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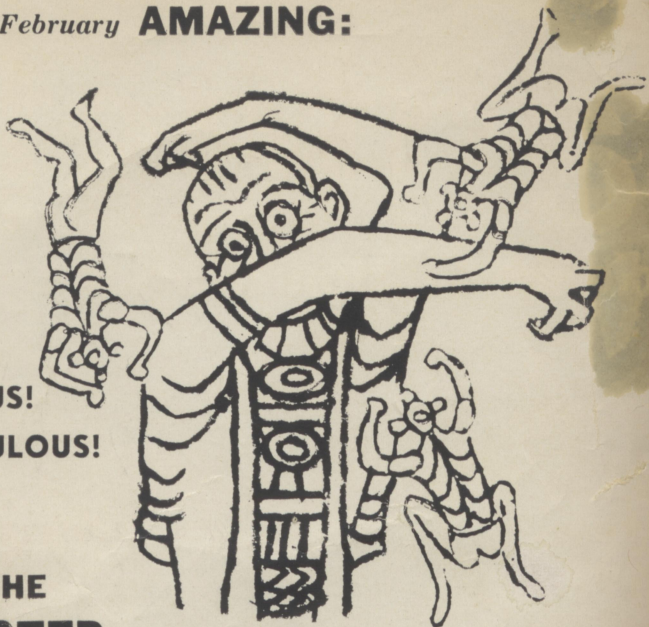


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by Frank Herbert



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Volume 9 Number 2

Science Fiction Stories

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Editorial

THE world of science and of fantasy would be a dull one these days without the Soviet theorists. For men working in a regimented society, they seem to have no difficulty in letting their minds range far and wide beyond the bounds of such practicalities as building a better tractor, or even a better Lunik.

The latest in a series of fascinating probabilities expounded by the Russians was offered recently by Dr. Nikolai Kozyrev, an astronomer and physicist. Theorizes Dr. Kozyrev: The flow of time, from past to future, creates vast cosmic energies. The "Kozyrev effect" predicts that for every kilogram of revolving mass in a rotating body, the time flow produces one-tenth of an erg of energy per second. Since it takes 13,560,000 ergs to move one pound of material one foot in space, all you need to know how to move the earth, is a pocket calculator—and presumably still that damned old place to stand on while you're doing it.

Tests have been made, it is indicated, that confirm Kozyrev's theory. If it can also be confirmed in the vast reaches of galactic space, there may need to be a basic rethinking of the fundamentals of modern physics. For most mathematical physics today does not involve the motion of time; the results of the equations are the same whether one assumes time to be moving forward or backward. Even Einstein's theory does not depend on the direction of time. But if time does operate like a waterfall—and if its movement forward creates energies—all our concepts (not to mention our equations) may have to be re-thought from scratch.—NL

THE PRIESTS OF PSI

By FRANK HERBERT

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

He was sent to test the powers of the Fanatic Planet... to learn its secrets. And in The Ordeal, he trembled on the edge of the Ultimate Secret.

THE instant he stepped out of the transport's shields into Amel's sunlight warm on the exit ramp Lewis Orne felt the psi fields. He caught the hand rail in sudden dizziness, stared down some two hundred meters at the glassy tricrete of the space port. Heat waves shimmered off the glistening surface, baking the air even up to this height. There was no wind except inside him where the hidden gusts of the psi fields howled against his recently awakened senses.

The techs who had trained Orne in the use of the flesh-buried psi detection instruments had given him a small forestate of this sensation back in the laboratory on Marak. It had been far short of this reality. The first sharp

signal of the primary detector concealed in his neck had been replaced by the full spectrum of psi awareness.

Orne shuddered. Amel crawled with skin-creeping sensations. Weird urges flickered through his mind like flashes of heat lightning. He wanted to grunt like a wallowing *kiriffa*, and in the next instant felt laughter welling in him while a sob tore at his throat.

I knew it was going to be bad, he thought. They warned me.

The counter conditioning only made this moment worse because now he was *aware*. Without the psi training, he knew that his mind would have confused the discreet sensations into a combined awe-fear — perfectly



Only Orne could save Bakrish from the blazing inferno which threatened to envelop him.

logical emotions for him to feel when debarking on the priest planet.

