, with discarded beverage containers and so on, to do something."

"Beverage containers?"

"Beer cans."

"Oh. You mean . . . ?"

"As a kind of trash-removal scheme."

"But fungus doesn't attack metal," Albert said.

"That's just the point," Pierce replied. "If we were to develop—in fact we're already engaged in developing—a beer can that *would* be susceptible to fungus—" He gazed at Albert and the dawn of understanding brightened his friend's features.

In the several panels affixed to the walls of the conference room there were illuminated sketches of various fibers and crystals in microscopic enlargement. David Pierce explained that these were the chemists' diagrams. "These reflect preliminary research suppositions," Pierce said.

The plan was simply set forth. If Albert would agree, for a suitable daily consultant's fee, to act as general consulting director for the plan, they saw a possibility of a massive new market, geared to a plastic beer can. The federal government would give its full support. "And maybe we can move on, if the first phase is successful, to a plastic auto body next. Something in the vein of the acrylonitrile-butadienestyrene. The White House is keenly interested in that possibility, also. We're working with several of the chemical companies right now, and in fact we're about to set up a separate corporation with Consolidated-Western to work out the applications."

"I see," Albert said.

"Do you?" Pierce wanted to know. "I mean *really*? Look, Albert, this is planned obsolescence carried to its ultimate in logic. I mean, here we have a beer can or an auto that sits on the shelf or in the showroom for a certain time—fine and good. Then it gets sold—also good. Used. Good, too. And finally junked. At that point, it fades away. It doesn't just sit there in the junkyard becoming an eyesore and blighting the countryside. Driving down property values. It disappears. Thanks to your—ah—fungus work."

Albert felt a jolt of pleasure, and his pink cheeks brightened at the thought. Pierce even thought he detected a slight wiggling of Albert's nose, but it was so swift he couldn't be sure. "A way of accelerating the obsolescence, so to speak?"

"Exactly!" Pierce said. "Of course the plastic would have to have a fungistat built in. That would be essential. Otherwise we'd have beer cans springing leaks on the shelves

. . . dripping into cake mixes and powdered milk . . ."

"Yes," Albert said, "I can see that. Or an auto might develop a sagging crankshaft—"

"Right," Pierce said. "But the fungistat would age and finally—in keeping with the idea of planned obsolescence—lose its power in minutely calibrated increments, so owners would have plenty of warning."

It was crystalline to Albert that a large organization would have to be put together, and that a great deal of research would have to be done.

"Yes," Pierce agreed, "and in that particular, we feel we are particularly lucky in the advisory staff we have assembled from our suppliers. As it happens, our new supplier of data processing equipment happens to be in the office today, and we thought it might be nice—Eli Zouver and I—if you just said 'hello' and heard some of the research opportunities. From a logistics standpoint. That's always been your forte, after all."

"I see," Albert said.

"What's the matter?"

"It's just that now that I'm entirely out of a workaday schedule, I wonder—"

"If you want any of this?"

"Yes."

"There's a most generous honorarium. In fact, you can name your daily fee. We probably wouldn't bat an eyelash."

"This is the same company I worked for for thirty years?" Albert asked.

"The same," Pierce said with a smile.

At length, with some reluctance, Albert agreed to meet with whomever Eli Zouver had in mind. They walked down to Zouver's suite, but before they got there, Ann spotted the president in an anteroom, and it was there, in the corridor, that Albert suddenly drew in his breath, for there stood Nathan Osgood in deep conversation with Zouver.

"Oh, Dr. Osgood—excuse us, Eli—"

"Of course, Dave."

Zouver bowed and stood back a half pace.

"Dr. Osgood, I want you to meet the man we hope will be our consulting director of new product research, Mr. Albert D. Cartwright-Chickering."

Nathan's expression betrayed nothing. It had only that

slight smiling receptivity that polite usage requires at such times. "How do you do, Mr. Chickering," Nathan said.

"Cartwright-Chickering," Albert responded, almost involuntarily, and he thought he could see Zouver wince, out of the corner of his eye.

Nathan smiled. "Oh, I beg your pardon. It's . . . ?"

"A hyphenated name," Albert said.

There was nervous laughter: a titter from Zouver, and a truncated half-gulp laugh from David Pierce, but Albert caught Nathan's sly glance and enjoyed the joke between them. They remained standing there for a moment, those five, and time seemed to grow elongated and viscid.

Finally, after what seemed to Ann an intolerable silence, Zouver suggested that they come on into the office, which they did. A small clock ticked on a shelf, and far below, outside, a taxicab horn honked. Otherwise, there was virtual silence. Only the quiet sound of people breathing in anticipation.

Everyone was watching Albert, looking for any sign he might give. But self-containment was the only signal he emitted—the quiet, level gaze of a man sure of himself and a bit impatient with other, probing eyes. Eyes that acted like ghosts seeking to invest an abandoned house. Or worse, to drive from an occupied house its rightful tenant.

His facade remained so noncommittal as to induce a general alarm both in Zouver and Pierce. Eli Zouver tried to jolly Albert out of his reserve, but that failed. Then David Pierce tried his close-grained logic, but Albert remained inert.

It was at that point that Nathan said something about trout streams being returned to their natural state, but Zouver dissipated the advantage by saying it would be a war to make the world safe for ichthyology.

Albert's face darkened, and there was very nearly a communal shudder around the table. There were, to Ann, none of the psychological effects she had anticipated—a sense of disjointedness ending; of a rebellion petering out; of a strayed sheep returning to the fold, the joyous shepherds greeting it with piping trills.

Finally Albert faced the men there. "I find your proposal interesting," he said, "but I need time to consider it."

"One doesn't keep the Chief Executive waiting," Eli Zouver said.

