



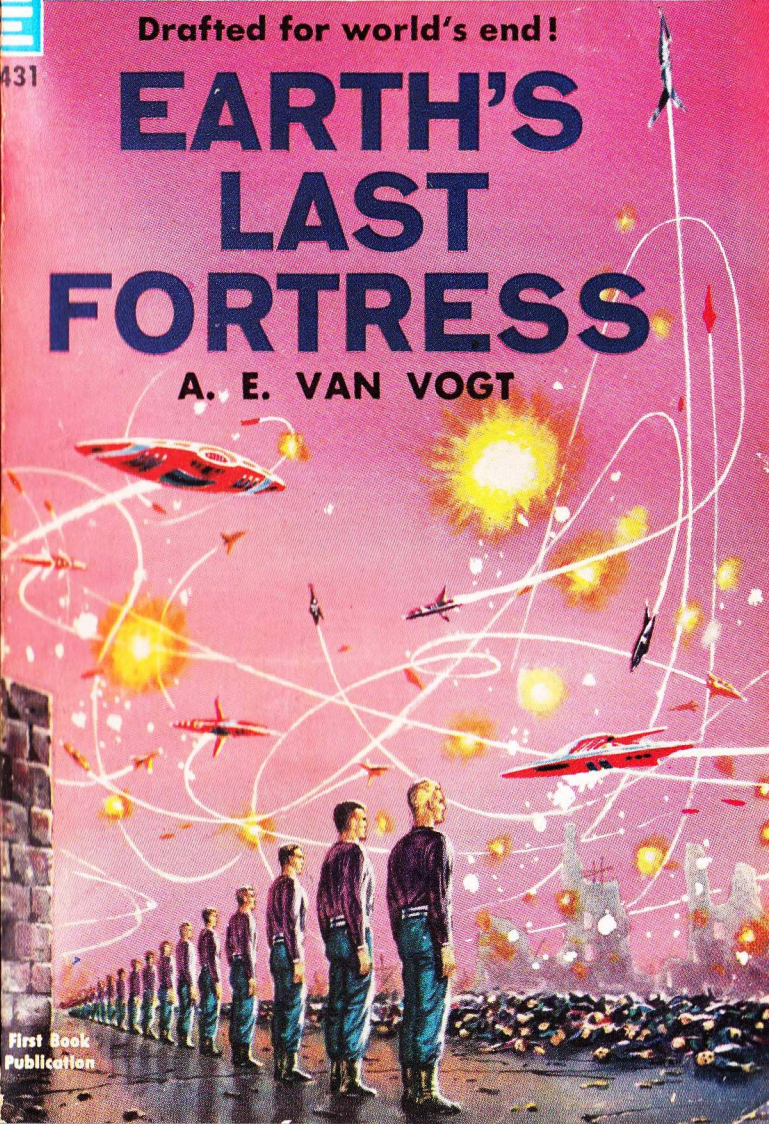
DOUBLE NOVEL BOOKS **35c**

D431

Drafted for world's end!

EARTH'S LAST FORTRESS

A. E. VAN VOGT



First Book
Publication

VOLUNTEERS FOR THE TOMORROW FRONT

It looked like a perfectly innocent store front, a volunteer enrollment office for young idealists who wanted to help the desperate forces of a young democracy overseas win their civil war. The young girl who sat at the desk inside was attractive, sympathetic, and would see that you got your passage safely.

But it was all a trap. It was indeed a recruiting station, but the war for which it brainwashed its deluded cannon fodder was out of this world—remote in time, remote in space, and nobody would ever return alive. As for the girl—she was as much a slave of that monstrous future-world machine as if she were chained to the desk.

Except for one thing that even the inhuman super-science of EARTH'S LAST FORTRESS did not suspect—that Norma was the secret lever that could shatter their universe!

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

A. E. VAN VOGT is rightfully regarded as one of the great masters of modern science-fiction. Establishing a new pace for brilliancy of narration and a new high mark for originality of concept, each of his books has achieved recognition as an imaginative classic. Van Vogt was born in Canada, but now is a resident of Los Angeles, where he has been active in the exploration of new fields of thought.

Ace Books have published many of his novels, of which **THE PAWNS OF NULL-A (D-187)**, **EMPIRE OF THE ATOM (D-242)**, and **SIEGE OF THE UNSEEN (D-391)** are still available.

EARTH'S LAST FORTRESS

by

A. E. VAN VOGT

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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EARTH'S LAST FORTRESS

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LOST IN SPACE

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SHE DIDN'T DARE! Suddenly, the night was a cold, enveloping thing. The edge of the broad, black river gurgled evilly at her feet as if, now that she had changed her mind, it hungered for her.

Her foot slipped on the wet, sloping ground, and her thoughts grew blurred with the terrible, senseless fear that *things* were reaching out of the night, trying to drown her now against her will. She fought her way up the bank and slumped, breathlessly, onto the nearest park bench. Dully, she watched the gaunt man come along the pathway past the light standard. So sluggish was her mind that she was not aware of surprise when she realized he was coming straight toward her.

The purulent yellowish light made a crazy patch of his shadow across her where she sat. His voice, when he spoke, was vaguely foreign in tone, yet modulated, cultured. He said, "Are you interested in the Calonian cause?"

Norma stared. There was no quickening in her brain, but suddenly she began to laugh. It was funny, horribly, hysterically funny. To be sitting here, trying to get up the nerve for another attempt at those deadly waters, and then to have some crackbrain come along and—

"You're deluding yourself, Miss Matheson," the man went on coolly. "You're not the suicide type."

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"Nor the pickup type!" She answered automatically. "Beat it before—"

Abruptly, it penetrated that the man had called her by name. She looked up sharply at the dark blank that was his face. His head against the background of distant light nodded as if in reply to the question that quivered in her thought.

"Yes, I know your name. I also know your history and your fear."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that a young scientist named Garson arrived in the city tonight to deliver a series of lectures. Ten years ago, when you and he graduated from the same university, he asked you to marry him, but you wanted a career. And now you're terrified that in your extremity you might turn to him for assistance."

"Stop!"

The man seemed to watch her as she sat there breathing heavily. He said at last, quietly, "I think I have proved that I am not simply a casual philanderer."

"What other kind of philanderer is there?" Norma asked, sluggish again. But she made no objection as he sank down on the far end of the bench. His back was still to the light, his features night-enveloped.

"Ah," he said, "you joke. You are bitter. But that is an improvement. You feel now, perhaps, that if somebody has taken an interest in you, all is not lost."

Norma said dully, "People who are acquainted with the basic laws of psychology are cursed with the memory of them, even when disaster strikes into their lives. All I've done the last ten years is—" She stopped, then: "You're very clever.

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Without more than arousing a mild suspicion, you've insinuated yourself into the company of an hysterical woman. What's your purpose?"

"I intend to offer you a job."

Norma's laugh sounded so harsh in her own ears that she thought, startled, *I am hysterical!* Aloud, she said, "An apartment, jewels, a car of my own, I suppose?"

His reply was cool. "No. To put it frankly, if I were looking for a mistress, I'd pass you by. You are not pretty enough as you are right now. Too angular, mentally and physically. That's been one of your troubles the last ten years: developing introversion of the mind which has influenced the shape of your body unfavorably."

The words shivered through the suddenly stiffened muscles of her body. With an enormous effort, she forced herself to relax. She said, "I had that coming to me. Insults are good for hysteria. So now what?"

"Are you interested in the Calonian cause?"

"There you go again," she complained. "But, yes, I'm for it. Birds of a feather, you know."

"I know very well indeed. In fact, in those words you named the reason why I am here tonight, hiring a young woman who is up against it. Calonia, too, is up against it and—" He stopped. In the darkness, he spread his shadowlike hands. "You see: good publicity for our recruiting centers."

Norma nodded. It seemed to her that she did see, and suddenly she didn't trust herself to speak. Her hand trembled as she took the key he held out.

"This key," he said, "will fit the lock of the front door leading to the apartment above the center. The apartment is

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yours while you have the job. You can go there tonight if you wish, or wait until morning if you fear this is merely a device. Now, I must give you a warning."

"Warning?"

"Yes. The work we are doing is illegal. Actually, only the American government can enlist American citizens and operate recruiting stations. We exist on sufferance and sympathy, but at any time someone may lay a charge and the police will have to act."

Norma nodded rapidly. "That's no risk," she said. "No judge would ever—"

"The address is 322 Carlton Street," he cut in smoothly. "And for your information, my name is Dr. Lell."

Norma had the distinct sense of being pushed along too swiftly for caution. She hesitated, her mind on the street address. "Is that near Bessemer?"

It was his turn to hesitate. "I'm afraid," he confessed, "I don't know this city very well, at least not in its twentieth century. You see," he finished suavely, "I was here many years ago, around the mid-century."

Norma wondered vaguely why he bothered to explain. She said half-accusingly, "You're not a Calonian. You sound—French, maybe."

"You're not a Calonian either," he said, and stood up abruptly. She watched his great gloom-wrapped figure walk off into the night and vanish.

SHE STOPPED short in the deserted night street. The sound that came was like a whisper touching her brain; a machine whirring somewhere with a soft humming sound. For a moment, her mind concentrated on the shadow vibrations; and then, somehow, they seemed to fade like figments of her imagination. Suddenly, there was only the street and the silent night. The street was dimly lighted, and that brought doubt, sharp and tinged with fear. She strained her eyes and traced the numbers on the doors until she came to 322. That was it! The place was in darkness. She peered at the signs that made up the window display:

FIGHT FOR THE BRAVE CALONIANS!

THE CALONIANS ARE FIGHTING FREEDOM'S

FIGHT—YOUR FIGHT! IF YOU CAN PAY YOUR

OWN WAY, IT WOULD BE APPRECIATED.

OTHERWISE WE'LL GET YOU OVER!

There were other signs, but they were essentially the same, all terribly honest and appealing if you really thought about the desperate things that made up their grim background. Illegal, of course. But the man had admitted that, too. With sudden end of doubt, she took the key from her purse.

There were two doorways, one on either side of the window. The one to the right led into the recruiting station. The one on the left led up dimly lighted stairs. The apartment at

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the top was uninhabited. The door had a bolt. She clicked it home, and then, wearily, headed for the bedroom. It was as she lay in the bed that she grew aware again of the faint whirring of a machine. It was a mere whisper of sound, and, queerly, it seemed to reach into her brain. The very last second before she drifted into sleep, the pulse of the vibration, remote as the park bench, was a steady beat inside her.

All through the night that faint whirring was there. Only occasionally did it seem to be in her head. She was aware of turning, twisting, curling, straightening and, in the fractional wakefulness that accompanied each move, the tiniest vibrational tremors would sweep down along her nerves like infinitesimal currents of energy.

Spears of sunlight, piercingly brilliant through the small window, brought her awake at last. She lay taut and strained for a moment and then relaxed, puzzled. There was not a sound from the maddening machine, only the raucous noises of the awakening street. She found food in the refrigerator and in the little pantry. The weariness of the night vanished swiftly before the revivifying power of breakfast. She thought with gathering interest, *What did he look like, that strange-voiced man of night?*

Relief flooded her when the key unlocked the door to the recruiting room, for there had been in her mind a fear that this was all quite mad. She shuddered the darkness out of her system. The world was sunlit and cheerful, not the black and gloomy abode of people with angular introversion of the mind.

She flushed at the memory of the words. There was no pleasure in knowing that the man's clever analysis of her was

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true. Still stinging, she examined the little room. There were four chairs, a bench, a long wooden counter; newspaper clippings of the Calonian War were tacked up on the otherwise bare walls. There was a back door to the place. Curious, she tried the knob—once! It was locked, but there was something about the feel of it that shocked her. The door, in spite of its wooden appearance, was solid metal.

The chill of that discovery finally left her. She thought, *None of my business*. And then, before she could turn away, the door opened and a gaunt man loomed on the threshold. He snapped harshly, almost into her face, "Oh, yes, it is your business!"

It was not fear that made her back away. The deeps of her mind registered the cold voice, so different from that of the previous night. She was aware of the ugly sneer on his face. But there was no real emotion in her, nothing but a blurred blankness. It wasn't fear. It couldn't be fear because all she had to do was run a few yards and she'd be out on a busy street. And besides, she had never before been afraid of people who had the misfortune of not looking quite human, and she wasn't now.

That first impression that he wasn't quite human was so sharp, so immensely surprising, that the fast-following second impression seemed like a trick of her eyes. For the man was actually just foreign looking. She shook her head, trying to shake that trickiness out of her vision. But the picture remained steady now. He wasn't colored, he wasn't white, but he was a combination of types and races. Slowly, her brain adjusted itself to his alienness. She saw that he had slant eyes like a Chinese. His skin, though dark, was fine in texture,

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but it was not a young face. The nose was sheer chiseled beauty, the most handsome, most normal part of his face. His mouth was thin-lipped, commanding; his bold chin gave strength and power to the insolence of his steel-gray eyes. His sneer deepened.

"Oh, no," he said softly, "you're not afraid of me, are you? Let me inform you that my purpose is to make you afraid. Last night I had the purpose of bringing you here. That required tact, understanding. My new purpose requires, among other things, the realization on your part that you are in my power beyond the control of your will or wish. I could have allowed you to discover gradually that this is not a Calonian recruiting station. But I prefer to get these early squirmings of the slaves over as soon as possible. The reaction to the power of the machine is always so similar and unutterably boring."

"I—I don't understand!"

He answered coldly, "Let me be brief. You have been vaguely aware of a machine. That machine has attuned the rhythm of your body to itself, and through its actions I can control you against your desire. Naturally, I don't expect you to believe me. Like other women, you will test its mind-destroying power. Notice that I said *women!* We always hire women. For purely psychological reasons, they are safer than men. You will discover what I mean if you should attempt to warn any applicant on the basis of what I have told you." He finished swiftly, "Your duties are simple. There is a pad on the table made up of sheets with simple questions printed on them. Ask those questions, note the answers, then direct the

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applicants to me in the back room. I have—er—a medical examination to give them.”

Of all the things he had said, the one that searingly dominated her whole mind had no connection with her personal fate. “But,” she gasped, “if these men are not being sent to Calonia, where—”

His hiss of caution cut her words short. “Here comes a man. Now, remember!”

He stepped back to one side, out of sight in the dimness of the back room. Behind her there was the dismaying sound of the front door opening. A man’s baritone voice blurred a greeting into her ears.

Her fingers shook as she wrote down the man’s answers to the dozen questions. Name, address, next of kin . . . His face was a ruddy-cheeked blur against the shapeless, shifting pattern of her racing thoughts. “You can see,” she heard herself mumbling, “that these questions are only a matter of identification. Now, if you’ll go into the back room—”

The sentence shattered into silence. She’d said it! The uncertainty of her mind, the unwillingness to take a definite stand until she had thought of some way out, had made her say the very thing she had intended to avoid.

The man said, “What do I go in there for?”

She stared at him numbly. Her mind felt sick, useless. She needed time, calm. She said at last, “It’s a simple medical exam, entirely for your own protection.”

Sickly, Norma watched his stocky form head briskly toward the rear door. He knocked, and the door opened. Surprisingly, it stayed open. Surprisingly, because it was then, as the man disappeared from her line of vision, that she saw the

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machine. The immense and darkly gleaming end of it that she could see reared up halfway to the ceiling, partially hiding a door that seemed to be a rear exit from the building.

She forgot the door, forgot the man. Her mind fastened on the great machine as swift realization came that *this* was the machine. Involuntarily, her body, her ears, her mind strained for the whirring sound that she had heard in the night. But there was nothing, not a whisper, not the tiniest of tiny noises, not the vaguest stir of vibration. The machine crouched there, hugging the floor with its solidness, its clinging metal strength; and it was dead, motionless.

The doctor's smooth, persuasive voice came to her, "I hope you don't mind going out the back door, Mr. Barton. We ask applicants to use it because—well, our recruiting station is illegal. As you probably know, we exist on sufferance and sympathy, but we don't want to be too blatant about the success we're having in getting young men to fight for our cause."

Norma waited. As soon as the man was gone she would force a showdown on this whole fantastic affair. If this was some distorted scheme of Calonia's enemies, she would go to the police immediately. The thought twisted into a swirling chaos of wonder.

The machine was coming swiftly, monstrosly alive. It glowed with a soft, swelling white light, and then seemed to burst into an enormous flame. A breaker of writhing tongues of blue and green and red and yellow fire stormed over that first glow, blotting it from view instantaneously. The fire sprayed and flashed like an intricately designed fountain,

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with a wild and violent beauty, a glittering blaze of unearthly glory.

And then—just like that—the flame faded. Briefly, stubborn in its fight for life, the swarming, sparkling energy clung to the metal. It was gone. The machine lay there a mass of metallic deadness, inert, motionless. The doctor appeared in the doorway.

“Sound chap,” he said, satisfaction in his tone. “Heart requires a bit of glandular adjustment to eradicate the effects of bad diet. Lungs will react swiftly to gas-immunization injections, and our surgeons should be able to patch that body up from almost anything except an atomic storm.”

Norma licked dry lips. “What are you talking about?” she asked wildly. “W—what happened to that man?”

She was aware of him staring at her blandly. His voice was cool, amused. “Why, he went out the back door.”

“He did not! He—”

She realized the uselessness of words. Cold with the confusion of her thought, she emerged from behind the counter. She brushed past him, and then, as she reached the threshold of the door leading into the rear room, her knees wobbled. She grabbed at the doorjamb for support, and knew that she didn't dare go near that machine. With an effort she said, “Will you go over there and open it?”