This was holy ground: sanctuary of all the religions in the known universe (and, some said, of all the religions in the *unknown* universe).

Orne forced his attention onto the inner focus as the techs had taught him. Slowly, psi awareness dimmed to background annoyance. He drew in a deep breath of the hot, dry air. It was vaguely unsatisfying as though lacking some essential element to which his lungs were accustomed.

Still holding the rail, he waited to make certain he had subdued the ghost urges within him. Across the ramp, the glistening inner surface of the opened port reflected his image, distorting it slightly in a way that accented his differences from the lean, striding norm. He looked like a demigod reincarnated out of this world's ancient past: square and solid with the corded neck muscles of a heavy-grav native. A faint scar demarked the brow line of his close-cropped red hair. Other fine scars on his bulldog face were visible because he knew where to look, and his memory told of more

scars on his heavy body. There was a half-humorous saying in Investigation & Adjustment that senior field agents could be detected by the number of scars and medical patches they carried.

Orne tugged at the black belt on his aqua toga, feeling uncomfortable in this garment that all "students" on Amel had to wear.

The yellow sun, Dubhe, hung at the meridian in a cloudless blue sky. It hammered through the toga with oppressive warmth. Orne felt the perspiration slick on his body. One step away the escalfield hummed softly, ready to drop him into the bustle visible at the foot of the transport. Priests and passengers were engaged in some kind of ceremony down there—initiation of the new students. Faintly to his ears came a throbbing drumchant and a singsong keening almost hidden beneath the port's machinery clatter.

Orne studied the scene around him, still waiting to make sure he would not betray his awareness. The transport's ramp commanded a sweeping view: a fantastic scratchwork of towers, belfries, steeples, monoliths, domes, ziggurats, pagodas, stupas, minarets, dagobas.

They cluttered a flat plain that stretched to a horizon dancing in the heat waves. Golden sunlight danced off bright primary colors and weathered pastels—buildings in tile and stone, tricrete and plasteel, and the synthetics of a thousand thousand civilizations.

Staring out at the religious warren, Orne experienced an abrupt feeling of dread at the unknown things that could be waiting in those narrow, twisted streets and jumbled buildings. The stories that leaked out of Amel always carried a hint of forbidden mystery, and Orne knew his emotions were bound to be tainted by some of that mystery. But his sudden dread shifted subtly to a special kind of fear.

This *peculiar* fear, coming out of his new awareness, had begun back on Marak.

Orne had been seated at the desk in his bachelor officer quarters, staring out at the park-like landscape of the I-A university grounds. Marak's green sun hung low in the afternoon quadrant. Orne had been filling in as a lecturer on "Exotic Clues to War Tendencies" while waiting for his wedding to Diana Bullone. He was scheduled to marry the High Commission-

er's daughter in only three weeks, and after a honeymoon on Kirachin he was expecting permanent assignment to the anti-war college. He could look forward to a life of training new I-A agents in the arts of seeking out and destroying the seeds that could grow into another Rim War.

That had been his concept of the future that afternoon on Marak. But suddenly he had turned away from his desk to frown at the stiffly regulated room. Something was awry. He studied the gray walls, the sharp angles of the bunk, the white bed-cover with its blue I-A monogram: the crossed sword and stylus. The room's other chair stood backed against the foot of the bunk, leaving a three-centimeter clearance for the gray flatness of the closet door.

Something he could not define was making him restless—call it premonition.

Abruptly, the hall door banged open. Umbo Stetson, Orne's superior officer, strode into the room. The section chief wore his characteristic patched blue fatigues. His only badge of rank, golden I-A emblems on his collar and uniform cap, looked faintly

corroded. Orne wondered when they had last been polished, then he pushed the thought aside. Stetson reserved all of his polish for his mind.

Behind the I-A officer rolled a mechanocart piled with cramtapes, microfilms and even some old style books. It trundled itself into the room, its wheels rumbling as it cleared the doorsill. The door closed itself.

Good Lord! thought Orne. *Not an assignment! Not now.* He got to his feet, looked first at the cart, then at Stetson. There was an edge of uneasiness in Orne's voice as he asked: "What's this, Stet?"

Stetson pulled out the chair from the foot of the bunk, straddled it, sailed his cap on to the blanket. His dark hair straggled in an uncombed muss. His eyelids drooped, accenting his usual look of haughty superciliousness.