"Are you referring to yourself or to the White House, Mr. Zouver?" Albert asked evenly.

"The White House, of course," Zouver said, and then he withdrew his handkerchief and blew his nose loudly.

"Still, I need time to think."

There was a general sagging of shoulders around the room. Then came a spark of rekindling hope in David Pierce's eye. "Can't we discuss this over lunch, Albert?"

"You know me and the big business lunch, David. Clouds a man's judgment, befogs his detachment . . . But—"

"Yes?"

"Well, I would welcome a chance to have a sandwich with Dr. Osgood, if he is willing."

"Dr. Osgood?" Zouver asked solicitously.

"Yes," Nathan said, "I would like that."

As they were standing to leave, Albert turned back into the room and looked past the harried faces to Ann's. A slight smile sat on her lips, cryptic and puzzling to him. "And Ann? You and your mother? Could you possibly join us? Might we meet—say—in a half-hour? At Eighth and Olive?"

When Millicent and Ann came around the corner, they could see Albert and Nathan talking, and from the way they were standing, under a sparse-leaved tree, it looked for all the world as if Albert were leaning away from the conversation, as if a prism had inclined him out at a fifteen-degree angle.

"Are we late?" Millicent asked, glancing at her watch and smoothing her gloves against her wrists.

"Only a few moments, Mother," Ann said. There was one more cross street before they got down the hill to Eighth and Olive, and they were caught by the light.

Ann's gaze fixed on a large bakery truck that blocked her view of Albert and Nathan. When the signal changed and the traffic moved, however, there was only a single form under the tree: Nathan's. They hurried down to meet him.

"But where's Albert, Dr. Osgood?" Millicent asked.

An explanation came, with that economy of phrase that crisis always evokes. Albert was gone, Nathan said, but he had said to wait. He would return.

"But where has he gone?" Millicent wanted to know.

"There," Nathan said. His eyes fixed on a street-level office on the opposite corner. The sign over the draped windows stretched the length of the block, and it virtually jumped out at the passer-by:

INVICTA CREDIT CORPORATION INTERNATIONAL.

"Oh dear," Ann said.

"He said he would be right hack, I tried to stop him, but you know Albert. Once he gets an idea in his head . . ."

"He didn't—er—have his water pistol did he?" Ann asked.

"I don't know. I didn't see it if he did."

"Or a little box of spores?" Millicent asked. "I think I feel an ode coming on!"

"Please, Mother!"

They weighed the possibilities, and Nathan suggested a sign they could watch for. "If he comes out smiling, that's bad."

"Why?"

"It will mean he hasn't paid. Not cleared up his disagreement with Invicta, in other words. That is the company that keeps dunning him, isn't it?"

"Yes," Ann said breathily.

"But, Dr. Osgood," Millicent said, "I don't understand. About the smile."

"It's simple," Nathan said, scanning the front of the Invicta office as he talked, his eyes taking on a faraway expression. "Albert is a Puritan. Right? I mean, he says so himself, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"As a Puritan he becomes grave and unhappy when he spends money. Stern-faced as a sea captain, in other words."

"I see," Millicent said, and something in Nathan's gaze made her look where he was looking.

At that moment their eyes were drawn to the front door of Invicta. There stood Albert. His features were wreathed in the most radiant smile anyone of them could ever remember seeing on his face.

"Oh, oh," Nathan said.

Albert moved swiftly to the curb, danced through the traffic, and came toward them, his step so springy that

Nathan's sense of impending doom deepened. Ann was twisting her handkerchief and Millicent was saying, as if it were a litany, "Oh Lordy, Lordy . . . Lordy, Oh!"

"Mother, hush won't you?"

Albert was upon them, and before they could even greet him he was talking. But the words were not apocalyptic at all. No galloping hooves rose behind them and no thunder rent the heavens.

"I paid up," Albert said.

"You what?" Nathan asked, his jaw dropping a full inch and a half.

"Yes, I did. You see, they made a gesture. A gesture, and I just got your company a new account, too, Nathan."

"No," Nathan said, sinking against the tree. "We don't want any more accounts that way."

"Not that way. You see, I paid up and they have made a gesture."

"A gesture?"

"Yes," Albert said, withdrawing a piece of laminated plastic from his vest pocket. It was imprinted with a line of golden letters and code numbers. Millicent grabbed for his arm and held it tight.

"Oh, Albert," she said, "they've imprinted your *whole* name!" Millicent leapt a few inches off the sidewalk, clapped her hands together, and started to hum.

"Please, Mother, not here on the street!" Ann said. Too late.

"May I not rejoice, Albert?" Millicent asked.

"All right," he said, "if you must."

She began to sing:

Tra-la-la, tra-la-lee, we're happy now as we can be!
Tra-la-la, tra-la-lee, our Albert's won—it's plain to see—
a simply smashing vic-tor-eel

"Oh, Mother, really!"

Leave your doldrums, banish sadness, surrender selves
to mirth and snickering!
Raise your voices now in gladness for the cause of
Cartwright-Chickering!

"Still doesn't scan," Ann said.

"Please, ladies, please," Albert tried to say.

Nathan was laughing now so loud that pedestrians were turning to look at them all.

"Oh, Albert, it's just marvelous," Millicent said. "Let me see it again," she said, and Albert handed her the card and they all clustered around to see it.

"How sweet," she said. "Your *whole*, entire name."

Ann took the card and looked at it and shook her head and smiled. "Albert Duane Cartwright—" She paused and looked with a smile at Albert.

"Chickering," he said.

"Yes," Nathan said, and then he caught himself. There was a pause then, and everyone was eyeing each other and smiling, and as if in that moment of a toast, of clinking glasses and common resolve, they said in unison:

"It's a hyphenated name."

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