He did so, smiling. The door squealed slightly as it opened. When he closed it, it creaked, and the automatic lock clicked loudly. There had been no such sound. Norma felt the deepening whiteness in her cheeks. Chilled, she asked, “What is this machine?”

“Owned by the local electric company, I believe,” he an-

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swered suavely, and his voice mocked her. "We just have permission to use the room, of course."

"That's not possible," she said thickly. "Electrical companies don't have machines in the back rooms of shabby buildings."

He shrugged. "Really," he said indifferently, "this is beginning to bore me. I have already seen some of its powers, yet your mind persists in being practical after a twentieth-century fashion. I will repeat merely that you are a slave of the machine, and that it will do no good to go to the police, entirely aside from the fact that I saved you from suicide by drowning, and gratitude alone should make you realize that you owe everything to me, and nothing to the world you were prepared to desert. However, that is too much to expect. You will learn by experience."

Quite calmly, Norma walked across the room. She opened the door, and then, startled that he had made no move to stop her, turned to stare at him. He was still standing there, and he was smiling.

"You must be quite mad," she said after a moment. "Perhaps you had some idea that your little trick, whatever it was, would put the fear of the unknown into me. Let me dispel that right now. I'm going to the police this very minute."

The picture that remained in her mind as she climbed aboard the bus was of him standing there, tall and casual and terrible in his contemptuous derision. The chill of that memory slowly mutilated the steady tenor of her forced calm.

THE SENSE of nightmare vanished as she climbed off the streetcar in front of the imposing police building. Sunshine splashed vigorously on the pavement, cars honked. The life of the city swirled lustily around her, and brought a wave of returning confidence.

The answer, now that she thought of it, was simplicity itself. Hypnotism! That was what had made her see a great, black, unused engine burst into mysterious flames. Tingling with anger at the way she had been tricked, she lifted her foot to step on the curb.

The foot, instead of lifting springily, dragged. Her muscles almost refused to carry the weight. She grew aware of a man less than a dozen feet from her, staring at her with popping eyes.

"Good heavens!" he gasped audibly. "I must be seeing things."

He walked off rapidly, and the part of her thoughts that registered his odd actions tucked them away. She felt too weary, mentally and physically, even for curiosity. With faltering steps she moved across the sidewalk. It was as if something was tearing at her strength, holding her with invisible but immense forces. *The machine!* she thought, and panic blazed through her.

Will power kept her going. She reached the top of the

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steps and approached the big doors. It was then the first sick fear came that she couldn't make it; and as she strained feebly against the hard resistance of the door, the fever of dismay grew hot and terrible inside her. What had happened to her? How could a machine reach out over a distance and strike unerringly at one particular individual with such enormous devitalizing power?

A shadow leaned over her. The booming voice of a policeman who had just come up the steps was the most heartening sound she'd ever heard. "Too much for you, eh, madam? Here, I'll push that door for you."

"Thank you," she said, and her voice sounded so weak and unnatural in her own ears that a new terror flared. In a few minutes she wouldn't be able to speak above a whisper.

"A *slave of the machine*," he had said, and she knew with a clear and burning logic that if she was ever to conquer, it was now. She must get into this building. She must see someone in authority, and she must tell him . . . must . . . must . . . Somehow, she pumped strength into her brain and courage into her heart and forced her legs to carry her across the threshold into the big modern building with its mirrored ante-room and its fine marble corridors. Inside, she knew suddenly that she had reached her limit. She stood there on the hard floor and felt her whole body shaking from the enormous effort it took simply to stay erect. Her knees felt dissolved and cold, like ice turning to liquid. She grew aware that the big policeman was hovering uncertainly beside her.

"Anything I can do, mother?" he asked heartily.

Mother! she echoed mentally with a queer sense of insanity. Her mind skittered off after the word. Did he really say that,

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or had she dreamed it? Why, she wasn't a mother. She wasn't even married.

She fought the thought off. She'd have to pull herself together, or there was madness here. No chance now of getting to an inspector or an officer. The big constable must be her confidant, her hope to defeat the mighty power that was striking at her across miles of city, an incredibly evil, terrible power whose ultimate purpose she could not begin to imagine. She parted her lips to speak, and it was then she saw the mirror.

She saw a tall, thin, old, old woman standing beside the fresh-cheeked bulk of a blue-garbed policeman. It was such an abnormal trick of vision that it fascinated her. In some way, the mirror was missing her image and reflecting instead the form of an old woman who must be close behind and slightly to one side of her. She half-lifted her red-gloved hand toward the policeman to draw his attention to the distortion. Simultaneously, the red-gloved hand of the old woman in the mirror reached toward the policeman. Her own raised hand stiffened in midair; so did the hand of the old woman. Puzzled, she drew her gaze from the mirror and stared blankly at that rigidly uplifted hand. A tiny bit of wrist was visible between her glove and the sleeve of her woolen suit. Her skin wasn't really so dark as that!

Two things happened then. A tall man came softly through the door—Dr. Lell—and the big policeman's hand touched her shoulder.

"Really, madam, at your age, you shouldn't come here. A phone call would serve."

And Dr. Lell was saying, "My poor old grandmother—"

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Their voices went on, but the sense of them jangled in her brain as she jerked frantically to pull the glove off a hand wrinkled and shriveled by age. Blackness, pierced with agonized splinters of light, reached mercifully into her brain. Her very last thought was that it must have happened just before she stepped onto the curb, when the man had stared at her pop-eyed and thought himself crazy. He must have seen the change taking place.

The pain faded; the blackness turned gray, then white. She was conscious of a car engine purring, and of forward movement. She opened her eyes—and her brain reeled from a surge of awful memory.

"Don't be afraid," said Dr. Lell, and his voice was as soothing and gentle as it had been hard and satirical at the recruiting station. "You are again yourself. In fact, you are approximately ten years younger."

He removed one hand from the steering wheel and flashed a mirror before her eyes. The brief glimpse she had of her image made her grab at the silvered glass as if it were the most precious thing in all the world.

One long hungry look she took. And then her arm, holding the mirror, collapsed to the seat. Tears sticky on her cheeks, weak and sick from reaction, she lay back against the cushions. At last she said steadily, "Thanks for telling me right away. Otherwise I should have gone mad."

"That, of course, was why I told you," he said. His voice was still soft, still calm. And she felt soothed, in spite of the dark terror just past, in spite of the intellectual realization that this diabolical man used words and tones and human emotions as coldly as Pan himself piping his reed, sounding

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what stop he pleased. That quiet, deep voice went on: "You see, you are now a valuable member of our twentieth-century staff, with a vested interest in the success of our purpose. You thoroughly understand the system of rewards and punishments for good or bad service. You will have food, a roof over your head, money to spend—and eternal youth! Woman, look at your face again, look hard, and rejoice at your good fortune. Weep for those who have nothing but old age and death as their future. Look hard, I say!"

It was like gazing at a marvelous photograph out of the past, except that she had been somewhat prettier in the actuality, her face more rounded, not so sharp, more girlish. She was twenty again, but different, more mature, leaner. She heard his voice go on dispassionately, a distant background to her own thoughts, feeding, feeding at the image in the mirror.

"As you can see," Dr. Lell said, "you are not truly yourself as you were at twenty. This is because we could only manipulate the time tensions which influenced your thirty-year-old body according to the rigid mathematical laws governing the energies and forces involved. We could not undo the harm wrought these last rather prim, introverted years of your life because you have already lived them, and nothing can change that."

It came to her that he was talking to give her time to recover from the deadliest shock that had ever stabbed into a human brain. And for the first time she thought, not of herself, but of the incredible things implied by every action that had occurred, every word spoken.

"Who are you?"

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He was silent. The car twisted in and out of the clamorous traffic, and she watched his face now, that lean, strange, dark, finely chiseled, *evil* face with its glittering dark eyes. For the moment she felt no repulsion, only a gathering fascination at the way that strong chin tilted unconsciously as he said in a cold, proud, ringing voice, "We are the masters of time. We live at the farthest frontier of time itself, and all the ages belong to us. No words could begin to describe the vastness of our empire or the futility of opposing us." He stopped. Some of the fire faded from his dark eyes. His brows knit, his chin dropped, his lips clamped into a thin line, then parted as he snapped, "I hope that any ideas you have had for further opposition will yield to the logic of events and of fact. Now you know why we hire women who have no friends."

"You devil!" She half-sobbed the words.

"Ah," he said softly. "I can see you understand a woman's psychology. Two final points should clinch the argument I am trying to make. First, I can read your mind, every thought that comes into it, every emotion that moves it. And second, before establishing the machine in that particular building, we explored the years to come; and during all the time investigated, found the machine unharmed, its presence unsuspected by those in authority. Therefore, the future record is that you did nothing! I think you will agree that this is convincing."

Norma nodded dully, her mirror forgotten. "Yes," she said, "yes, I suppose it is."

Miss Norma Matheson
Calonian Recruiting Station
322 Carlton Street

Dear Norma:

I made a point of addressing the envelope of this letter to you c/o General Delivery, instead of the above address. I would not care to put you in any danger, however imaginary. I use the word imaginary deliberately for I cannot begin to describe how grieved and astounded I was to receive such a letter from the girl I once loved—it's eleven years since I proposed on graduation day, isn't it?—and how amazed I was by your questions and statements about time travel.

I might say that if you are not already mentally unbalanced, you will be shortly unless you take hold of yourself. The very fact that you were nerving yourself to commit suicide when this man—Dr. Lell—hired you from a park bench to be clerk in the recruiting station, is evidence of your hysteria. You could have gone on city relief.

I see that you have lost none of your powers of self-expression. Your letter, mad though it is in subject matter, is eminently coherent and well thought out. Your drawing of the face of Dr. Lell is a remarkable piece of work.

If it is a true resemblance, then I agree that he is definitely not, shall I say, Western. His eyes are distinctly

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slanted, like the Chinese. You show the skin to be dark, indicating a faint Negro strain. His nose is very fine and sensitive, strong in character.

This effect is incremented by his firm mouth, though those thin lips are much too arrogant—the whole effect is of an extraordinarily intelligent men, a supermongrel in appearance. Such people could probably be produced in the southeastern provinces of Asia.

I pass without comment over your description of the machine which swallows up the unsuspecting recruits. The superman has apparently not objected to answering your questions since the police station incident; and so we have a new theory of time and space.

Time, he states, is the all, the only reality. Every unfolding instant the Earth and its life, the universe and all its galaxies are re-created by the titanic energy that is time. And always it is essentially the same pattern that is re-formed, because that is the easiest course.

He makes a comparison. According to Einstein, and in this he is correct, the Earth goes around the Sun, not because there is such a force as gravitation, but because it is easier for it to go around the Sun in exactly the way it does than to hurtle off into space.

It is easier for time to re-form the same pattern of rock, the same man, the same tree, the same earth. That is all; that is the law.

The rate of reproduction is approximately ten billion a second. During the past minute, therefore, six hundred billion replicas of myself have been created; and all of them are still there, each a separate body occupying its

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own space, completely unaware of the others. Not one has been destroyed. There is no purpose; it is simply easier to let them stay there than to destroy them.

If those bodies ever met in the same space—that is, if I should go back and shake hands with my twenty-year-old self there would be a clash of similar patterns, and the interloper would be distorted out of memory and shape.

I have no criticism of this theory to make, other than that it is utterly fantastic. However, it is very interesting in the vivid picture it draws of an eternity of human beings, breeding and living and dying in the quiet eddies of the time stream, while the great current flares on ahead in a fury of incredible creation.

I am puzzled by the detailed information you are seeking—you make it almost seem real—but I give the answers for what they are worth:

1. Time travel would naturally be based on the most rigid mechanical laws.
2. It seems plausible that they would be able to investigate your future actions.
3. Dr. Lell used phrases such as "atomic storm" and "gas-immunization injections." The implication is that they are recruiting for an unimaginably great war.
4. I cannot see how the machine could act on you over a distance—unless there was some sort of radio-controlled intermediate. In your position, I would ask myself one question: Was there anything, any metal, anything, upon my person that might have been placed there by an enemy?
5. Some thoughts are so dimly held that they could not possibly be transmitted. Presumably, sharp, clear thoughts

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might be receivable. If you could keep your mind calm, as you say you did while deciding to write the letter—the letter itself is proof that you succeeded.

6. It is unwise to assume that here is greater basic intelligence; but rather greater development of the potential forces of the mind. If men ever learn to read minds, it will be because they train their innate capacity for mind reading; they will be cleverer only when new knowledge adds new techniques of training.

To become personal, I regret immeasurably having heard from you. I had a memory of a rather brave spirit, rejecting my proposal of marriage, determined to remain independent, ambitious for advancement in the important field of social services. Instead, I find a sorry ending, a soul degenerated, a mind feeding on fantasia and a sense of incredible persecution. My advice is: go to a psychiatrist before it is too late, and to that end I enclose a money order for \$200, and extend you my best wishes.

Yours in memory,
Jack Garson

At least there was no interference with her private life. No footsteps but her own ever mounted the dark, narrow flight of stairs that led to her tiny apartment. At night, after the recruiting shop closed, she walked the crowded streets. Sometimes, there was a movie that seemed to promise surcease from the deadly strain of living. Sometimes a new book on her old love, the social sciences, held her for a brief hour.

But there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could relax the burning pressure of the reality of the machine. It was

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always there, like a steel band drawn tautly around her mind.

It was crazy funny to read about the Calonian War, and the victories and the defeats, when somewhere in the future an even greater war was being fought; a war so great that all the ages were being ransacked for manpower. And men came! Dark men, blond men, young men, grim men, hard men, and veterans of other wars. The stream of them was a steady flow into that dimly lighted back room. And one day she looked up from an intent, mindless study of the pattern of the stained old counter, and there was Jack Garson!

He leaned on the counter, not much older looking after ten years, a little leaner of face perhaps, and there were tired lines around his dark eyes. While she stared at him in dumb paralysis, he said, "I had to come, of course. You were the first emotional tie I had, and also the last. When I wrote that letter, I didn't realize how strong that emotion still is. What's all this about?"

She thought with a flaming intensity: Often in the past, Dr. Lell had vanished for brief periods during the day hours. Once, she had seen him disappear into the flamboyant embrace of the light shed by the machine. Twice, she had opened the door of his room to speak to him, and found him gone.

All accidental observations! It meant he had stepped scores of times into his own world when she hadn't seen him.

Please let this be one of the times when he was away.

A second thought came, so fierce, so sharply focused that it made a pain inside her head. She must be calm. She must hold her mind away from giveaway thoughts, if it was not already ages too late.

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Her voice came into the silence like a wounded, fluttering bird, briefly stricken by shock, then galvanized by agony. "Quick! You must go—till after six. Hurry!"

Her trembling hands struck at his chest, as if by her blows she would set him running for the door. But the thrust of her strength was lost on the muscles of his breast, defeated by the way he was leaning forward. His body did not even stagger.

Through a blur, she saw he was staring down at her with a grim, set smile. His voice was hard as chipped steel as he said, "Somebody's certainly thrown a scare into you. But don't worry—I've got a revolver in my pocket. And don't think I'm alone in this. I wired the Calonian Embassy at Washington; then notified the police here of their answer. They have no knowledge of this place. The police will arrive in minutes. I came in first to see that you didn't get hurt in the shuffle. Come on, outside with you, because—"

It was Norma's eyes that must have warned him—her eyes glaring past him. She was aware of him whirling to face the dozen men who were trooping out of the back room. The men came stolidly, and she had time to see that they were short, squat, ugly creatures, more roughly built than the lean, finely molded Dr. Lell; and their faces were not so much evil as half dead with unintelligence.

A dozen pairs of eyes lighted with brief, animal-like curiosity as they stared at the scene outside the window. Then they glanced indifferently at her and at Jack Garson and the revolver he was holding so steadily. Finally, their interest fading visibly, their gazes reverted expectantly to Dr. Lell, who stood smiling laconically on the threshold of the doorway.

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"Ah, yes, Professor Garson, you have a gun, haven't you? And the police are coming. Fortunately, I have something here that may convince you of the uselessness of your puny plans."

His hand came from behind his back, where he had been hiding it. A gasp escaped from Norma as she saw that in it he held a blazing ball, a globe of furious flame, a veritable ball of fire. The thing burned there in his palm, crude and terrible in the illusion of incredible, destroying incandescence. The mockery in Dr. Lell's voice was utterly convincing, as he said in measured tones to her, "My dear Miss Matheson, I think you will agree that you will not offer further obstacles to our purpose, now that we have enlisted this valuable young man into the invincible armies of the Glorious—and as for you, Garson, I suggest you drop that gun before it burns off your hand."

His words were lost in the cry that came from Jack Garson. Amazed, Norma saw the gun fall to the floor, and lie there burning with a white hot intensity. Garson stared at the weapon; he seemed enthralled, unmindful of danger, as it shrank visibly in that intense fire. In seconds, there was no weapon, no metal; the fire blinked out. The floor where the gun had lain was not even singed.

From Dr. Lell came a barked command, oddly twisted, foreign-sounding words that nevertheless must have meant: *Grab him!*"

She looked up, abruptly sick; but there was no fight. Jack Garson did not resist as the wave of beast men flowed around him. Dr. Lell said, "So far, Professor, you haven't made a very good showing as a gallant rescuer. But I'm glad

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to see that you have already recognized the hopelessness of opposing us. It is possible that, if you remain reasonable, we will not have to destroy your personality. And now"—urgency sharpened his tone—"I had intended to wait and capture your burly policemen; but as they have not arrived at the proper moment—a tradition with them, I believe—I think we shall have to go without them. It's just as well, I suppose."

He waved his hand that held the ball of fire, and the men carrying Jack Garson literally ran into the back room. Almost instantly, they were out of sight. Norma had a brief glimpse of the machine blazing into radiance. And then there was only Dr. Lell striding forward, leaning over the bench, his eyes narrowed with menace.