"You've had enough assignments to know what this is," he growled. A wry smile touched his lips. "Got a little job for you."

"Don't I have any say in this anymore?" asked Orne.

"Well now, things may've changed a bit, and then again maybe they haven't," said Stetson.

"I'm getting married in three weeks," said Orne. "To the daughter of the High Commissioner."

"Your wedding is being postponed," said Stetson. He held up a hand as Orne's face darkened. "Wait a bit. Just postponed. Emergency. The High Commissioner sent his daughter off today on a job we just trumped up for the purpose."

Orne's voice was dangerously low: "What purpose?"

"The purpose of getting her out of your hair. You're leaving for Amel in six days and there's lots to be done before you're ready to go."

Orne drummed his fingers on the desk. "Just like that. Wedding's off. I'm assigned to a . . . Amel?"

"Yes."

"What is this, Stet? Amel's a picnic ground."

"Well . . ." Stetson shook his head. "Maybe not."

A sudden fear struck Orne. "Whose job was trumped up?" he demanded. "Has Diana . . ."

"She's off to Franchi Primus to help design a new uniform for the I-A women," said Stetson. "That safe enough for you?"

"But why so sudden?"

"We have to get you ready for Amel. Miss Bullone would

have wasted time, diverted your attention. She knows something's up, but she takes orders just like the rest of us in the I-A. Have I made myself clear?"

"No notice. No nothing. Oh, this I-A is real fun! I must recommend it every time I find a young fellow looking for a job!"

"Mrs. Bullone will bring a note from Diana tonight," said Stetson. "She's perfectly safe. You can get married when this is over."

"Provided the I-A doesn't dream up some new emergency for me!" marked Orne.

"You're the ones who took the I-A oath," said Stetson. "You knew when you took it that this sort of thing could happen."

"I'm going to rewrite the oath," said Orne. "To the words. '*I pledge my life and my sacred honor to seek out and destroy the seeds of war wherever they may be found.*' let us add: '*and I will sacrifice anything and anybody in the process.*'"

"Not a bad addition," said Stetson. "Why don't you recommend it when you get back?"

"If I get back! What's the emergency this time?"

"This emergency must be

hunting for you specifically," said Stetson.

"How thoughtful of it."

"Your name's on the list for the latest *summoning* to Amel."

"A religious student? But I've never applied for . . ."

"But your name's on the list. Nice great big letters. List signed by Halmyrach Abbod himself."

"There has to be a mistake. It's obviously a confusion of names with . . ."

"You've been specifically identified by family and current abode. No mistake."

Orne pushed himself away from the desk. "But there *has* to be! I tell you I've never applied for . . ." He broke off. "Anyway, what's the difference? The I-A couldn't be interested in Amel. Never been a war anywhere near the place. The big shots were always afraid of offending their gods."

Stetson pointed to the mechanocart. "I don't have much time for this briefing, so stop interrupting. You're going to need everything on this cart and more. You're going to the medics this evening for a quick-heal operation. Some very hush-hush . . ." He frowned, repeated himself: ". . . *very* hush-hush equipment is to be hidden under

your skin. Do you know anything about psi powers and what they involve?"

The change of pace caused Orne to blink. He wet his lips with his tongue. "You mean like that fellow on Wessen who was supposed to be able to jump to any planet in the universe without a ship?"

"Something like that."

"Say, what ever happened to him? All the stories, then . . ."

"Maybe it was a fake," said Stetson. "Maybe it wasn't. We hope you can find out. Our techs will be showing you some psi equipment later. An amplifier . . ."

"But how does this connect with Amel?"

"You're going to tell us . . . we hope. You see, Lew, we just had the confirmation early this morning. At the next session of the Assembly there's going to be a motion to do away with the I-A, turn all of our functions over to Rediscovery & Re-education."

"Put us under Tyler Gemine? That political hack! Half our problems come from Rah & Rah stupidities! They've damn' near bumbled us into another Rim War a dozen times!"

"Mmmmm, hmmmm," said Stetson. "And the next session

of the Assembly is just over the horizon—five months."

"But . . . but a motion like that wouldn't stand a chance! It's assinine! I mean, look at the . . ."

"You'll be interested to know, Lew, that the pressure for this change comes from the priests of Amel. There does not seem to be any doubt that religious heat can put it over."

"Which sect of the priests?"

"All of them."

Orne shook his head. "But there are thousands of sects on Amel . . . millions, maybe. Under the Ecumenical Truce they . . ."

"All of them," repeated Stetson.

Orne frowned. "None of this fits. If the priests are gunning for us, why should they invite a I-A field agent onto their planet at the same time? That doesn't . . ."

"Exactly," said Stetson. "I'm sure you'll jump with joy when you learn that nobody—repeat: nobody!—has ever before been able to put an agent into Amel. Not the I-A. Not the old Marakian Secret Service. Not even the Nathians. All attempts have been met with polite rejections. No agent's ever gotten farther than their landing field." Stetson got to his feet,

glared down at Orne. "You'd better get started on this background material I brought. Your first session with the techs is tonight after the medics get through with you."

"What provision will there be for getting me off if Amel goes sour?" asked Orne.

"None."

Orne bounced to his feet. "None?"

"Our best information indicates that your training—they call it 'The Ordeal'—takes about six months. If there's no report from you within that limit, we'll make inquiries."

"Like: 'What've you done with the body?'" snarled Orne. "Hell! There might not even be any I-A to make an inquiry in six months!"

Stetson shrugged. "I know this is sudden, and our data's skimpy where it . . ."

"This is like a last resort!"

"Exactly, Lew. But we have to find out why the galactic center of all religions had turned against us. We have no hope of going in there and subduing them. It'd start religious uprisings all through the galaxy. Make the Rim War look like a game of ball at a girls' school. I'm not even certain we could get enough volunteers to do the job. We never qualify an agent be-

cause of his religion, but I'm damned sure they'd *qualify* us on that score. No. We have to find out why! Maybe we can change whatever's bothering them. It's our only hope. Maybe they don't understa . . ."

"What if they have plans for conquest by war? What then, Stet? A new faction could've come to power on Amel. Why not?"

Stetson looked sad, shrugged. "If you could prove it . . ." He shook his head.

"When am I going to the medics?"

"They'll come for you."

"Yeah. Somebody already came for me . . . it looks like."

It was early evening in Orne's hospital room at the I-A medical center—the quiet time between dinner and visiting hours. The nurse had turned on the light beside his bed. It cast a soothing reflection from the green walls. The induction bandage felt bulky under his chin, but the characteristic quick-heal itching had not yet started.

Being in a hospital room made him vaguely uneasy. He knew why: the smells and the sounds reminded him of all the months he'd spent creeping back from death after his injuries in the Heleb uprising. Heleb had been another planet

where war just could *not* start. Like Amel.

The door to his hospital room opened. A tech officer strode through, closed the door. The man's uniform bore odd forked lightning insignia. Orne had never seen the emblem before. *Psi?* he wondered. The officer stopped at the foot of the bed, leaned on the cross bar. His face was bird-like. There was a long nose, pointed chin, narrow mouth. The eyes made quick, darting movements. He was tall, bone skinny, and when he lifted his right hand in a mock salute, the gesture appeared to be fluttery.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Ag Emolirdo, head of our Psi Section. The Ag is for Agony."

Unable to move his head because of the induction bandage, Orne stared down the length of the bed at Emolirdo. The officer carried an aura of . . . confidence, *knowing* confidence. He reminded Orne of a priest back on Orne's home planet, Chargon. This idea made Orne uneasy. He said: "How d'you do."

"This will have to move rather rapidly," said the tech. He smiled. "You'll be into parahypnoid sessions by midnight."

"Join the I-A and learn the

mysteries of the universe," quipped Orne.

Emolirdo cocked one eyebrow. "Were you aware that you're a psi focus?"

"A what?" Orne tried to sit up, but the bandage restraints held him fast.

"Psi focus," said Emolirdo. "You'll understand it later. Briefly, you're an island of order in a disordered universe. Four times since you came to the attention of the I-A you've done the impossible. Any one of the incidents you tackled should have led to ferment and then general war. You've brought order out of . . ."

"So I did what I was trained to do."

"Trained? By whom?"

"By my government . . . by the I-A. That's a stupid question."