"Go upstairs instantly! I don't think the police will recognize you—but if you make one false move, *he* will pay. Go quickly!"

As she hurried past the window, she saw his tall figure vanish through the door into the back room. Then she was climbing the stairs. Halfway up, her movements slowed as if she had been struck. Her mirror told the story of her punishment. The lean face of a woman of fifty-five met her stunned gaze. The disaster was complete. Cold, stiff, tearless, she waited for the police.

5

FOR GARSON, the world of the future began as a long dim corridor that he had a hard time keeping in focus with his

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unsteady vision. Heavy hands held him erect as he walked.

A wave of blur blotted out the uncertain picture.

When he could see again, the pressure of unpleasant hands was gone from him, and he was in a small room, sitting down. His first impression was that he was alone. Yet when he shook his head, and his vision cleared, he saw the desk; and behind the desk was a man.

The sight of that lean, dark, saturnine face sent a shock along his nerves, and swiftly galvanized a measure of strength back into his body. He leaned forward, his attention gathered on the man, and that was like a signal. Dr. Lell said derisively:

"I know. You've decided to co-operate. It was in your mind even before we left the presence of Norma, to whose rescue you came with such impetuous gallantry. Unfortunately, it isn't only a matter of making up *your* mind."

The sneer in the man's voice made Garson uneasy. He thought, not coherently, not even chronologically: Lucky he was here in this room. Damned lucky they hadn't sprung a complication of futuristic newness on him, and so disorganized his concentration. Now there was time to gather his thoughts, harden his mind to every conceivable development, discount surprises, and *stay alive*.

He said, "It's quite simple. You've got Norma. You've got me in your power, here in your own age. I'd be a fool to resist."

Dr. Lell regarded him almost pityingly for a moment. But the sneer was in his tone again when he spoke. "My dear Professor Garson, discussion at this point would be futile. My purpose is merely to discover if you are the type we can use

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in our laboratories. If you are not, the alternative is the de-personalizing chamber. I can say this much: men of your character type have not, on the average, been successful in passing our tests."

Every word of that was like a penetrating, edged thing. In spite of his contempt, this man was indifferent to him. There was only the test, whatever that was; and his own conscious life at stake. The important thing was to stay calm, and to continue to insist that he would co-operate. Before he could speak, Dr. Lell said in a curiously flat voice:

"We have a machine that tests human beings for degree of recalcitrancy. The Observer Machine will speak to you now!"

"What is your name?" said a voice out of the thin air beside Garson.

Garson jumped. He had a bad moment of mental unbalance. In spite of his determination, he had been caught off guard. Without his being aware of it, he had actually been in a state of extreme tension. With an effort he caught himself. He saw that Dr. Lell was smiling again, and that helped. Trembling, he leaned back in his chair; and, after a moment, he was sufficiently recovered to feel a surge of anger at the way the chill clung to his body, and at the tiny quaver in his voice as he began to answer:

"My name is John Bellmore Garson; age, thirty-three; research scientist; professor of physics at the University of—"; blood type number . . ."

There were too many questions, an exhaustive drain of detail out of his mind, the history of his life and aspirations. In the end, the truth was a cold weight inside him. His life, his

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awareness was at stake. Here was not comedy, but a precise, thorough, machinelike grilling. He must pass this test.

"Dr. Lell!" The insistent voice of the machine broke in. "What is the state of this man's mind at this moment?"

Dr. Lell said promptly, "Tremendous doubt. He is in a highly disturbed state."

Garson drew a deep breath. He felt sick at the simple way he had been demoralized. And by one new thing. Here was a machine that needed neither telephone nor radio—if it was a machine. His voice was a rasping thing in his own ears as he snapped, "My disturbed feeling can go straight to hell! I'm a reasonable person. I've made up my mind. I play ball with your organization to the limit."

The silence that followed was unnaturally long; and when at last the machine spoke, his relief lasted only until its final words penetrated. The disembodied voice said, "I am pessimistic, but bring him over for the test after the usual preliminaries."

He began to feel better as he walked behind Dr. Lell along the gray-blue hallway. In a small way, he had won. Whatever these other tests were, how could they possibly ignore his determined conviction that he must co-operate?

It was more than just staying alive. For a man of his training this world of the future offered endless opportunities. Surely, he could resign himself to his lot for the duration of this war and concentrate on the amazing immensity of a science that included time portation, fireballs, and Observer Machines that judged men with a cold, remorseless logic and spoke out of the air. He frowned. There must be some trick to that, some "telephone" in the nearby wall. Damned if he'd

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believe any force could focus sound without intermediary instruments, just as Norma couldn't have been made older that day in the police station without something mechanical.

The thought ended in a gasp of alarm. For a moment he stared, half paralyzed, down to where the floor had been. It wasn't there! Garson grabbed at the opaque wall; and then, as a low laugh came from the doctor, and the continued hardness beneath his feet told the extent of the illusion, he controlled himself, and stared in gathering fascination.

Below him was a section of a room whose limits he could not see because the opaque walls barred his vision on either side. A milling pack of men filled every available foot of space that he could see.

The ironic voice of Dr. Lell came to him, echoing his thoughts with brittle words. "Men, yes, men! Recruits from all times. Soldiers-to-be from the ages, and not yet do they know their destiny."

The voice ended, but the confusion below went on. Men squirmed, shoved, fought. Upturned faces showed puzzlement, anger, fear, amusement, and combinations of emotions. There were men in clothes that sparkled with every color of the rainbow; there were the drab-colored, the in-betweens; there were more than he could ever count.

Garson caught his flitting mind, and began to observe the scene more closely. In spite of the radical difference in the dress styles of the men who floundered down there like sheep in a slaughterhouse pen, there was a sameness about them that could only mean one thing.

"You're right!" It was that cool, taunting voice again. "They're all Americans, all from this one city now called

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Delpa. From our several thousand machines located in the various ages of Delpa, we obtain about four thousand men an hour during the daylight hours. What you see below is the main receiving room. The recruits come sliding down the time chutes, and are promptly revived and shoved in there. Naturally, at this stage there is a certain amount of disorder. But let us proceed further."

Garson scarcely noticed as the solid floor leaped into place beneath his feet. He did think that at no time had he seen Dr. Lell press a button or manipulate a control of any kind, neither when the Observer Machine spoke with ventriloquistic wizardry, nor when the floor was made invisible, nor when it again became opaque. Possibly here was some form of mental control. His mind leaped to a personal danger. What was the purpose of this preliminary? Were they showing him horror, then watching his reactions? He felt rage. What did they expect from a man brought up in a twentieth century environment? Nothing here had anything to do with his intellectual conviction that he was caught and that therefore he must cooperate. But four thousand men in one hour from one city! He felt shocked and unhappy.

"And here," said Dr. Lell, and his voice was as calm and placid as the waters of a lilly pond, "we have one of several hundred smaller rooms that make a great circle around the primary time machine. You can see the confusion has diminished."

It was an understatement, Garson thought. There was no confusion at all. Men sat on lounges and chairs. Some were looking at books. Others chatted like people in a silent movie:

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their lips moved, but no sound penetrated the illusive transparency of the floor.

"I didn't," came that calm, smooth, confident voice, "show you the intermediate stage that leads up to this clublike atmosphere. A thousand frightened men confronted with danger could make trouble. But we winnow them down, psychologically and physically, until we have one man going through that door at the end of the room—ah, there's one going now. Let us by all means follow him. You see, at this point we dispense with coddling and bring forth the naked reality."

The reality was a metal, boiler-shaped affair with a furnacelike door; and four beast humans simply grabbed the startled newcomer and thrust him feet first into the door.

The man must have screamed, for his face twisted upward, and the contorted fear, the almost idiotic gaping and working of the mouth, came at Carson like an enormous physical blow. As from a great distance, he heard Dr. Lell say, "It helps at this stage to disorganize the patient's mind, for then the de-personalizing machine can do a better job."

Abruptly, the indifference went out of his voice. In an icily curt tone, he said, "It is useless to continue this little lecture tour. To my mind, your reactions have fully justified the pessimism of the Observer. There will be no further delay."

The threat scarcely touched Carson. He was drained of emotion, of hope; and that first blaze of scientific eagerness was a dull ember. After that incredible succession of blows, he accepted the verdict of failure.

HE CAME slowly out of that defeatist mood. Damn it, there was still the fact that he was committed to this world. He'd have to harden himself, narrow his emotions down to a channel that would include only Norma and himself. If these people and their machine condemned on the basis of feelings, then he'd have to show them how stony-cold his intellect could be. Where the devil was this all-knowing machine?

The corridor ended abruptly in a plain black door exactly like all the other doors. It held no promise of anything important beyond. The others had led to rooms and other corridors. This one opened onto a street.

A street of the city of the future!

Garson stiffened. His brain soared beyond contemplation of his own danger in a burning anticipation; and then, almost instantly, began to sag. Puzzled, he stared at a scene that was different from his expectations. In a vague way, mindful of the effects of war, he had pictured devastated magnificence. But it was not like that.

Before him stretched a depressingly narrow, unsightly street. Dark, unwashed buildings towered up to hide the sun. A trickle of the squat, semihuman men and women, beastlike creatures, moved stolidly along narrow areas of pavement marked off by black lines. That seemed to be the only method by which the road was distinguished from the sidewalk. The street stretched away into distance and it was all like that, as far as he could see. Intensely disappointed, conscious even of

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disgust, Garson turned away—and grew aware that Dr. Lell was staring at him with that grim smile.

The doctor said, "What you are looking for, Professor Garson, you will not find, not in this or similar cities of the 'slaves,' but in the palace cities of the Glorious and the Planetarians —" He stopped, as if his words had brought an unpleasant thought. To Garson's amazement, his face twisted with rage. His voice was harsh as he spat, "Those damnable Planetarians! When I think what their so-called ideals are bringing the world to, I—"

The fury passed. He went on quietly, "Several hundred years ago, a mixed commission of Glorious and Planetarians surveyed the entire physical resources of the solar system. Men had made themselves practically immortal; theoretically, this body of mine will last a million years, barring major accidents. It was decided that available resources would maintain ten million men on Earth, ten million on Venus, five million on Mars, and ten million altogether on the moons of Jupiter for one million years at the then-existing high standard of consumption. Roughly, this would amount to about four million dollars a year per person by your standards of value, circa 1960.

"If in the meantime man conquered the stars, all these figures were subject to revision, though then, as now, the latter possibility was considered as remote as the stars themselves. Under examination, the problem of interstellar transport, apparently so simple, had shown itself intricate beyond the scope of our mathematics."

He paused, and Garson ventured, "We had versions of

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planned states too, but they always broke down because of human nature. That seems to have happened again."

Garson did not think of the possibility of his statement being dangerous to him. The effect of his words was startling. The lean, handsome face became like frozen marble. Harshly, Dr. Lell said:

"Do not dare to compare your primitive societies to *us*! We are the rulers of all future time, and who in the past could ever stand against us if we chose to dominate? We shall win this war, in spite of being on the verge of defeat, for we are building the greatest time-energy barrier that has ever existed. With it, we shall ensure that we win—or no one will win! We'll teach those moralistic scum of the planets to prate about man's rights and freedom of the spirit. Blast them all!"

He spoke with violent emotion. But Garson did not back down. He had his opinions, and it was clear that he could not hope to conceal them from either Dr. Lell or the Observer, so he said:

"I see an aristocratic hierarchy and a swarm of beast-men slaves. How do *they* fit into the picture, anyway? What about the resources they require? There certainly seem to be hundreds of thousands in this city alone."

The man was staring at him in rigid hostility. Garson felt a sudden chill. He hadn't expected that any reasonable statement he might make would be used against him. Dr. Lell said, too quietly, "Basically, they do not use any resources. They live in cities of stone and brick, and eat the produce of the indefatigable soil."

His voice was suddenly sharp as steel. "And now, Professor Garson, I assure you that you have already condemned

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yourself. The Observer is located in that metal building across the street because the impact of energy from the great primary time machine would affect its sensitive parts if it were any nearer. I can think of no other explanation that you require, and I certainly have no desire to remain in the company of a man who will be an automaton in half an hour. *Come along!*"

Garson did not argue. He was aware again of this monstrous city, and he thought bleakly, It's the same old, old story of the aristocrat justifying his black crime against his fellow man. Originally, there must have been deliberate physical degradation, deliberate misuse of psychology. The very name by which these people called themselves, the Glorious, seemed a heritage from days when enormous efforts must have been made to arouse hero worship in the masses.

Dr. Lell's dry voice said, "Your disapproval of our slaves is shared by the Planetarians. They also oppose our methods of depersonalizing our recruits. It is easy to see that they and you have many things in common, and if only you could escape to their side . . ."

With an effort, Garson pulled himself out of his private world. He was being led on, not skillfully. It was apparent now that every word Dr. Lell spoke had the purpose of making him reveal himself. For a moment, he was conscious of impatience; then puzzlement came. "I don't get it," he said. "What you're doing cannot be bringing forth any new facts. I'm the product of my environment. You know what that environment is, and what type of normal human being it must inevitably produce. As I've said, my whole case rests on cooperation."

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A difference in the color of the sky at the remote end of the street snatched his attention. It was a faint, abnormal, scarlet tinge like a mist, an unnatural, unearthly sunset, only it was hours yet before the sun would set. He felt himself growing taut. He said in a tense voice, "What's that?"

"That," Dr. Lell's curt, amused voice came at him, "is the war."

Garson laughed. He couldn't help it. For weeks, speculation about this gigantic war of the future had intertwined with his gathering anxiety about Norma. And now this red haze on the horizon of an otherwise undamaged city—the war!

The dark flash of laughter ended as Dr. Lell said, "It is not as amusing as you think. Most of Delpa is intact because it is protected by a local time-energy barrier. Delpa is actually under siege, fifty miles inside enemy territory." He must have caught the thought that came to Garson. He said good-humoredly, "You're right. All you have to do is get out of Delpa, and you'll be safe."

Garson said angrily, "It's a thought that would occur to any intelligent person. Don't forget you have Miss Matheson."

Dr. Lell seemed not to have heard. "The red haze you see is the point where the enemy has neutralized our energy barrier. It is there that they attack us unceasingly day and night with an inexhaustible store of robot machines.

"We are unfortunate in not having the factory capacity in Delpa to build robot weapons, so we use a similar type manned by depersonalized humans. Unfortunately, again, the cost in lives is high; one hundred percent of recruits. Every day, too, we lose about forty feet of city, and, of course, in

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the end Delpa will fall." He smiled, an almost gentle smile. Garson was amazed to notice that he seemed suddenly in high good humor as he said, "You can see how effective even a small time-energy barrier is. When we complete the great barrier two years hence, our entire front line will be literally impregnable.

"As for your co-operation argument, it's worthless. Men are braver than they think, braver than reason. But let's forget argument. In a minute, the machine will give us the truth of this matter."

7

AT FIRST SIGHT, the Observer Machine was a solid bank of flickering lights that steadied as they surveyed him. Garson waited under that many-faceted gaze, scarcely breathing. He didn't think that the wall of black metal machine and lights was very impressive, and found himself analyzing the lack. It was too big and too stationary. If it had been small and possessed of shape, however ugly, and *movement*, there might have been a suggestion of abnormal personality. Here were a myriad lights on a metal wall. As he watched, the lights began to wink again. Abruptly, they blinked out, all except a little colored design of them at the bottom right-hand corner.

Behind Garson, the door opened, and Dr. Lell came into the silent room. "I'm glad," he said quietly, "that the result

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was what it was. We are desperately in need of good assistants. To illustrate," he went on as they emerged into the brightness of the unpleasant street, "I am, for instance, in charge of that recruiting station in the twentieth century, but I'm there only when an inter-time alarm system has warned me. In the interim, I am employed on scientific duties of the second order—first order being work which, by its very nature, must continue without interruption."

They were back at the same great building from which they had come, and ahead stretched the same gray-blue, familiar corridor, only this time Dr. Lell opened the first of several doors. He bowed politely. "After you, Professor."

A fraction too late, Garson's fist flailed the air where that dark, strong face had been. They stared at each other, Garson tight-lipped, his brain like a steel bar. The superman said softly:

"You will always be that instant too slow, Professor. It is a lack you cannot remedy. You know, of course, that my little speech was designed to keep you quiet during the trip back here, and that actually you failed the test. What you do not know is that you failed startlingly, with a recalcitrancy grading of six, which is the very worst, and intelligence AA plus, almost the very best. It is too bad because we really need capable assistants. I regret—"

"Let me do the regretting!" Garson cut him off roughly. "If I remember rightly, it was just below here that your beast men were forcing a man into the depersonalizing machine. Perhaps, on the staircase going down, I can find some way of tripping you up, and knocking that little gun you're palming right out of your hand."

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There was something in the smile of the other that should have warned him, a hint of sly amusement. Not that it would have made any difference. He stepped warily through the open doorway and headed toward the gray-blue, plainly visible stairway. Behind him, the door clicked with an odd finality.

Ahead, the staircase was gone—a vanished illusion. Where it had been was a large boilerlike case with a furnace-shaped door. Half a dozen beast men came forward. A moment later they were shoving him toward that black hole of a door.

The second day, Norma took the risk. The windows of the recruiting station still showed the same blank interior; walls stripped by the police of Calonian slogans, and signs and newspaper clippings trampled all over the floor. The door of the back room was half closed, and it was too dark to see the interior.