"Is it?" Emolirdo found a chair, sat down, his head level with Orne's. "Well, we won't argue the point. The chief thing now is that you know consciously the broad areas to be covered. You understand?"

"I know the parahypnoid technique," said Orne.

"First, psi focus," said Emolirdo. "Let us define life as a bridge between Order and Chaos. Then, let us define Chaos as raw energy available to anything that can subdue

it—that is, to anything that can put it into some order. Life, then, becomes stored Chaos. You follow?”

“I hear you. Get on with it.”

“Ah, the impatience of the non-adept,” murmured Emolirido. He cleared his throat. “To restate the situation, Life feeds on Chaos, but must exist in Order. An apparent paradox. This brings us to the condition called *stasis*. Stasis is like a magnet. It attracts free energy to itself until the pressure becomes too great and it explodes . . . and, exploding, goes back to Chaos. One is left with the unavoidable conclusion that stasis leads always to Chaos.”

“That’s dandy,” said Orne.

Emolirido frowned. “This rule is true on both the levels of chemical-inanimate and chemical-animate, Mr. Orne. For example, ice, the stasis of water, explodes when brought into abrupt contact with extreme heat. The frozen society explodes when exposed suddenly to the chaos of war or the *apparent* chaos of a strange new society. Nature abhors stasis.”

“Like a vacuum,” said Orne.

“Precisely.”

“Outside of the vacuum in my head, what other little

problems do we have?” asked Orne.

“Amel.”

“Oh, yes. Another vacuum?”

“Apparently a stasis that does not explode.”

“Then perhaps it isn’t static.”

“You’re very astute, Mr. Orne.”

“Golly . . . thanks.”

“You think you’re being very humorous, don’t you, Mr. Orne?”

“I thought you were the prize joker here. What’s all this have to do with Amel?”

“Miracles,” said Emolirido. “You obviously were summoned to Amel because they consider you a worker of miracles.”

The pain stabbed through Orne’s bandaged neck as he tried to turn his head. “Miracles?” he roared.

“Substitute *psi* for miracle,” said the tech. “*Psi focus*, to be more precise.” A weird half smile flickered across Emolirido’s mouth. It was as though he had fought down an internal dispute on whether to laugh or cry, solved it by doing neither.

Orne felt confused, uneasy. He said: “You’ve left me.”

“*Psi focus* is the scientific label for miracle,” said Emo-

lirido. "It's something that happens outside of recognized channels, in spite of accepted rules. Religions say it's a miracle. Certain scientists say we have encountered a psi focus. That can be either a person or a locale."

"I'm not reading you at all," muttered Orne.

"You've heard of the ancient miracle caverns on the older planets?"

Orne blinked. "I've heard the legends."

"We're convinced that they concealed shapes . . . convolutions that projected out of our apparent universe. Except at these focus points, the raw energy of outer Chaos cannot be bent to our needs. But *at* these focus points, Chaos—the wild energy—is richly available in a way that can be tamed. It may be moulded in unique ways that defy ordinary rules." Emolirido's eyes blazed. He seemed to be fighting a great inner excitement.

Orne then wet his lips. "Shapes?"

"Men have bent wires, coiled them, carved bits of plastic, jumbled together odd assortments of completely unrelated objects. And weird things happen. A smooth piece of metal becomes tacky, as though you'd smeared it with

glue. A man draws a pentagram on a certain floor, and flame dances within it. Smoke curls from a strangely shaped bottle and does another man's bidding, obeys his will. Then there are certain men who conceal this focus within themselves. They walk into . . . nothing, and reappear light years away. They look at a person suffering from an incurable disease. The incurable is cured. They raise the dead. They read minds."

Orne tried to swallow in a dry throat. "All this is psi?"

"We believe so." Emolirido bent toward Orne's bedside light, thrust a fist in between the light and the green wall. "Look at the wall."

"I can't turn my head," said Orne.

"Sorry. Just a shadow." Emolirido withdrew his hand. "But let us say there were sentient beings confined to the flat plane of that wall. Let us say they saw the shadow of my fist. Could a genius among them imagine the shape that cast the shadow—a shape that projected outside of his dimensions?"

"Good question," said Orne.

"What if the being in the wall fashioned a device that projected into our dimension?" asked Emolirido. "He would be like the blind men

studying the legendary elephant. His device would respond in ways that do not fit his dimension. He would have to set up all kinds of new postulates."

Under the bandage, the skin of Orne's neck began to itch maddeningly. He resisted the desire to probe there with a finger. Bits of the folklore from Chargon flitted through his memory: the magicians, the little people who granted wishes in a way that made the wisher regret his desires, the cavern where the sick were cured. The quick-heal itching lured his finger with almost irresistible force. He groped for a pill on his bedstand, gulped it down, waited for the relief.

Presently, Orne said: "What's this thing you've put in my neck?"

"It has a dual purpose," said Emolirido. "It signals the presence of psi activity—psi fields, we call them. And it's an amplifier, giving a boost to any latent . . . ah, talents you may have. It'll often permit a novice to produce some of the minor psi effects."

Orne rubbed the outside of his neck bandage, forced his hand away. "Such as what?"

"Oh . . . resisting psi-induced emotions, detecting

motivation in others through some of their emotions. It may give a small degree of prescience. You'd be able to detect extremes of personal danger when they were still some distance off in time. You'll understand about this after the parahypnoid session we're going to give you."

Orne felt something tingling in his neck. There was a vacant sensation in the pit of his stomach. "Prescience?"

"You'd recognize it at first as a kind of fear . . . a peculiar kind of fear. Sometimes it's like hunger, though you've just eaten. Something feels like it's lacking . . . inside you, or in the air you breathe. If you feel it, you'll recognize it. It'll always be a warning of danger. Very trustworthy."

Orne's skin felt clammy. There was the vacant sensation in his stomach. The air of the room tasted stale. His immediate reaction was to reject the sensations and all of the suggestive conversation, but there was still the fact of Stetson. Nobody in the I-A was more coldly objective or quicker to toss out mumbo-jumbo. And Stetson obviously accepted this psi thing. Stetson could be trusted. That was the major fact keeping Orne from booting this . . . this . . .

"You look a little pale," said Emolirido.

"Probably." Orne managed a tight smile. "I think I feel your prescience thing right now."

"Describe your sensations."

Orne obeyed.

"You feel irritated, jumpy without apparent reason," said Emolirido. "Odd that it should happen so soon, before the training, that is. Unless . . ." He pursed his lips.

"Unless what?"

"Unless your . . . ah, talent were quite strong. And unless psi training itself were actually dangerous to you. Wouldn't that be interesting, though?"

"Yeah. Fascinating. I can hardly wait to get through this training and be on my way to Amel."

It was reluctance, Orne decided. There was no real excuse to wait up here on the transport's ramp any longer. Obviously, he had overcome the first staggering impact of the psi fields of Amel. There was still the prescient awareness of danger—like a sore tooth signaling its presence. The day was hot, and the toga was too heavy. He was soaked in perspiration.

Damn! If I wait too long they'll get suspicious.

He took a half step toward the escafield, still fighting the reluctance. His nostrils caught an acrid bite of incense that had evaded the oil-and-ozone dominance of the landing area. In spite of counter conditioning and carefully nurtured agnosticism, he felt an abrupt sensation of awe. Amel exuded an aura of magic that defied cynical disbelief.

The chanting and keening that lifted fog-like from the religious warren sparked memory fragments. Shards of his childhood on Chargon tumbled through Orne's mind: *the religious processions on holy days . . . the image of Mahmud glowering down from the kiblah . . . and the azan ringing out across the great square on the day of Bairam—*

"Let no blasphemy occur nor permit a blasphemer to live! May such a one be accursed of God and of the blessed from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head, sleeping and waking, sitting and standing . . ."
Orne shook his head.

Yes, bow down to Ullua, the star wanderer of the Ayrbs, he thought. Now would be a great time for him to get religion!

But the roots were deep. He tightened the belt of his toga,

strode forward into the escalfield. Its feathery touch dropped him to the ground, disgorged him beside a covered walkway. A cluster of priests and students were pressed into the thin shade of the cover. They began to separate as Orne approached, leaving in pairs—a white-clad priest with each student.

One priest remained facing Orne. He was tall and with a thick body. There was a heavy feeling about him as though the ground would shudder when he walked. His head was shaved bald. Deep lines scratched patterns on his wide, jowled face. Dark eyes glowered from beneath overhanging grey brows.