It was noon. With drummed-up courage, Norma walked swiftly to the front entrance. The lock clicked open smoothly. She stepped inside and a moment later was pushing at the back door. The machine was not there. Great dents showed in the floor where it had stood for so many months. But it was gone as completely as Dr. Lell, as completely as the beast men and Jack Garson.

Back in her rooms, she collapsed onto the bed, and lay quivering from the dreadful nervous reaction of that swift, illegal search.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, as she sat staring at the meaningless words of a book, there was an abrupt tingling in her body. Somewhere a machine—the machine—was

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vibrating softly. She climbed to her feet, the book forgotten on the window sill where, freakishly, it had fallen. But the sound was gone. Not a tremor touched her taut nerves. The thought came: Imagination! Her tension was really beginning to affect her.

As she stood there, stiff, unable to relax, there came the thin squeal of a door opening downstairs. It was the back door that led into the vacant lot which her window overlooked. The back door opening and shutting! As she watched, fascinated, Dr. Lell stalked into view. Her awareness of him was so sharp that he must have caught it, but he did not turn. In half a minute he was gone, out of her line of vision.

On the fifth day, there was hammering downstairs, carpenters working. Several trucks came, and she heard the mumbly sound of men talking. But it was evening before she dared venture down. Through the window, then, she saw the beginning of the changes that were being wrought. The old bench had been removed. The walls were being redone. There was no new furniture yet, but a rough, unfinished sign leaned against one wall. It read: **EMPLOYMENT BUREAU—MEN WANTED.**

Men wanted! So that was it. Another trap for men! Those ravenous armies of the future must be kept glutted with fodder. The incredible war in that incredible future raged on.

She watched dumbly as Dr. Lell came out of the back room. He walked toward the front door, and she waited helplessly as he opened the door, looked in, and meticulously closed the door again. Then, a moment later, he stood beside her, as silent as she, also staring into the window. Finally, he said:

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"I see you've been admiring our new set-up."

His voice was matter-of-fact, and lacking in menace. She made no reply. He seemed to expect none, for he said almost immediately, in that same conversational tone, "It's just as well that it all happened as it did. Nothing I ever told you has been disproved. I said that investigation had shown the machine to be here several years hence. Naturally, we could not examine every day or week of that time. This little episode accordingly escaped our notice, but did not change the situation.

"As for the fact that it will be an employment bureau henceforth, that seemed natural at the period of our investigation because this Calonian War was over then."

He paused, and still there was no word that she could think to say. In the gathering darkness, he seemed to stare at her. He said, "I'm telling you all this because it would be annoying to have to train someone else for your position, and because you must realize the impossibility of further opposition. Accept your situation. We have thousands of machines similar to this, and the millions of men flowing through them are gradually turning the tide of battle in our favor. We must win; our cause is overwhelmingly just. We are Earth against all the planets; Earth protecting herself against the aggression of a combination of enemies armed as no powers in all time have ever been armed. We have the highest moral right to draw on the men of Earth of every century to defend their planet.

"However"—his voice lost its objectivity, grew colder—"if this logic does not move you, the following rewards for your good behavior should prove efficacious. We have Professor

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Garson. Unfortunately, I was unable to save his personality. Definite tests proved that he would be a recalcitrant. But there is your youth. It will be returned to you on a salary basis. Every three weeks you will become a year younger. In short, it will require two years for you to return to your version of twenty."

He finished on a note of command. "A week from today, this bureau will open for business. You will report at nine o'clock. This is your last chance. Good-by."

In the darkness, she watched his shape turn. He vanished into the gloom of the building.

She had a purpose. At first it was a tiny mind-growth that she wouldn't admit into her consciousness. But gradually embarrassment passed, and the whole world of her thought began to organize around it.

It began with the developing realization that resistance was useless. Not that she believed in the rightness of the cause of this race that called itself the Glorious, although his story of Earth against the planets had put the first doubt into her brain. As, she knew, he had intended it should. The affair was simpler than that. One woman had set herself against the men of the future. What a silly thing for one woman to do!

But there remained Jack Garson . . .

If she could get him back—poor, broken, strange creature that he must be now with his personality destroyed—somehow she would make amends for having been responsible. She thought: What madness to hope that they'd give him back to her, ever! She was the tiniest cog in a vast war machine. Nevertheless, the fact remained. She must get him back!

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The part of her brain that was educated, civilized, thought: What an elemental purpose, everything drained out of her but the basic of basics, one woman concentrating on one man.

But the purpose was there, unquenchable.

The slow months dragged, and once gone, seemed to have flashed by. One night she turned a corner and found herself on a street she hadn't visited for some time. She stopped short, her body stiffening. The street ahead was swarming with men but their presence scarcely touched her mind.

Above all that confusion of sound, above the catcalls, above the roar of streetcars and automobiles, above the totality of the cacophonous combination, there was another sound, an incredibly softer sound—the whisper of a time machine. She was miles from the employment bureau with its machine, but the tiny tremor along her nerves was unmistakable.

She pressed forward, blind to everything but the attention of the men. A man tried to put his arm through hers. She jerked free automatically. Another man simply caught her in an embrace, and for brief seconds she was subjected to a hard hug and a hard kiss. Purpose gave her strength. With scarcely an effort, she freed one arm and struck at his face. The man laughed good-humoredly, released her, but walked beside her. "Clear the way for the lady!" he shouted.

Almost magically, there was a lane; and she was at the window. There was a sign that read:

WANTED

RETURNED SOLDIERS

FOR DANGEROUS ADVENTURE

GOOD PAY!

She felt no emotion as she realized that here was another

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trap for men. In her brain she had space for only an impression. The impression was of a large square room, with a dozen men in it. Only three of the men were recruits. Of the other nine, one was an American soldier dressed in the uniform of World War 1. He sat at a desk pounding a typewriter. Over him leaned a Roman legionnaire of the time of Julius Caesar, complete with toga and short sword. Beside the door, holding back the pressing throng of men, were two Greek soldiers of the time of Pericles.

The men and the times they represented were unmistakable to her, who had taken four college years of Latin and Greek and acted in plays of both periods in the original languages. There was another man in an ancient costume, but she was unable to place him. At the moment, he was at a short counter interviewing one of the three recruits. Of the four remaining men, two wore uniforms that could have been developments of the late twentieth century. The cloth was of a light-yellow color, and both men had two pips on their shoulders. The rank of lieutenant was obviously still in style when they were commissioned.

The remaining two men were simply strange, not in face, but in the cloth of their uniforms. Their faces were of sensitive, normal construction. Their uniforms consisted of breeches and neatly fitting coats all in blue, a blue that sparkled as from a million needlelike diamond points. In a quiet, blue, intense way, they shone.

As she watched, one of the recruits was led to the back door. It was her first awareness that there was a back door. The door opened; she had the briefest glimpse of a towering machine and a flashing picture of a man who was tall and

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dark of face, and who might have been Dr. Lell. Only he wasn't. But the similarity of race was unmistakable.

The door closed, and one of the Greeks guarding the outer entrance said, "All right, two more of you fellows can come in."

There was a struggle for position, brief but violent. And then the two victors, grinning and breathing heavily from their exertion, were inside. In the silence that followed, one of the Greeks turned to the other, and said in a tangy, almost incomprehensible version of ancient Greek:

"Sparta herself never had more willing fighters. This promises to be a good night's catch."

It was the rhythm of the words, and the colloquial gusto with which they were spoken, that almost destroyed the meaning for her. After a moment, however, she made the mental translation. And now the truth was clear. The men of Time had gone back even to old Greece, probably much further back, for their recruits. And always they had used every version of bait, based on all the weaknesses and urgencies in the natures of man.

Fight for Calonia!—an appeal to idealism. *Men Wanted!*—the most basic of all appeals, work for food, happiness, security. And now, the appeal variation was for returned soldiers—*Adventure With Pay!*

Diabolical! And yet so effective that they could use as recruiting officers men who had been caught by the same propaganda. These men must be of the non-recalcitrant type, who fitted themselves willingly into the war machine of the Glorious. Traitors! Abruptly ablaze with hatred for all nonrecalci-

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trants who still possessed their personalities, she whirled away from the window.

She was thinking: Thousands of such machines. The figures had been meaningless before, but now, with just one other machine as a measurable example, the reality reared up into a monstrous thing. To think that there had been a time when she had actually set herself, singlehanded, against *them*.

There remained the problem of getting Jack Garson out of the hell of that titanic war of the future!

At night she walked the streets, because there was always the fear that in the apartment her thoughts, her driving, deadly thoughts, would be tapped. And because to be enclosed in those narrow walls above the machine that had devoured so many thousands of men was intolerable. She thought as she walked, over and over she thought of the letter Jack Garson had written her before he came in person. The letter was long destroyed, but every word was recorded on her brain. And of all the words in it, the one sentence that she kept returning to was: *In your position, I would ask myself one question: Was there anything, any metal, anything upon my person that might have been placed there?*

One day, as she was wearily unlocking the door of her apartment, the answer came. Perhaps it was the extra weariness that brought her briefly closer to basic things. Perhaps her brain was simply tired of slipping over the same blind spot. Or perhaps the months of concentration had finally earned the long-delayed result. Whatever the reason, she was putting the key back into her purse when the hard, metallic feel of it against her fingers brought realization.

The key was metal! The key—

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Desperately, she stopped the repetition. The apartment door slammed behind her, and like some terrorized creature she fled down the dark stairs into the glare of the night streets. Impossible to return until she had answered the burning question in her mind. Until she had made sure!

After half an hour, a measure of coherence came. In a drugstore, she bought an overnight case and a few fill-ins to give it weight. A pair of small pliers, a pair of tweezers—in case the pliers were too large—and a small screwdriver completed her equipment. Then she went to a hotel.

The pliers and the tweezers were all she needed. The little bulbous cap of the skeleton-type key yielded to the first hard pressure. Her trembling fingers completed the unscrewing—and she found herself staring at a tiny, glowing point, like a red-hot needle protruding from the very center of the tube that was inside the key. The needle was absorbed into an intricate design of spiderlike wires, all visible in the glow that emanated from them.

She thought uncertainly that here were probably terrific energies. She was not restrained by the possibility. But enough of the reality of the danger stayed with her to make her wrap her flimsy lace handkerchief around the tweezers. Then she touched the shining, protruding needle point. It yielded the slightest bit to her shaky touch. Nothing happened. It continued to glow.

Dissatisfied, she put the key down and stared at it. So tiny, so delicate a machine actually disturbed to the extent of one-sixteenth of an inch displacement. And nothing happened. A sudden thought sent her to the mirror. A forty-year-old face stared back at her.

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It was months since she had returned to twenty. And now, in a flash, she was forty. The touch of the tweezers against the needle's end, pushing, had aged her twenty years.

That explained what had happened at the police station. It meant that if she could only pull it back . . . She fought to steady her fingers, then applied the tweezers.

She was twenty again!

Abruptly weak, she lay down on the bed. She thought: Somewhere in the world of time and space was the still-living body of the man that had been Jack Garson. But for him she could throw this key thing into the river three blocks away, take the first train east or west or south, and the power of the machine would be futile against her. Dr. Lell would not seriously consider searching for her once she had lost herself in the swarm of humankind.

How simple it all was, really. For three long years, their power over her had been the key and its one devastating ability to age her. Or was that all? Startled, she sat up. Did they count, perhaps, on their victims believing themselves safe enough to keep the key and its magic powers of rejuvenation. She, of course, because of Jack Garson, was bound to the key as if it were still the controller, and not she. But the other incentive, now that she had thought of it, was enormous.

Her fingers shook as she picked up the key with its glowing, intricate interior. It seemed incredible that they could have allowed the precious instrument to pass so easily into the hands of an alien, when they must have known that there was a probability of discovery.

She had an idea then; she grew calm. With suddenly steady fingers, she picked up the tweezers, caught the pro-

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truding glow point of the key between the metal jaws and, making no attempt to pull or push, twisted clockwise. There was a tiny, almost inaudible click. Her body twanged like a taut violin string, and then she was falling, falling into dark, immense distance.

Out of that night, a vaguely shining body drifted toward her, a body human yet not human. There was something about the head and the shoulders, something physically different, that eluded her slow thought. And in that strange, superhuman head were eyes that blazed like jewels, and seemed literally to pierce her. The voice that came couldn't have been sound, for it was inside her brain, and it said:

"With this great moment, you enter upon your power and your purpose. I say to you, the time-energy barrier must not be completed. It will destroy all ages of the solar system. The time-energy barrier must *not* be completed!"

The body faded, and was gone. The very memory of it became a dim mind-shape. There remained the darkness, the jet-black incredible darkness.

Abruptly, she was in a material world. She seemed to be half-slumped, half-kneeling, one leg folded under her in the exact position she had occupied on the bed. Only she must have drooped there unconscious for long moments. Her knees ached with the hard, pressing pain of her position. And, beneath the silk of her stockings was, not the hotel bed, but metal

IT WAS the combination of surprise, the aloneness, and the stark fact of what was happening that unnerved Garson. He started to squirm, then he was writhing, his face twisted in agony. And then the strength of the rough, stolid hands holding him seemed to flow somehow along his nerves.

He willed himself calm. And was safe from madness!

There were no hands touching him now. He lay, face downward, on a flat hard surface; and at first there was only the darkness and a slow return of the sense of aloneness. Vague thoughts came, thoughts of Norma and the coincidence that had molded his life, seemingly so free for so many years, yet destined to find its ending here in this black execution chamber. For he was being destroyed here, though his body might live on for a few brief mindless hours. Or days. Or weeks. The time didn't matter.

The thing was fantastic. Surely, in a minute he'd wake up from this nightmare.

At first the sound was less than a whisper, a stealthy noise out of remoteness, that prodded with an odd insistence at Garson's hearing. It quivered toward him in the blackness, a rasping presence that grew louder—voices! It exploded into a monstrous existence, a billion voices clamoring at his brain, a massive blare that pressed at him. Abruptly, the ferocity of the voices dimmed. They faded into the distance, still insistent, somehow reluctant to leave, as if there was something still left unsaid.

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The end of sound came, and, briefly, there was utter silence. Then there was a click. Light flooded at him from an opening a scant foot from his head. Garson twisted and stared, fascinated. Daylight! From his vantage point, he could see the edge of a brick-and-stone building, a wretchedly old, worn building, a street of Delpa.

It was over. Incredibly, it was over. And nothing had happened. No, that wasn't it exactly. There were things in his mind, confusing things about the importance of loyalty to the Glorious, a sense of intimacy with his surroundings, pictures of machines, but nothing clear.

A harsh voice broke his amazed blur of thought. "Come on out of there, you damned slowpoke!"

A square, heavy, brutal face was peering into the open door. The face belonged to a big, square-built young man with a thick neck, a boxer's flat nose, and unpleasant blue eyes.

Garson lay quite still. It was not that he intended to disobey. His reason urged instant, automatic obedience until he could estimate the astounding things that had happened. What held him there, every muscle stiff, was a new, tremendous fact that grew, not out of the meaning of the man's words, but out of the words themselves.

The language was not English. Yet he understood every word.

The sudden squint of impatient rage that flushed the coarse face peering in at him brought life to Garson's muscles. He scrambled forward, but it was the man's big hands that actually pulled him clear and deposited him with a jarring casualness face downward on the paved road.

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He lay tense for an instant, fighting mad. Yet he dare not show his anger. Something had gone wrong. The machine hadn't worked all the way, and he must not wreck the great chance that offered. He stood up slowly, wondering how an automaton, a depersonalized human being, should look and act.

"This way, damn you," said the bullying voice from behind him. "You're in the army now." Satisfaction came into the voice. "Well, you're the last for me today. I'll get you fellows to the front, and then—"

"This way" led to a dispirited-looking group of men, about a hundred of them, who stood in two rows alongside a great, gloomy, dirty building. Carson walked stolidly to the end of the rear line, and for the first time realized how surprisingly straight the formation of men were holding their lines, in spite of their dulled appearance.

"All right, all right," bellowed the square-jawed young man. "Let's get going. You've got some hard fighting ahead of you before this day and night are over."

It struck Carson, as he stared at the leader, that this was the type they picked for nonrecalcitrant training: the ignorant, blatant, amoral, sensual pigman type. No wonder he himself had been rejected by the Observer. His eyes narrowed to slits as he watched the line of dead-alive men walk by him in perfect rhythm. He fell in step, his mind deliberately slow and ice-cold. Cautiously he explored the strange knowledge in his brain that didn't fit with his freedom.

It didn't, in fact, fit with anything that had happened. But it was there, nevertheless, a little group of sentences that kept repeating inside him: *The great time-energy barrier is being*

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built in Delpha. It must not be completed, for it will destroy the universe. Prepare to do your part in its destruction. Try to tell the Planetarians, but take no unnecessary risks. To stay alive, to tell the Planetarians, those are your immediate purposes. The time-energy barrier must not—not—"

The repetition grew monotonous. He squeezed the crazy thing out of his consciousness.

No trucks came gliding along to transport them, no street-car whispered along in some futuristic development of street-railway service. There was no machinery, nothing but those narrow avenues with their gray, sidewalkless lengths, like back alleys.

They walked to war; and it was like being in an old, dead, deserted city. Deserted except for the straggle of short, thick, slow, stolid men and women who plodded heavily by, unsmiling and without a side glance. As if they were but the pitiful, primitive remnants of a once-great race, and this city the proud monument to—*no!* Carson smiled wryly. It was foolish to feel romantic about this monstrosity of a city. Even without Dr. Lell's words as a reminder, it was evident that every narrow, dirty street, and every squalid building had been erected to be what it was.

And the sooner he got out of the place, and delivered to the Planetarians the queer, inexplicable message about the great time-energy barrier, the better off he'd be. With deliberate abruptness, he cut the thought. He'd have to be careful. If one of the Glorious should happen to be around, and accidentally catch the free thought of what was supposed to be an automaton, next time there'd be no mistake.

Tramp, tramp, tramp! The pavement echoed hollowly, like

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a ghost city. He had the tremendous thought that he was here centuries, perhaps millennia, into the future. What an awful realization to think that Norma, poor, persecuted, enslaved Norma, whose despairing face he had seen little more than an hour ago, was actually dead and buried in the dim ages of the long ago. And yet she was alive. Those six hundred billion bodies per minute of hers were somewhere in space and time, alive because the great time-energy cycle followed its casual, cosmic course of endless repetition, because life was but an accident as purposeless as the immeasurable energy that plunged grandly on into the unknown night. Tramp, tramp, on and on, and his thought was a rhythm to the march.

At last he came out of his reverie, and saw the red haze in the near distance ahead. It wouldn't take ten minutes more, and they'd be *there!* Machines glinted in the slanting rays of the warm, golden, sinking sun; machines that moved and fought! A sick thrill struck Garson, the first shock of realization that this tiny segment of the battle of the ages was real, and near, and deadly. Up there, men were dying every minute, dying miserably for a cause their depersonalized minds did not even comprehend. Up there, too, was infinitesimal victory for the Planetarians, and a small, stinging measure of defeat for the Glorious. Forty feet a day, Dr. Lell had said.

Forty feet of city conquered every day. What a murderous war of attrition. What a bankruptcy of strategy. Or was it the ultimate nullification of the role of military genius, in that each side knew and practiced every rule of military science without error? If so, then the forty feet was simply the inevi-

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table mathematical outcome of the difference in the potential in striking power of the two forces.

Forty feet a day. Wonderingly, Garson stood finally with his troop a hundred yards from that unnatural battlefield. Like a robot he stood stiffly among those robot men, but his eyes and mind fed in undiminished fascination at the deadly mechanical routine that was the offense and defense.

In the limited area that he could see, the Planetarians had seven major machines, and there were at least half a hundred tiny, swift, glittering craft as escort for each of the great-*battleships*. That was it: battleships and destroyers! Against them, the Glorious had only destroyers, a host of darting, shining, torpedo-shaped craft that hugged the ground and fought in an endlessly repeated complicated maneuver. He could guess that similar battles progressed for a hundred miles all around them.

Maneuver against maneuver; an intricate game, whose purpose and method seemed to quiver just beyond the reach of his reason. Everything revolved around the battleships. In some way they must be protected from energy guns, because no attempt was made to use energy against them. Somehow, too, cannon must be useless against them. There was none in sight, nor was there any other method of propelling solid objects at the machines. The Planetarians did not even fire at the more than a hundred troops like his own, who stood at stiff attention so close to the front, so bunched that a few superexplosive shells of the past would have smashed them all. There was nothing but the battleships and the destroyers!

The battleships moved forward and backward and forward and backward and in and out, intertwining among them-

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selves; and the destroyers of the Glorious darted in when the battleships came forward, and hung back when the battleships retreated. And always the destroyers of the Planetarians were gliding in to intercept the destroyers of the Glorious. As the sun sank in a blaze of red beyond the green hills to the west, the battleships in their farthest forward thrust were feet closer than they had been at the beginning; and the sharply delineated red line of haze, which must be the point where the time-energy barrier was neutralized, was no longer lying athwart a shattered slab of rock, but on the ground feet nearer.

That was it. The battleships somehow forced the time-energy barrier to be withdrawn. Obviously, it would only be withdrawn to save it from a worse fate, perhaps from a complete neutralization over a wide front. And so a city was being won, inch by inch, foot by foot, street by street. Only the intricate evolution of the battle, the way of that almost immeasurably slow victory, was as great a mystery as ever.

Garson thought grimly: If the message that had come into his brain in that out-of-order depersonalizing machine was true, then the final victory would not come quickly enough. Long before the forty-feet-a-day conquerers had gained the prize that was Delpa, the secret, super time-energy barrier would be completed, and the human race and all its works would be eliminated from the universe.

Night fell, but a glare of searchlights replaced the sun, and that fantastic battle raged on. No one aimed a gun or a weapon at the lights. Each side concentrated on its part of the intricate, murderous game, and troop after troop dissolved into the ravenous, incredible conflagration.

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Death came simply to the automatons. Each in turn crowded into one of the torpedo-shaped destroyers. Each individual had learned from the depersonalizing machine that the tiny, man-sized tank was operated by thought control. Highly trained in that limited sense, the human automaton flashed out to the battleline. Sometimes the end came swiftly, sometimes it was delayed, but sooner or later there was a metallic contact with the enemy, and that was all that the enemy needed. Instantly, the machine would twist and race toward the line of waiting men; the next victim would drag out the corpse and crawl in himself.

There were variations. Machines clashed with the enemy and died with their drivers, or darted aimlessly out of control. Always, swift metallic scavengers raced from both sides to capture the prize; and sometimes the Planetarians succeeded, sometimes the Glorious. Carson counted: one, two, three—less than four hundred men ahead of him. As he realized how close his turn was, cold perspiration beaded his face. Minutes, *damn it!* He had to solve the rules of this battle, or go in there without a plan, without hope.

Seven battleships, scores of destroyers to each battleship and all acting as one unit in one involved maneuver.

And, by heaven, he had a part of the answer. One unit. Not seven battleships out there, but one in the form of seven. One superneutralizing machine in its seven-dimensional maneuver. No wonder he had been unable to follow the intertwinings of those monsters with each other, the retreats, the advances. Mathematicians of the twentieth century could only solve easily problems with four equations. Here was a problem with seven, and the general staff of the Glorious could

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never be anything but a step behind in their solution. That step cost them forty feet a day.

It was his turn! He crept into the casing of the torpedo cycle, and it was smaller even than he had thought. The machine fitted him almost like a glove. Effortlessly, under his direction, it glided forward, too smoothly, too willingly, into that dazzle of searchlights, into that maelstrom of machines. One contact, he thought, one contact with an enemy meant death; and his plan of breaking through was as vague as his understanding of how a seven-dimensional maneuver actually worked.

Amazed wonder came that he was even letting himself hope.

9

NORMA BEGAN TO notice the difference, a strange, vibrant, quality within herself. She felt warmly alive, a new kind of aliveness added now to the life that had always existed within her.

Physically, she was still crouching there, her legs twisted under her, vision still blinded; and the hard pain of the metal beneath her was an unchanged pressure against the bone and muscle of her knees. But along every nerve crept that wonderful sense of wellbeing, of buoyant power. It yielded abruptly to the violence of the thought that flashed into her mind: *Where was she? What had happened? What—*

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The thought ended as an alienness intruded into it, another thought, not out of her own mind, not even directed at her, not human!

Tentacle 2731 reporting to the Observer. A warning light has flashed on the . . . (meaningless) . . . time machine. Action!

The answer came instantly, coldly: *An intruder—on top of the primary time machine. Warning from, and to, Dr. Lell's section. Tentacle 2731, go at once—destroy intruder. Action!*

There was stunning significance in those hard wisps of message and answering message, that echoed back along the corridors of her mind. The stupefying fact that she had effortlessly intercepted thought waves momentarily blotted out the immediacy of the danger. The impact of the death threat struck her suddenly.

Before that menace, even the knowledge of where she was came with a quiet unobtrusiveness, like a minor harmony in a clash of major discord. Her present location was only too obvious. By twisting the key, she had been hurtled through time to the age of the Glorious, to the primary time machine, where fantastic things called tentacles and observers were ceaselessly on guard.

If only she could see! She *must* see, or she was lost before she could begin to hope. Frantically, she strained against the blackness that lay so tight against her eyes.

She saw!

It was as simple as that. One instant, blindness. The next, the urge to see. And then, complete sight, without preliminary blue, like opening her eyes after a quiet sleep.

The simplicity of it was crowded out of her mind by a

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swirling confusion of impression. There were two swift thoughts that clung—a brief wonder at the way sight had come back to her, merely from that wish that it would, and a flashing memory of the face that had floated at her out of the blackness of time: *With this great moment you enter upon your power and your purpose!*

The picture, all connecting thoughts, fled. She saw that she was in a vast, domed room, and that she was on top of a gigantic machine. There were transparent walls. Through them, she saw a shimmering roseate fire, like a greater dome that covered the near sky and hid the night universe beyond.

The effort of staring tired her. Her gaze came down out of the sky; and back in the room, she saw that all the transparent wall that faced her was broken into a senseless pattern of small balconies, each mounting glittering, strangely menacing machinery: weapons! So many weapons, for what?

With a jar that shocked her brain, the thought disintegrated. She stared in horror at a long, thick, tube-shaped metal thing that floated up from below the rim of the time machine. A score of gleaming, insectlike facets seemed to glare at her.

Tentacle 2731—destroy the intruder!

No! It was her own desperate negation, product of pure panic. All the bravery that had made her experiment with the key in the first place collapsed before the hideous alien threat. Her mind spun. She shrank from the terrible fear that this metal would spray her with some incredible flame weapon before she could think, before she could turn to run, or even move!

Of all her pride and accumulated courage, there remained

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only enough to bring a spasm of shame at the words that burst senselessly from her lips. "No, no, you can't! Go away! Go back where you came from! Go—"

She stopped, blinked, and stared wildly. The thing was gone!

The reality of that had scarcely touched her before a crash sounded. It came from beyond and below the rim of the machine. Instinctively, Norma ran forward to peer down. The hundred foot, precipicelike slope of metal time-machine that greeted her startled gaze made her draw back with a gasp. But quickly she was creeping forward again, more cautiously, but with utter fascination to see once more what that first brief glimpse had revealed.

And there it was, on the distant floor, the tube-shaped thing. Even as she watched, hope building up in her, there came a weak impulse of alien thought:

Tentacle 2731 reporting—difficulty. Female human using Insel mind rays, power 100. No further action possible by this unit, incapacitation 74 mechanical—"

But I did say that, she thought incredulously. Her wish had brought instant return of sight. Her despairing thought had sent the tentacle crashing to mechanical ruin. Insel mind rays, power 100! Why, it meant—it could mean—

The leaping thought sagged. One of a series of doors in the wall facing her opened, and a tall man emerged hurriedly. She pressed back flat on the metal, out of sight; but it seemed to her *those familiar, sardonic eyes were staring straight up* at her. Dr. Lell's hard, superbly confident thought came then like a succession of battering blows against the crumbling structure of her hope:

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This is a repetition of the X time and space manipulation. Fortunately, the transformation center this seventeenth time is a Miss Norma Matheson, who is incapable, mathematically, of using the power at her disposal. She must be kept confused. The solution to her swift destruction is a concentration of forces of the third order, nonmechanical, according to Plan A-4. Action!

Action immediate! came the cold, distinctive thought of the Observer.

That was like death itself. She abandoned hope, and lay flat on that flat metal, her mind blank and no strength in her body.

A minute passed and that seemed an immense time. So much that the swift form of her thought changed and hardened. Fear faded like a dream, and then she had a returning awareness of that curious, wonderful sense of power. She stood up, and the way her legs trembled with the effort brought the automatic memory of the way she had regained her vision. She thought tensely: *No more physical weakness. Every muscle, every nerve, every organ of my body must function perfectly from now on and—*

A queer thrill cut the thought. It seemed to start at her toes, and sweep up, a delicious sense of warmth, like an all-over blush. And the weakness was gone.

She stood for a moment, fascinated. She hesitated to try the power too far. Yet the enormous threat stiffened her will. She thought: *No more mental weakness, no confusion; my brain must function with all the logic of which I am capable!*

What happened then was not altogether satisfactory. Her mind seemed to stop. For an instant the blankness was com-

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plete. And then a single, simple idea came into it: Danger! For her there was nothing but danger, and escape from that danger. Find the key. Go back. Get out of this world of Dr. Lell, and gain time to solve the secrets of the mighty power centralized in her.

She jerked as a lean, yard-long flame struck the metal beside her, and caromed away toward the ceiling. She watched it bounce from the ceiling, out of sight beyond the edge of the machine. It must have struck the floor, but instantly it was in sight again, leaping toward the ceiling with undiminished power. Up, down, up, down, up it went as she watched. Then, abruptly, it lost momentum and collapsed like an empty flaming sack toward the floor, out of her line of vision.

A second streamer of flame soared up from where Dr. Lell had been heading when last she saw him. It struck the ceiling and, like an elongated billiard ball, darted down—and this time she was ready for it. Her brain reached out: *Stop! Whatever the energy that drives you, it is powerless against me. Stop!*

The flame missed her right hand by inches, and soared on up to the ceiling; and from below, strong and clear and satirical, came the voice of Dr. Lell:

"My dear Miss Matheson, that's the first of the third order energies, quite beyond your control. And if you'll notice, your mind isn't as cool as you ordered it to be. The truth is that, although you have power unlimited, you can only use it when you understand the forces involved, either consciously or unconsciously. Most people have a reasonably clear picture of their bodily processes, which is why your body reacted so

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favorably, but your brain—its secrets are largely beyond your understanding. As for the key”—there was laughter in the words—“you seem to have forgotten it is geared to the time machine. The Observer’s first act was to switch it back to the twentieth century. Accordingly, I can promise you death.”

Her brain remained calm; her body steady, unaffected. No blood surged to her head. There was the barest quickening of her heartbeat. Her hands clenched with the tense knowledge that she must act faster, think faster. She thought: *If only Jack Garson were here, with his science, his swift, logical brain . . .*

Strangely then, she could feel her mind slipping out of her control, like sand between her fingers. Her body remained untroubled, untouched, but her mind was suddenly gliding down into dark depths. Terror came abruptly, as a score of flame streamers leaped into sight toward the ceiling. *Jack, Jack, help me! I need you! Oh, Jack, come—*

The slow seconds brought no answer; and the urgency of her need could brook no waiting. *Back home,*” she thought. *I’ve got to get back home, back to the twentieth century.*

Her body twanged. There was blackness, and a horrible sensation of falling. The blow of the fall was not hard, and that unaffected, almost indestructible body of hers took the shock in a flash of pain-absorbing power. She grew aware of a floor with a rug on it. A dull light directly in front of her lost its distortion and became a window.

Her own apartment! She scrambled to her feet, and then poised motionless with dismay as the old, familiar, subtle vibration thrilled its intimate way along her nerves. The machine! The machine in the room below was working! Her will

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to safety had sent her back to her own time, but her call to Jack Garson had passed unheard. And here she was, alone with only a strange, unwieldy power to help her against the gathering might of the enemy.

But that was her hope, that it was only gathering! Even Dr. Lell must have time to transport his forces. If she could get out of this building, use her power to carry her to safety, as it had already borne her from the time and space of the future. Carry her where? There was only one other place she could think of: To the hotel room from where she had launched herself with the key.

It wasn't death that came then, but a blow so hard that she was sobbing bitterly with the pain even as her mind yielded reluctantly to unconsciousness; even as she realized in stark dismay that she had struck the wall of her apartment and this power she possessed had been betrayed once again by her inability to handle it. And now Dr. Lell would have time to do everything necessary.

Blackness came.

10

THERE WAS a memory in Garson of the night, and the rushing machine that had carried him. It was a wonderful little metal thing that darted and twisted far to the left, as close to the red haze of the time-energy barrier as he dared to go.

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But not a machine had followed him. In seconds he was through the blazing gap, out of Delpa, safe from Dr. Lell.

Something had struck him then, a crushing blow . . . He came out of sleep without pain, and with no sense of urgency. Drowsily, he lay, parading before his mind the things that had happened; and the comfortable realization came that he must be safe or he wouldn't be like this. There were things to do, of course. He must transmit the information to the Planetarians that they must conquer Delpa more swiftly, that final victory waited nowhere but in Delpa. And then, somehow, he must persuade them to let him return to Norma.

For a while he lay peacefully, his eyes open, gazing thoughtfully at a gray ceiling. From nearby, a man's voice said:

"There is no use expecting it."

Garson turned his head, his first alert movement. A row of hospital-like cots stretched there, other rows beyond. From the nearest bed, a pair of fine, bright, cheerful eyes stared at him. The man lay with his head crotched in a bunched, badly rumpled pillow. He said:

"Expecting to feel surprised, I mean. You won't. You've been conditioned into recovering on a gradual scale, no excitement, no hysteria, nothing that will upset you. The doctors, though Planetarian trained, are all men of the past, and up to a day ago, they pronounced you—"

The man paused. His brown eyes darkened in a frown, then he smiled with an equally amazing grimness. "I nearly said too much there. Actually, you may be strong enough, without getting yourself into a nervous state. Here's a preliminary warning: Toughen your mind for bad news."

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Garson had only the dimmest curiosity, and no sense of alarm at all. After what Dr. Lell had said directly and by implication of the Planetarians, no danger here could surpass what he had already been through. The only emotion he could sense within himself had to do with his double purpose of rescuing Norma from the recruiting station. He said aloud, "If I should be asleep the next time a doctor or Planetarian comes in, will you waken me? I've got something to tell them."

The man smiled mirthlessly. He was a personable looking young fellow around thirty. His reaction made Garson frown. His voice was sharp as he asked, "What's the matter?"

The stranger shook his head half-pityingly. "I've been twenty-seven days in this age," he said, "and I've never seen a Planetarian. As for telling anyone on the Planetarian side anything, I've already told you to expect bad news. I know you have a message to deliver. I even know from Dra Derrel what it is, but don't ask me how he found out. All I can say is, you'll have to forget about delivering any message to anyone. Incidentally, my name is Mairphy—Edard Mairphy."

Garson was not interested in names or the mystery of how they knew his message. He was worried, however. Every word this gentle-faced, gentle-voiced young man had spoken was packed with tremendous implications. He stared at Mairphy, but there was only the frank, open face, the friendly, half-grim smile, the careless wisp of bright brown hair coming down over one temple—nothing at all of danger. Besides, where could any danger be coming from? From the Planetarians?

That was ridiculous. Regardless of their shortcomings, the Planetarians were the one race of this "time" that must be

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supported. They might have curious, even difficult habits, but the other side was evil almost beyond imagination. Between them, there was no question of choice.

His course was simple. As soon as he was allowed to get up—and he felt perfectly well now—he would set out to make contact with a Planetarian. The whole affair was beginning to show unpleasant, puzzling aspects, but nothing serious. He grew aware of Mairphy's voice:

"The warning is all I'll say on that subject for the time being. There's something else, though. Do you think you'll be able to get up in an hour? I mean, do you feel all right?"

Garson nodded, puzzled. "I think so. Why?"

"We'll be passing the moon about then, and I understand it's a sight worth seeing."

"What?"

Mairphy stared at him contritely. He said slowly, "I forgot. I was so busy not telling you about our main danger, it didn't occur to me that you were unconscious when we started." He shrugged. "Well, we're on our way to Venus; and even if there was nothing else, the cards would be stacked against you by that fact alone. There are no Planetarians aboard this ship, only human beings out of the past and tentacles of the Observer. There's not a chance in the world of you talking to any of them because—" He stopped, then, "There, I nearly did it again. I'll let out the truth yet, before you ought to hear it."

Garson paid scant attention. The shock wouldn't go away. He lay in a daze of wonder, overwhelmed by the incredible fact that he was in space. *In space!* He felt outmaneuvered.

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Even the events he knew about would soon be a quarter of a million miles behind him.

The idea grew shocking. He sat rigidly, awkwardly, in the bed; and finally, in a choked voice, he said, "How long will it take to get to Venus?"

"Ten days, I believe."

Very cautiously, Garson allowed the figures to penetrate. Hope came again. It wasn't so bad as his first despairing thought had pictured it. Ten days to get there, ten days to persuade someone to let a Planetarian have a glimpse of his mind, ten days to get back to Earth. A month! He frowned. That wasn't so good. Wars had been lost, great empires collapsed in less time than that. Yet, how could he deliver his message on a Venus-bound spaceship? Courses of initial action suggested themselves, but one was clear.

He said in a troubled tone, "If I were back where I came from, at this point I would try to see the captain of the ship. But you've made me doubt that normal procedures apply on a Planetarian spaceliner. Frankly, what are my chances?"

He saw that the young man was grim. "Exactly none," Mairphy replied. "This is no joke, Garson. As I said before, Derrel knows and is interested in your message—don't ask me how or what or when. He was a political leader in his own age, and he's a marvel at mechanics, but, according to him, he knows only the normal, everyday things of his life. You'll have to get used to the idea of being in with a bunch of men from past ages, some queer ducks among them, Derrel being the queerest of them all. But forget that. Just remember that you're on a spaceship in an age so far ahead of your

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own that there's not even a record of your time in the history books. Think hard about that!"

Garson thought, and he lay back, breathlessly still, dazzled once again by his strange environment, straining for impression. But there was no sense of movement, no abnormality at all. The world was quiet. The room seemed like an unusually large dormitory in a hospital. After a moment of tenseness, he allowed his body to relax, and the full, rich flood of thought to flow in. In that eager tide, the danger of which Mairphy had told him was like a figment of imagination, a shadow in remoteness. There was only the wonder, only Venus, and this silent, swift-plunging spaceship.

Venus! He let the word roll around in his mind, and it was exciting, intellectual fare, immensely stimulating to a mind shaped and trained as was his. Venus? For ages the dreams of men had reached into the skies, immeasurably fascinated by the mind-staggering fact of other worlds as vast as their own; continents, seas, rivers, treasure beyond estimate. And now for him there was to be reality. Before that fact, other urgencies faded. Norma must be rescued, of course; the strange message delivered. But if it was to be his destiny to remain in this world until the end of the war, then he could ask nothing more of those years than this glowing sense of adventure, this shining opportunity to learn and see and know in a scientist's heaven.

He grew aware that Mairphy was speaking. "You know"—the young man's voice was thoughtful—"it's just possible that it might be a good idea if you did try to see the captain. I'll have to speak to Derrel before any further action is taken but—"

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Garson sighed. He felt suddenly exhausted, mentally and physically, by the twisting course of events. "Look," he said wearily, "a minute ago you stated it was absolutely impossible for me to see the captain; now it seems it might be a good idea and so the impossible becomes possible."

A sound interrupted his words, a curious hissing sound that seemed to press at him. With a start he saw that men were climbing out of bed, groups that had been standing in quiet conversation were breaking up. In a minute, except for some three dozen who had not stirred from their beds, the manpower of that great room had emptied through a far door. As the door closed, Mairphy's tense voice stabbed at him:

"Quick! Help me out of bed and into my wheel chair. Damn this game leg of mine, but I've got to see Derrel. The attack must not take place until you've tried to see the captain. Quick, man!"

"Attack!" Garson began, then with an effort, caught himself. Forcing coolness through the shock that was gathering inside him, he lay back. He said in a voice that trembled, "I'll help you up when you tell me what all this is about. Start talking. Fast!"

Mairphy sighed. "The whole thing's really very simple. They herded together a bunch of skeptics—that's us; it means simply men who know they are in another age, and aren't superstitious about it, always potentially explosive, as the Planetarians well understood. But what they didn't realize was that Derrel was what he was. The mutiny was only partially successful. We got the control room, the engine room, but only one of the arsenals. The worst thing was that one of the tentacles escaped our trap, which means that the

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Observer Machine has been informed and that battleships have already been dispatched after us. Unless we gain full control fast, we'll be crushed; and the whole bunch of us will be executed out of hand."

He continued, with a bleak smile, "That includes you and every person in this room, sick or innocent. The Planetarians leave the details of running their world in the hands of a monster machine called the Observer; and the Observer is mercilessly logical." He shrugged, finished, "That's what I meant by bad news. All of us are committed to victory or death. And now, quick! Help me get to Derrel and stop this attack!"

Garson's mind was a swollen, painful thing with the questions that quivered there: skeptics, tentacles, mutiny . . . It was not until after Mairphy's power-driven wheel chair had vanished through the same door that had swallowed the men, that he realized how weary he was. He lay down on the bed, and there didn't seem to be a drop of emotion in him. He was thinking, a slow, flat, gray thought, of the part of that message that had come to him in the depersonalizing machine, the solemn admonishment: *Take no unnecessary risks; stay alive!*

What a chance!

THE MOON floated majestically against the backdrop of blank space, a great globe of light that grew and grew. He looked

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eagerly down at the side hidden from Earth and only vaguely photographed in his own day and age. Seen now, from space, he had a view of the relatively featureless surface. The Sea of Moscow and the great Soviet Mountains were still the most conspicuous objects, but in the central mass at this near distance, everything seemed rough and jagged, uneven.

For an hour the moon clung to size, but at last it began to retreat into distance. It was the gathering immensity of that distance that brought to Garson a sudden dark consciousness that he was again a tiny pawn in this gigantic struggle of gigantic forces.

He watched until the glowing sphere of moon was a shadowy pea-sized light half-hidden by the dominating ball of fire that was Earth. His immediate purpose was already a waxing shape in his mind, as he turned to stare down at Mairphy in his wheel chair. It struck him there were lines of fatigue around the other's eyes. He said, "Now that the attack has been called off, I'd like to meet this mysterious Derrel. After which you'd better go straight to sleep."

The younger man drooped. "Help me to my bed, will you?"

From the bed, Mairphy smiled wanly. "Apparently, I'm the invalid, not you. The paralyzer certainly did you no real harm, but the energy chopper made a pretty job of my right leg. By the way, I'll introduce you to Derrel when I wake up."

Mairphy's slow, deep breathing came as a shock to Garson. He felt deserted, at a loss for action, and finally annoyed at the way he had come to depend on the company of another man. For a while, he wandered around the room, half aimlessly, half in search of the extraordinary Derrel. But gradu-

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ally his mind was drawn from that undetermined purpose. He became aware of the men from other times and places.

They swaggered, did these boys. When they stood, they leaned with casual grace, thumbs nonchalantly tucked into belts or into the armpits of strangely designed vests. Not more than half a dozen of that bold, vigorous-looking crew seemed to be the studious type. Here were men of the past, adventurers, soldiers of fortune, who had mutinied as easily as, under slightly different circumstances, they might have decided to fight for, instead of against, their captors.

Was it bad psychology on the part of the Planetarians? That seemed impossible because they were superbly skillful in the art. The explanation, of course, was that intelligence and ability as great as their own, or nearly as great, had entered the scene unknown to them, and easily duped the men of the past who operated the spaceship.

Derrell

It brought a vivid awareness of the immense vitality of the life that had spawned over Earth through the ages. Here were men come full grown out of their own times, loving life, yet by their casual, desperate attempt at mutiny proving that they were not afraid of death.

One man was the responsible, the activating force.

Three times Garson was sure that he had picked out Derrel, but each time he changed his mind before actually approaching the stranger. It was only gradually that he grew aware of a lank man. The first coherent picture he had was of a tall, somewhat awkward looking individual with a long face that was hollow-cheeked. The man was dressed in a

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gray shirt and gray trousers. Except for a look of cleanness about him, he could have stepped out of a farmhouse.

The man half stood, half leaned, in an ungraceful way against the side of one of the hospital-type beds, and he said nothing. Yet, somehow, he was the center of the group that surrounded him. The leader! After a moment Garson saw that the other was surreptitiously studying him. That was all he needed. He surveyed the man openly. Before his searching gaze, the deceptive, farmerish appearance of the other altered.

The hollow cheeks showed suddenly as a natural screen that distorted the almost abnormal strength of that face. The line of jaw ceased to be merely framework supporting the chin, showed instead in all its grim hardness, like the blunt edge of an anvil. The nose was strong and sharp, the face as a whole long and thin.

Garson's examination was interrupted. Somebody addressed the man as Mr. Derrel; and it was as if Derrel had been waiting for the words as for a signal. He stepped forward. He said in the calmest voice Garson had ever heard, "Professor Garson, do you mind if I speak to you"—he motioned forcefully yet vaguely—"over there?"

Garson was amazed to find himself hesitating. For nearly an hour he had had the purpose of finding this man, but now he realized he was reluctant to yield to the leadership of a stranger. It struck him sharply that even to agree to Derrel's simple request was to place himself, somehow, subtly under the man's domination.

Their eyes met, his own hard with thought, Derrel's at first expressionless, then smiling. The smile touched his face

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and lighted it in a most charming fashion. His entire countenance seemed to change. Briefly, the man's personality was so attractive that Garson's resistance seemed immature, even childish.

Garson was startled to hear himself say, "Why, yes. What is it you wish?"

The answer was cool and of tremendous import. "You have received a warning message, but you need look no further for its source. I am Dra Derrel of the Wizard race of Bor. My people are fighting under great difficulties to save a universe threatened by a war whose weapons are based on the time-energy cycle itself."

"Just a minute!" Garson's voice was harsh in his own ears. "Are you trying to tell me your people sent that message?"

"I am!" The man's face was almost gray-steel in color. "And to explain that our position is now so dangerous that your own suggestion that you see Captain Larradin has become the most important necessity and the best plan."

Strangely, it was that on which his mind fastened, not the revelation, but the mind picture of himself leaving the placid security of this room, delivering himself into the ruthless clutches of men from some other, more merciless past than his own—and to tentacles. Like a shadow overhanging every other emotion, he realized that the law of averages would not permit him to face death again without receiving it.

Slowly, the other thought—Derrel's revelation—began to intrude. He examined it, at first half puzzled that it continued to exist in his mind. Somehow, it wasn't really adequate, and certainly far from satisfactory as an explanation of all that had happened.

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A message delivered into the black narrowness of a Glorious depersonalizing machine, hurtled across distance, through a web of Glorious defenses. From Derrell

Garson frowned, his dissatisfaction growing. He stared at the man from slitted eyes; and saw that the other was standing in that peculiar easy-awkward posture of his, gazing at him coolly as if—the impression was a distinct one—as if waiting patiently for his considered reaction. That was reassuring, but it was far from being enough.

Garson said, "I can see I've got to be frank, or this thing is going to be all wrong. My angle goes like this: I've been building a picture in my mind, an impossible picture I can see now, of beings with tremendous powers. I thought of them as possibly acting from the future of this future but, whatever their origin, I had confidence they were superhuman and super-Glorious."

He stopped because the long-faced man was smiling in a twisted fashion. "And now," Derrell said wryly, "the reality does not come up to your expectations. An ordinary man stands before you, and your dreams of god-power interfering in the affairs of men becomes what it always was basically: wishful thinking."

"And in its place is what?" Garson questioned coolly.

Derrell took up the words steadily. "In its place is a man who failed to take over a spaceship, and now faces death."

Garson parted his lips to speak, then closed them again, puzzled. There was nothing so far but apparent honesty. Still, confession was far from being satisfactory explanation.

Derrell, his voice rich with the first hint of passion he had shown, said, "I'm not sure it was such a great failure. I was

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one man manipulating strangers who had no reason to fight—many of them invalids—and yet I won a partial success against the highly trained crew of a completely mechanized space cruiser, a crew supported by no less than four tentacles of this omniscient Observer.”

Stripped as the account was, it brought a vivid flash of what the reality of that fight must have been. Flesh-and-blood men charging forward in the face of energy weapons, dealing and receiving desperate wounds, overwhelming the alert and adequate staff of an armored ship, and four tentacles, whatever they were. Tentacle—a potent, ugly word with inhuman implications.

And still the picture was not satisfactory. “If you’re going to use logic on this,” Garson said at last, slowly, “you’ll have to put up with my brand for another minute. Why did you go in for mutiny in the first place under such difficult conditions?”

The man’s eyes flashed with contemptuous fire. When he spoke, his voice was thick with emotion. “Can you reasonably ask for more than the reality, which is that our position is desperate because we took risks? We took risks because”—he paused, as if gathering himself; then he continued tensely—“because I am of the race of Wizards, and we were masters of the Earth of our time because we were bold. As was ever the way with Wizards, I chose the difficult, the dangerous path; and I tell you that victory, with all that it means, is not yet beyond our grasp.”

In the queerest fashion, the glowing voice died. An intent expression crept into the man’s eyes. He tilted his head, as if listening for a remote sound. Garson shook the impression

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out of his mind, and returned to the thought that had been gathering while the other was speaking. He said coolly:

"Unfortunately, for all that emotion, I was trained to be a scientist, and I never learned to accept justification as a substitute for explanation."

It was his turn to fall silent. With startled gaze he watched the tall, gawky figure stride at top speed along the wall. The Wizard man halted as swiftly as he had started, but now his fingers were working with frantic speed at a section of the wall. As Garson came up, the wall slid free; and Derrel half-lowered, half-dropped it to the floor. In the hollow space revealed, wires gleamed; and a silver, shining glow-point showed. Unhesitatingly, Derrel grasped at the white-hot looking thing, and jerked. There was a faint flash of fire, and when his hand came away the glow was gone.

Derrel stared at Garson grimly. "Those seeming wires are not wires at all, but a pure energy web, an electron mold that, over a period of about an hour, can mold a weapon where nothing existed before. Tentacles can focus that type of mold anywhere, and the mold itself is indestructible. But up to a certain stage the molded thing can be destroyed."

Garson braced himself instinctively, as the other faced him squarely. Derrel said, "You can see that without my special ability to sense energy formations, there would have been tragedy."

"Without you," Garson interjected, "there would have been no mutiny. I'm sorry, but I've got the kind of mind that worries about explanations."

Derrel gazed at him without hostility. He said finally, earnestly, "I know your doubts, but you can see for yourself

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that I must go around examining our rather large territory for further electron-mold manifestations. Briefly, we Wizards are a race of the past who developed a science that enabled us to tap the time-ways of the Glorious, though we cannot yet build a time machine. In many ways, we are the superiors of both the Planetarians and the Glorious. Our mathematics showed us that the time-energy cycle could not stand strains beyond a certain point. Accordingly, we have taken, and are taking every possible action to save the universe, the first and most important necessity being that of establishing a base of operations, preferably a spaceship." He finished quietly, "For the rest, for the time being you must have faith. You must overcome your doubts, and go to see the captain. We must win this ship before we are overwhelmed. I leave you now to think it over."

He whirled and strode off; and behind him he left partial conviction, mostly disbelief, but—Garson thought wryly—no facts. What a vague basis on which to risk the only life he had!

He found himself straining for sounds, but there was nothing except the idle conversation of the other men. The ship itself was quiet. It seemed to be suspended in this remote coign of the universe; and it at least was not restless. It flashed on in tireless, stupendous flight, but basically it was unhurried, isolated from mechanical necessities, knowing neither doubt nor hope, nor fear nor courage.

Doubt! His brain was an opaque mass flecked with the moving lights of thoughts, heavy with the gathering pall of his suspicion, knowing finally only one certainty: With so much at stake, he must find out more about the so-called

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Wizards of Bor. It would be foolish to make some move against the Planetarians, the hope of this war, on the glib say-so of anyone! But what to do? Where to find out?

The urgent minutes fled. There was the black, incredible vista of space. No answers offered there. There was lying in bed and staring at the gray ceiling; that was worse. Finally, there was the discovery of the library in a room adjoining the long dormitory; and that held such an immense promise that, for a brief hour, even the sense of urgency faded out of him.

Only gradually did he become aware that the books were a carefully selected collection. At any other time, every word of every page would have held him in thrall, but not now. For a while, with grim good humor, he examined volume after volume to verify his discovery. At last, weary with frustration, he returned to his bed. He found Mairphy awake.

His mind leaped; then he hesitated. It was possible he would have to approach the subject of Derrel warily. He said finally, "I suppose you've been through the library."

Mairphy shook his head, eyes slightly sardonic. "Not that one. But on the basis of the two I have seen, I'll venture to guess they're elementary scientific books, travel books about planets, but no histories, and nowhere is there a reference to what year this is. They're not even letting us skeptics know that."

Carson cut in almost harshly, "These Planetarians are not such good angles as I thought. In an entirely different, perhaps cleverer way, this ship is organized to press us into their mold just as the Glorious used the deperson—"

He stopped, startled by the hard tenor of his thoughts. At

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this rate he'd soon work himself into an anti-Planetarian fury. Deliberately, he tightened his mind. His job was not to hate, but to ask careful questions about Derrel.

He parted his lips, but before he could speak, Mairphy said, "Oh, the Planetarians are all right. If we hadn't gone in for this damned mutiny, we'd have been treated all right in the long run, provided we kept our mouths shut and conformed."

Garson's mind wrenched itself from thought of Darrel. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Mairphy laughed mirthlessly. "We're the skeptics who, in a general way, know where we are. The great majority of recruits don't know anything except that it's a strange place. For psychological reasons, they've got to feel that they're in perfectly rational surroundings. Their own superstitions provide the solutions. An army of ancient Greeks think they're fighting on the side of Jupiter in the battle of the gods. Religious folk from about four hundred different ages think for reasons of their own that everything is as it should be. The Lerdite Moralists from the thirtieth century believe this is the war of the Great Machine to control its dissident elements. And the Nelorian Dissenters of the year 7643 to 7699—what's the matter?"

Garson couldn't help it. The shock was physical rather than mental. He hadn't, somehow, thought of it when Derrel talked of the Wizards of Bor, but now he was shaking. His nerves quivered from that casual, stunning array of words. He said finally, "Don't mind me. It's those dates you've been handing out. I suppose it's really silly to think of time as be-

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ing a past and a future. It's all these, spread out, six hundred billion Earths and universes created every minute."

He drew a deep breath. Damn it, he'd stalled long enough. Any minute, Derrel would be coming back. He said stiffly, "What about the Wizards of Bor? I heard somebody use the phrase, and it intrigued me."

"Interesting race," Mairphy commented, and Garson sighed with relief. The man suspected no ulterior motive. He waited tensely as Mairphy went on: "The Wizards discovered some connection between sex and the mind which gave them super-intellect, including mental telepathy. Ruled the Earth for about three hundred years, just before the age of Endless Peace set in. Power politics and all that; violence, great on mechanics, built the first true spaceship which, according to description, was as good as any that has ever existed since. Most of their secrets were lost. Those that weren't became the property of a special priest clique whose final destruction is a long story."

He paused, frowning thoughtfully, while Garson wondered bleakly how he ought to be taking all this. So far, Derrel's story was substantiated practically word for word. Mairphy's voice cut into his indecision. "There's a pretty story about how the spaceship was invented. In their final struggle for power, a defeated leader, mad with anxiety about his beautiful wife who had been taken as a mistress by the conqueror, disappeared, returned with the ship, got his wife and his power back; and the Derrel dynasty ruled for a hundred years after that."

"Derrell" Garson said. "The Derrel dynasty!"

The echo of the shock yielded to time and familiarity, and

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died. They talked about it in low tones; and their hushed baritones formed a queer, deep-throated background to the measured beat of Garson's thoughts.

He stepped back, finally, as Mairphy eagerly called other men. With bleak detachment, he listened while Mairphy's voice recast itself over and over into the same shape, the same story, though the words and even the tone varied with each telling. Always, however, the reaction of the men was the same—joy! Joy at the certainty of victory! And what did it matter what age they went to afterward?

Garson grew abruptly aware that Mairphy was staring at him sharply. Mairphy said, "What's the matter?"

He felt the weight of other eyes on him as he shrugged and said, "All this offers little hope for me. History records that we won this ship. But I have still to confront the captain, and history is silent as to whether I lived or died. Frankly, I consider the message that I received in the Glorious depersonalizing machine more important than ever, and accordingly my life is of more importance than that of anyone else on this ship. I repeat, our only certainty is that Derrel escaped with the spaceship. But who else lived, we don't know. Derrel—"

"Yes?" said the calm voice of Derrel behind him. "Yes, Professor Garson?"

Garson turned slowly. He had no fixed plan; there was the vaguest intention to undermine Derrel's position, and that made him stress the uncertainty of any of the men escaping. But it wasn't a plan, because there was the unalterable fact that the ship had gotten away. Derrel had won.

No plan. The only factors in his situation were his own

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tremendous necessities and the inimical environment in which they existed. For a long moment, he stared at the gangling body, studied the faint triumph that gleamed in the abnormally long yet distinctive face of the Wizard man. Garson said, "You can read minds. So it's unnecessary to tell you what's going on. What are your intentions?"

Derrel smiled, the glowing, magnetic smile that Garson had already seen. His agate eyes shone as he surveyed the circle of men; then he began to speak in a strong, resonant voice. There was command in that voice, and a rich, powerful personality behind it, the voice of a man who had won.

"My first intention is to tell everyone here that we are going to an age that is a treasure house of spoils for bold men. Women, palaces, wealth, power for every man who follows me to the death. You know yourself what a damned barren world we're in now. No women, never anything for us but the prospect of facing death fighting the Glorious still entrenched on Venus or Earth. And a damned bunch of moralists fighting a war to the finish over some queer idea that men ought or ought not to have birth control. Are you with me?"

It was a stirring, a ringing appeal to basic impulses, and the answer could not have been more satisfactory. A roar of voices, cheers; and finally, "What are we waiting for? Let's get going!"

The faint triumph deepened on Derrel's face as he turned back to Garson. He said softly, "I'm sorry I lied to you, Professor, but it never occurred to me that Mairphy or anybody aboard would know my history. I told you what I did because I had read in your mind some of the purposes that

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moved your actions. Naturally, I applied the first law of persuasion, and encouraged your hopes and desires."

Garson smiled grimly. The little speech Derrel had just given to the men was a supreme example of the encouragement of hopes and desires, obviously opportunistic, insincere and reliable only if it served the other's future purposes.

He saw that Derrel was staring at him, and he said, "You know what's in my mind. Perhaps you can give me some of that easy encouragement you dispense. But remember, it's got to be based on logic. That includes convincing me that, if I go to the captain, it is to your self-interest to set me down near a Planetarian stronghold, and that furthermore—"

The words, all the air in his lungs, hissed out of his body. There was a hideous sense of pressure. He was jerked off his feet, and he had the flashing, uncomprehending version of two beds passing by beneath him. Then he was falling.

Instinctively, he put out his hand, and took the desperate blow of the crash onto a third bed. He sprawled there, stunned, dismayed, but unhurt and safe.

Safe from what? He clawed himself erect, and stood swaying, watching other men pick themselves up, becoming aware for the first time of groans and cries of pain. A voice exploded into the room from some unseen source:

"Control room speaking! Derrel—the damndest thing has happened. A minute ago, we were thirty million miles from Venus. Now, the planet's just ahead, less than two million miles, plainly visible. What's happened?"

Garson saw Derrel then. The man was lying on his back on the floor, his eyes open, an intent expression on his face. The Wizard man waved aside his extended hands.

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"Wait!" Derrel said sharply. "The tentacle aboard this ship has just reported to the Observer on Venus, and is receiving a reply, an explanation of what happened. I'm trying to get it."

His voice changed, became a monotone. "The seventeenth X space and time manipulations . . . taking place somewhere in the future . . . several years from now. Your spaceship either by accident or design caught in the eddying current in the resulting time storm. Still no clue to the origin of the mighty powers being exercised. That is all . . . except that battleships are on the way from Venus to help you."

Derrel stood up; he said quietly, "About what you were saying, Garson, there is no method by which I can prove that I will do anything for you. History records that I lived out my full span of life. Therefore, no self-interest, no danger to the universe, can affect my existence in the past. You'll have to act on the chance that the opportunity offers for us to give you assistance later, and there's no other guarantee I can give."

That was at least straightforward. Of course, to an opportunist, even truth was but a means to an end, a means of lulling suspicion. There remained the hard fact that *he* must take the risks. He said, "Give me five minutes to think it over. You believe, I can see, that I will go."

Derrel nodded. "Your mind is beginning to accept the idea."

There was no premonition in Garson of the fantastic thing that was going to happen. He thought, a gray, cold thought: So he was going! In five minutes.

HE STOOD finally at the wall visiplat, staring out at the bur-nished immensity of Venus. The planet, already vast, was expanding visibly, like a balloon being blown up. Only it didn't stop expanding, and, unlike an overgrown balloon, it didn't burst.

The tight silence was broken by the tallest of the three handsome Ganellians. The man's words echoed, not Garson's thoughts, but the tenor, the dark mood of them. "So much beauty proves once again that war is the most completely fu-tile act of this 'future,' there are people who know who won this war; and they're doing nothing—damn them!"

Garson's impulse was to say something, to add once more his own few facts to that fascinating subject. But instead he held his thought hard on the reality of what he must do in a minute.

Besides, Mairphy had described the Ganellians as emo-tional weaklings who had concentrated on beauty, and with whom it was useless to discuss anything. It was true, of course, that he himself had given quite a few passable dis-plays of emotionalism.

The thought ended as Mairphy said impatiently, "We've discussed all that before, and we're agreed that either the people of the future do not exist at all—which means the universe was blown up in due course by the Glorious energy barrier—or, if the people of the future exist, they're simply

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older versions of the million-year-old bodies of the Planetarians or Glorious. If they exist, then the universe was not destroyed, so why should they interfere in the war?

"Finally, we're agreed that it's impossible that the people of the future, whatever their form, are responsible for the message that came through to Professor Garson. If they can get through a message at all, why pick Garson? Why not contact the Planetarians direct? Or even warn the Glorious of the danger!"

Garson said, "Derrel, what is your plan of attack?"

The reply was cool. "I'm not going to tell you that. Reason: at close range a tentacle can read any unwary mind. I want you to concentrate on the thought that your purpose is above-board; don't even think of an attack in connection with it. Wait—don't reply! I'm going to speak to Captain Larradin!"

"What . . ." Garson began, and stopped.

The Wizard man's eyes were closed, his body rigid. He said, half to Garson, half to the others, "A lot of this stuff here works by mind control." His voice changed. "Captain Larradin!"

There was a tense silence; then a hard voice literally spat into the room, "Yes!"

Derrel said, "We have an important communication to make. Professor Garson, one of the men who was unconscious when—"

"I know the one you mean," interrupted that curt voice. "Get on with your communication."

Derrel said, "Professor Garson has just become conscious and he has the answer to the phenomena that carried this spaceship thirty million miles on thirty seconds. He feels that

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he must see you immediately and communicate his message to the Planetarians at once."

There was a burst of cold laughter. "What fools we'd be to let any of you come here until after the battleships arrive! And that's my answer: He'll have to wait till the battleships arrive."

"His message," said Derrel, "cannot wait. He's coming down now, alone."

"He will be shot on sight."

"I can well imagine," Derrel said scathingly, "what the Planetarians will do to you if he is shot. This has nothing to do with the rest of us. He's coming because he must deliver that message. That is all."

Before Garson could speak, Mairphy, said in a distinct voice, "I'm opposed to it. I admit I accepted the plan earlier, but I couldn't favor it under such circumstances."

The Wizard man whirled on him. His voice was a vibrant force as he raged, "That was a stab in the back to all of us. Here is a man trying to make up his mind on a dangerous mission, and you project a weakening thought. You have said that you come from the stormy period following the thirteen thousand years of Endless Peace. That was after my time, and I know nothing about the age, but it is evident that the softness of the peace period still corroded your people. As a cripple, a weakling who is not going to do any of the fighting, you will kindly refrain from giving further advice!"

It could have been devastating, but Mairphy simply shrugged, smiled gently, unaffectedly at Garson, and said, "I withdraw from the conversation." He finished, "Good luck, friend!"

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Derrel, steely-eyed and cold-voiced, said to Garson, "I want to point out one thing. History says we conquered this ship. The only plan we have left revolves around you. Therefore, you went to see the captain."

To Garson, to whom logic was the great prime mover, that thought had already come. Besides, his mind had been made up for five minutes.

The second corridor was empty too, and that strained Garson's tightening nerves to the breaking point. He paused stiffly, and wiped the thin line of perspiration from his brow. And still he had no premonition of the incredible ending that was coming. There was nothing but the deadly actuality of his penetration into the depths of a ship that seemed of endless length, and seemed larger with each step that he took.

A door yielded to his touch. He peered into a great store-room, piled with freight, thousands of tons, silent and lifeless as the corridors ahead. He walked on, his mind blanker now, held steadily away from the thought of Derrel's intended attack. He thought vaguely: *If Norma could keep from Dr. Lell her action of writing a letter to me, then I can keep my thoughts from anyone or anything.*

He was so intent that he didn't see the side corridor until the men burst from it, and they had him before he could think of fighting. Not that he intended to fight.

"Bring him in herel" said a hard, familiar voice; and after a moment of peering into the shadows of the receding corridor, he saw a slender man in uniform standing beside a tentacle!

The hard, young-sounding voice said, "To hell with the Observer. We can always execute. Bring him in herel!"

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A door opened, and light splashed out. The door closed behind him. Garson saw that the room was no more than a small anteroom to some vaster, darkened room beyond. He scarcely noticed that. He was thinking with a stinging shock of fury: *The logical Observer advising execution without a hearing. Why, that isn't reasonable. Damn the stupid Observer!*

His fury faded into vast surprise as he stared at the captain. His first impression had been that the other was a young man, but at this closer view he looked years older, immeasurably more mature. And somehow, in his keyed-up state, the observation astonished him. His amazement ended as his mind registered the blazing question in Captain Larradin's eyes. Quickly, Garson launched into his story.

When he had finished, the commander turned his hard face to the tentacle, "Well?" he said.

The tentacle's voice came instantly, coldly. "The Observer recalls to your memory its earlier analysis of this entire situation: The destruction of Tentacles 1601, 2 and 3 and the neutralization of electron molds could only have been accomplished with the assistance of a mind reader. Accordingly, unknown to us, a mind reader is aboard. Four races in history solved the secret of the training essential to mental telepathy. Of these, only the Wizards of Bor possessed surpassing mechanical ability—"

It was the eeriness that held his whole mind at first, the fantastic reality of this *thing* talking and reasoning like a human being. The Observer Machine of the Glorious that he had seen was simply a large machine, too big to grasp mentally; like some gigantic number, it was there, and that was

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all. But this long tubular monstrosity with its human voice was alien.

The eerie feeling ended in hard, dismaying realization that a creature that could analyze Derrel's identity might actually prove that death was his own logical lot, and that all else was illusion. The dispassionate voice went on:

"Wizard men are bold, cunning and remorseless, and they take no action in an emergency that is not related to their purpose. Therefore, this man's appearance is part of a plot. Destroy him and withdraw from the ship. The battleship will take all necessary action later, without further loss of life."

Garson saw, with a sudden, desperate fear, that Captain Larradin was hesitating. The commander said unhappily, "Damn it, I hate to admit defeat."

"Don't be tedious!" said the tentacle. "Your forces *might* win, but the battleship *will* win."

Decision came abruptly. "Very well," said the captain curtly. "Willant, de-energize this prisoner and—"

Garson said in a voice that he scarcely recognized, an abnormally steady voice, "What about my story?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Your story," the tentacle said finally—and Garson's mind jumped at the realization that it was the tentacle, and not the captain, who answered—"your story is rejected by the Observer as illogical. It is impossible that anything went wrong with a Glorious depersonalizing machine. The fact that you were repersonalized after the usual manner on reaching our lines is evidence of your condition, because the repersonalizing machine reported nothing unusual in your case.

"Furthermore, even if it was true, the message you re-

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ceived was stupid, because no known power or military knowledge could force the surrender of Delpa one minute sooner. It is impossible to neutralize a time-energy barrier except in the way that it is being done; any other method would destroy the neutralizing machine. The military maneuver being used is the ultimate development of dimensional warfare in a given area of space. And so—”

The words scarcely penetrated, though all the sense strained through, somehow. His mind was like an enormous weight, dragging at one thought, one hope. He said, fighting for calmness now, “Commander, by your manner to this tentacle and its master, I can see that you have long ago ceased to follow its conclusions literally. Why? Because it’s inhuman. The Observer is a great reservoir of facts that can be coordinated on any subject, *but it is limited by the facts it knows*. It’s a machine, and, while it may be logical to destroy me before you leave the ship, you know and I know that it is neither necessary nor just, and what is overwhelmingly more important, it can do no harm to hold me prisoner, and make arrangements for a Planetarian to examine the origin of the message that came to me.”

He finished in a quiet, confident tone, “Captain, from what one of the men told me, you’re from the 2000’s A.D. I’ll wager they still had horse races in your day. I’ll wager, furthermore, that no machine could ever understand a man getting a hunch and betting his bottom dollar on a dark horse. You’ve already been illogical in not shooting me at sight, as you threatened on the communicator; in not leaving the ship as the Observer advised; in letting me talk here even as the attack on your enemies is beginning—for there is an attack

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of some kind, and it's got the best brain on this ship behind it. But that's unimportant because you're going to abandon ship. What is important is this: You must carry your illogic to its logical conclusion. Retrieve your prestige, depend for once in this barren life here on luck and luck alone."

The hard eyes did not weaken by a single gleam, but the hard voice spoke words that sounded like purest music. "Willant, take this prisoner into the lifeboat."

It was at that moment it happened. With victory in his hands, the knowledge that more than two years remained before the timē-energy barrier would be threatening the universe, the whole, rich, tremendous joy that he had won everything—all of that, and unutterable relief, and more, was in his brain when—

A voice came into his mind, strong and clear and as irresistible as living fire, a woman's voice. Norma's!

Jack, Jack, help me! I need you! Oh, Jack, come—"

The universe spun. Abruptly, there was no ship, and he was pitching into a gulf of blackness. Inconceivable distance fell behind him.

There was no ship, no earth, no light.

Time must have passed, for slow thought was in him; and the night remained. No not night. He could realize that now, for there was time to realize. It was not night, it was emptiness. Nothingness!

Briefly, the scientist part of his brain grasped at the idea; the possibility of exploring, of examining this nonspace. But there was nothing to examine, nothing in him to examine *with*, no senses that could record or comprehend—nothing—

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ness! He felt dismay then, a black wave of it. His brain shrank from the terrible strain of impression. But, somehow, time passed. The flood of despair streamed out of him. There remained only nothingness!

Change came abruptly. One instant there was that complete isolation. The next, a man's voice said matter-of-factly, "This one is a problem. How the devil did he get into the configuration of the upper arc? You'd think he fell in."

"No report of any planes passing over Delpa," said a second voice. "Better ask the Observer if there's any way of getting him out."

Figuratively, gravely, his mind nodded in agreement to that. He'd have to get out, of course.

His brain paused. Out of where? Nothingness?

For a long tense moment, his thought poised over that tremendous question, striving to penetrate the obscure depths of it that seemed to waver just beyond the reach of his reason. There had been familiar words spoken.

Delpa! An ugly thrill chased through his mind. He wasn't in Delpa—he felt abruptly, horribly sick—or was he?

The sickness faded into a hopeless weariness, almost a chaotic dissolution. What did it matter where he was? Once more, he was a complete prisoner of a powerful, dominating environment, prey to forces beyond his control, unable to help Norma, unable to help himself.

Normal! He frowned mentally, empty of any emotion, unresponsive even to the thought that what had happened implied some enormous and deadly danger for Norma. There was only the curious, almost incredible way that she had called him; and nightmarishly he had fallen—toward Delpa!

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Fallen into an insane region called the configuration of the upper arc. With a start, he realized that the Observer's voice had been speaking for some seconds:

"... it can be finally stated that no plane, no machine of any kind, has flown over Delpa since the seventeenth time and space manipulation four weeks ago. Therefore, the man you have discovered in the upper arc is an enigma whose identity must be solved without delay. Call your commander."

He waited, for there was nothing to think about, at least not at first. He recalled finally that the spaceship had been pulled a million miles a second by the mysterious seventeenth manipulation of time and space; only Derrel had distinctly described it as a repercussion from several years in the future. Now, the Observer talked as if it had happened four weeks ago. Funny!

"Nothing funny about it!" said a fourth voice, a voice so finely pitched, so directed into the stream of his thought that he wondered briefly, blankly, whether he had thought the words, or spoken them himself; then, "Professor Carson, you are identified. The voice you are hearing is that of a Planetarian who can read your mind."

A Planetarian! Relief made a chaos of his brain. With an effort, he tried to speak, but he seemed to have no tongue, or lips, or body. He had nothing but his mind there in that emptiness; his mind revolving swiftly, ever more swiftly around the host of things he simply had to know. It was the voice, the cool, sane voice, and the stupendous things it was saying, that gradually quieted the turmoil that racked him.

"The answer to what worries you most is that Miss Mathe-

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son was the center of the seventeenth space and time manipulation, the first time a human being has been used.

"The manipulation consisted of withdrawing one unit of the Solar System from the main stream without affecting the continuity of the main system; one out of the ten billion a second was swung clear in such a fashion that the time-energy cycle with its senseless, limitless power began to re-create it, carrying on two with the same superlative ease as formerly with only one.

"Actually, there are now eighteen solar systems existing roughly parallel to each other—seventeen manipulated creations and the original. My body, however, exists in only two of these because none of the previous sixteen manipulations occurred in my lifetime. Naturally, these two bodies of mine exist in separate worlds and will never again have contact with each other.

"Because she was the center of activity, Norma Matheson has her being in the main solar system only. The reason your physical elements responded to her call is that she now possesses the Insel mind power. Her call merely drew you toward her, not to her, because she lacks both the intelligence and the knowledge necessary for the competent employment of her power.

"As Miss Matheson did not protect you from intermediate dangers, you fell straight into the local time-energy barrier surrounding the city of Delpa, which promptly precipitated you into the time emptiness where you now exist. Because of the angle of your fall, it will require an indefinite period for the machines to solve the equation that will release you. Until then, have patience."

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"Wait!" Garson said urgently. "The great time-energy barrier! It should be completed about now!"

"In two weeks at most," came the cool reply. "We received your story, all right, and transmitted the startling extent of the danger to the Glorious. In their pride and awful determination, they see it merely as a threat to make us surrender—or else! To us, however, the rigidly controlled world they envision means another form of death—a worse form. No blackmail will make us yield, and we have the knowledge that people of the future sent the warning. Therefore, we won!"

There was no time to think that over carefully. Garson phrased his next question hurriedly. "Suppose they're not of the future, not of this seventeenth, or is it eighteenth, solar system? What will happen to me if this solar system explodes out of existence?"

The answer was cooler still. "Your position is as unique as that of Miss Matheson. You fell out of the past into the future; you missed the manipulation. Therefore you exist, not in two solar systems, but only where you are, attached in a general way to us. Miss Matheson exists only in the main system. There is no way to my knowledge that you two can ever come together again. Accustom yourself to that idea."

That was all. His next question remained unanswered. Time passed and his restless spirit drooped. Life grew dim within him. He lay without thought on the great, black deep. Immense, immeasurable time passed, and he waited, but no voices came to disturb his cosmic grave. Twice, forces tugged at him. The first time, he thought painfully: The time-energy

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barrier of the Glorious had been completed, and the pressure, the tugging, was all he felt of the resulting destruction.

If that had happened, nothing, no one, would ever come to save him!

That first tugging, and the thought that went with it, faded into remoteness, succumbed to the weight of the centuries, was lost in the trackless waste of the aeons that slid by. And finally, when it was completely forgotten, when every plan of action, every theory, every hope and despair had been explored to the nth degree—the second tug of pressure came.

A probing sensation it was, as if he was being examined; and finally a flaming, devastatingly powerful thought came at him from outside!

I judge it an extrusion from a previous universe, a very low form of life, intelligence .007, unworthy of our attention. It must be registered for its infinitesimal influence and interference with energy flowage—and cast adrift.

13

RETURNING CONSCIOUSNESS stirred in Norma's body. She felt the sigh that breathed from her lips. Dimly, she grew aware that she must leave this place. But there was not yet enough life in her nerves, no quickening of the co-ordination, the concentration, so necessary to the strange, masochistic power she had been given. She thought drearily: *If only I had gone*

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to a window instead of projecting myself against an impenetrable wall. She must get to the breakfast-nook window that overlooked the roof.

She stood at the window instantly, weary with pain, startled by the swift reaction to her thought. Hope came violently. She thought; *Pain—no pain can touch me.*

Behind her, footsteps and other, strange sounds crashed on the stairway; behind her, the outer door blinked into ravenous flame. Ahead was the dark, lonely night. She scrambled to the sill. In her ears was the sound of the things that were swarming into her apartment. Then she was at the edge of the roof, and she could see the milling beast men on the sidewalk below, and she could see the street corner a hundred yards away.

Instantly, she was at the corner, standing lightly, painlessly, on the pavement. But there were too many cars for further "power" travel, cars that would make devastatingly hard walls.

As she paused in a desperate uncertainty, one of the cars slowed to a stop; and it was the simplest thing to run forward, open the door and climb in, just as it started up again. There was a small man crouching in the dimness behind the steering wheel. To him, she said, almost matter-of-factly, "Those men! They're chasing me!"

A swarm of the beast men wallowed awkwardly into the revealing glow of the corner light, squat, apelike, frightening things. The driver yelped shrilly, "Good God!" The car accelerated.

The man began to babble, "Get out! Get out! I can't afford

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to get mixed up in a thing like this. I've got a family—wife—children—waiting for me this instant at home. Get out!"

He shoved at her with one hand, as if he would somehow push her through the closed door. And, because her brain was utterly pliant, utterly geared to flight, she had no real resistance. A neon light a block away caught her gaze, and she said, "See that taxi stand? Let me off there."

By the time she climbed out, tentacles were glittering shapes in the air above the dim street behind her. She struck at them with her mind, but they only sagged back, like recoiling snakes, still under control, obviously prepared now for her power.

In the taxi, her mind reverted briefly in astounded thought: That mouse of a man! Had she actually let him control her, instead of forcing the little pipsqueak to her mighty will—

Will! She must use her will. No tentacle can come within—within— She'd have to be practical. How far had they retreated from her power? Half a mile? No tentacle can come within half a mile of this car. Eagerly, she stared out of the rear window, and her eyes widened as she saw they were a hundred yards away and coming closer. *What was wrong?* In shrinking expectation she waited for the devastating fire of third-order energies, and when it did not come, she thought: *This car must be made to go faster!*

There were other cars ahead, and some passing, but altogether not many. There was room for terrible speed if she had the courage, didn't lose control, and if the power would work. *Through there*, she directed, *and through there and around that corner—*

She heard yells from the driver, but for a time the very ex-

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tent of his dismay brought encouragement. That faded bleakly as the tentacles continued their glittering course behind her, sometimes close, sometimes far away, but always relentlessly on her trail, unshakably astute in frustrating every twist of her thought, every turn of the car, every hope.

But why didn't they attack? There was no answer to that as the long night of flight dragged on, minute by slow minute. Finally, pity touched her for the almost mad driver, who half-sat, half-swooned behind the steering wheel, held to consciousness and to sanity—she could see in his mind—only by the desperate knowledge that this car was his sole means of livelihood and nothing else mattered besides that, not even death.

Let him go, she thought. It was sheer cruelty to include him in the fate that was gathering out of the night for her. Let him go, but not yet. At first, she couldn't have told what the purpose was that quivered in her mind. But it was there, deep and chill and like death itself, and she kept directing the car without knowing exactly where she was going.

Conscious understanding of her unconscious will to death came finally, as she climbed to the ground and saw the glint of river through the trees of a park. And knew her destiny. Here in this park, beside this river, where nearly four years before she had come starving and hopeless to commit suicide—here she would make her last stand!

She watched the tentacles floating toward her through the trees, catching little flashing glimpses of them as the dim electric lights of the park shimmered against their metallic bodies; and she felt a vast wonder, untainted by fear. Was this real? Was it possible that there was no one, no weapon, no com-

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bination of air, land and sea forces, nothing that could protect her?

In sudden exasperation, she thrust her power at the nearest glint. And laughed a curt, futile laugh when the thing did not even quiver. So far as the tentacles were concerned, her power had been nullified. The implications were ultimate. When Dr. Lell arrived, he would bring swift death to her.

She scrambled down the steep bank to the dark edge of the sullen river; and the intellectual mood that had brought her here to this park, where once she had wanted death, filled her being. She stood taut, striving for a return of the emotion, for the thought of it was not enough. If only she could recapture the black, emotional mood of that other dark night!

A cool, damp breeze whisked her cheeks; but she could not muster the desire to taste those ugly waters. She wanted, not death, nor power, nor the devastation of third-order energies, but marriage, a home with green grass and a flower garden. She wanted life, contentment—Garson!

It was more of a prayer than a command that rose from her lips in that second call for help, an appeal from the depths of her need to the only man who in all these long, deadly years had been in her thoughts: *Jack, wherever you are, come to me here on Earth, come through the emptiness of time, come safely without pain, without bodily hurt or damage, and with mind clear. Come now!*

With a dreadful start, she jerked back. For a man stood beside her there by the dark waters!

The breeze came stronger. It brought a richer, more tangy smell of river stinging into her nostrils. But it wasn't physical

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revival she needed. It was her mind again that was slow to move, her mind that had never yet reacted favorably to her power, her mind lying now like a cold weight inside her. The figure stood with stonelike stolidity, like a lump of dark, roughly shaped clay given a gruesome half-life. She thought in ghastly dismay: Had she recalled from the dead into dreadful existence a body that may have been lying in its grave for generations?

The thing stirred and became a man. Carson said in a voice that sounded hesitant and huskily unnatural in his own ears, "I've come—but my mind is only clearing now. And speech is hard after a quadrillion years." He shuddered with the thought of the countless ages he had spent in eternity; then, "I don't know what happened. I don't know what danger made you call me a second time, or whether any exists; but, whatever the situation, I've thought it all out.

"You and I are being used by the mysterious universe manipulators because, according to their history, we *were* used. They would not have allowed us to get into such desperate straits if they could come to us physically, and yet it is obvious that everything will fail for them, for us, unless they can make some direct physical contact and show us how to use the vast power you have been endowed with. They must be able to come only through some outside force, and only yours exists in our lives. Therefore, call them, call them in any words, for they must need only the slightest assistance. Call them, and afterward we can talk and plan and hope."

She began to have thoughts then, and questions—all the questions that had ever puzzled her. Why had Dr. Lell kept repeating that she had made no trouble according to the

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Glorious historical record of her, when trouble was all she had ever given? Why had she been able to defeat the first tentacle, and yet now her power, that had called Jack Garson from some remote time, was futile against them? And where was Dr. Lell? With an effort she finally roused her brain from its repetitious pondering over paradoxes. What words she used then, she could not have repeated, for she remembered nothing of them a moment after they were spoken. In her mind was only a fascinated horror of expectation that grew and grew as a sound came from the water near her feet.

The water stirred. It sighed as if yielding to some body that pressed its dark elements. It gurgled in a way that gave her a feeling of queer, obscene horror, and a body blacker than itself, and bigger than any man, made a glinting, ugly rim of foam.

It was Jack Garson's fingers, strong and unflinching, grasping her, and his hard, determined voice that prevented her from uttering the panicky words of demon exorcise that quivered at the edge of her mind.

"Wait!" he said. "It's victory, not defeat. Wait!"

"Thank you, Professor Garson!" The voice that came out of the darkness held a strange, inhuman quality that kept her taut and uneasy. It went on, "For your sakes, I could approach in no other way. We of the four hundred and ninetyeth century A.D. are human in name only. There is a dreadful irony in the thought that war, the destroyer of men, finally changed man into a beastlike creature. One solace remains: We saved our minds at the expense of our bodies.

"Your analysis was right, Professor Garson, as far as it went. The reason we cannot use a time machine from our age

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is that our whole period will be in a state of abnormal unbalance for hundreds of thousands of years; even the tiniest misuse of energy could cause unforeseeable changes in the fabric of the time-energy cycle, which is so utterly indifferent to the fate of men. Our method could only be the indirect and partially successful one of isolating the explosion on one of eighteen solar systems, and drawing all the others together to withstand the shock. This was not so difficult as it sounds, for time yields easily to simple pressures.

"Miss Matheson, the reason the tentacles could trail you is that you were being subjected to psychological terrors. The tentacles that have been following you through the night were not real, but third-order light projections of tentacles, designed to keep you occupied till Dr. Lell could bring his destroyer machines to bear. Actually, you have escaped all their designs. How? I have said time yields to proper pressures. Such a pressure existed as you stood by the river's edge trying to recall the mood of suicide. It was easier for you to have power to slip through time to that period nearly four years earlier than for you to recapture an unwanted lust for self-inflicted death."

"Good heavens!" Garson gasped. "Are you trying to tell us that this is that night, and that a few minutes from now Dr. Lell will come along and hire a desperate girl sitting on a park bench to be a front for a fake Calonian recruiting station?"

"And this time," said the inhuman voice, "the history of the Glorious will be fulfilled. She will make no trouble."

Garson had the sudden desperate sensation of being beyond his depth. "What—what about our bodies that existed

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then? I thought two bodies of the same person couldn't exist in the same time and space."

"They can't!"

"But—"

The firm, alien voice cut him off, cut off, too, Norma's sudden, startled intention to speak. "There are no paradoxes in time. I have said that, in order to resist the destruction of the isolated eighteenth solar system, the other seventeen were brought together into one—this one! The only one that now exists! But the others *were*, and in some form you were in them. But now you are here, and this is the real and only world.

"I leave you to think that over, for now you must act. History says that you two took out a marriage license—tomorrow. History says Norma Garson had no difficulty leading the double life of wife of Professor Garson and slave to Dr. Lell; and that, under my direction, she learned to use her power until the day came to destroy the great energy barrier of Delpa and help the Planetarians to their rightful victory."

Garson was himself again. "Rightful?" he said. "I'm not so convinced of that. They were the ones who precipitated the war by breaking the agreement for population curtailment."

"Rightful," said the voice firmly, "because they first denounced the agreement on the grounds that it would atrophy the human spirit and mind. They fought the war on a noble plane, and offered compromise until the last moment. No automatons are on their side, and all the men they directly recruited from the past were plainly told they were wanted for dangerous work. Most of them were unemployed veterans of past wars."

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Norma found her voice, "That second recruiting station I saw, with the Greeks and the Romans—"

"Exactly. But now you must receive your first lesson in the intricate process of mind and thought control, enough to fool Dr. Lell—"

The odd part of it was that, in spite of all the words that had been spoken, the warm glow of genuine belief didn't come to her until she sat in the dim light on the bench, and watched the gaunt body of Dr. Lell stalking out of the shadowed path. Poor, unsuspecting superman!