"Are you Orne?" the priest rumbled.

Orne stepped under the walkway. "That's right." There was a yellowish gleam to the priest's skin.

"I am Bakrish," said the priest. He put his slab hands on his hips, glared at Orne. "You missed the ceremony of lustration."

Something about the heavy figure, the glowering face reminded Orne abruptly of an I-A gunnery sergeant he had known. The thought restored Orne's sense of balance, brought a grin to his face.

"Sorry," said Orne. "I was enjoying the view."

"You find something amusing?" demanded Bakrish.

"This humble face reflects happiness," said Orne, "Happiness to be on Amel."

"Oh. Well, come along." Bakrish turned away, strode off under the covered walk, not looking to see if Orne followed.

Orne shrugged, set off after the priest, found that he had to force himself to a half trot to keep up with the other's long-legged stride.

No moving walks, no hop-alongs, thought Orne. *This place is primitive.*

The walk jutted like a long beak from a windowless, low stone building. Double doors opened into a dim hall. The doors had to be opened manually, and one of them creaked. Bakrish led the way past rows of narrow cells open to the hall, came finally to another door. It let them into a cell slightly larger than the others, big enough to accommodate one small desk and two chairs. Pink light filled the room from concealed excitors.

Bakrish crossed the cell ahead of Orne, crunched into the chair behind the desk, motioned for Orne to take the other seat. "Sit down."

Orne complied, but with a

sudden feeling of wariness. Something here failed to add up for his highly tuned senses.

"As you know, we here on Amel live under the Ecumenical Truce," said Bakrish. "Your intelligence service will have briefed you on some of the significance behind that fact, of course."

Orne concealed his surprise at this turn in the conversation. He nodded.

Bakrish smiled. "The main thing you need to understand about it now is that there is nothing unusual in my being assigned as your guru."

"I *don't* understand."

"You are a follower of Mahmud. I am a Hynd and a *Wali*, under divine protection. Under the Truce, all of us serve the one God who has many names. You understand?"

"I see."

Bakrish nodded. "When Emolirdo told us about you, we had to see for ourselves, of course. That is why you are here."

Emolirdo a traitor! Iron control kept Orne from revealing his shock.

"You pose a fascinating problem," said Bakrish.

Anger coursed through Orne. *What a foul up!* He set his face in a wolfish grin, probed with his newly awak-

ened psi awareness for some weakness here, an emotion, a clue to the feeling of oddness about the room. "I'm so happy you've found something to keep you occupied," he said with resentment.

Bakrish leaned forward, glanced behind Orne, nodded. In the same instant, Orne felt the sensation of oddness dissipate. He whirled, caught a flicker of robe and a wheeled object being pulled away from the open door.

"That's better," said Bakrish. "Now we have the tensor phase pattern of your booster equipment. We can nullify it at will, or destroy you with it."

Orne froze. *What kind of a bomb did Emolirdo have the medics plant in me?*

"However, we do not wish to destroy you," said Bakrish. "For the time being we will not tamper with your equipment. We *want* you to use it."

Orne drew two deep breaths. Without volition, his psi training took over. He concentrated on the inner focus for calmness. It came like a wash of cool water: icy, ob-servant calm.

Boxed! All it took was one traitor! The thoughts blazed through his mind. But outwardly he remained calm, alert.

"Have you nothing to say?" asked Bakrish.

"Yes." Orne cleared his throat. "I want to see the Halmyrach Abbod. I've got to find out why you're trying to destroy the . . ."

"All in due time," said Bakrish.

"Where's the Abbod?"

"Nearby. When the time comes for you to have your audience with him it will be arranged."

"Meanwhile, I just wait for you to blow me up!"

"Blow you . . ." Bakrish looked puzzled. "Believe me, my young friend, we have no desire to cause your destruction. That is merely a necessary precaution. Now, there are two facts here: You want to find out about us, and we want to find out about you. The best way for both of us to accomplish our aims would be for you to submit to your ordeal. You really don't have any choice, of course."

"You mean I let you lead me around like a *grifka* being brought to the slaughterhouse! That or you put an end to me immediately!"

"It would be better if you just looked on this as an interesting test," murmured Bakrish. "Your bloody thoughts really aren't suitable."

"Somehow, I'm going to find

out what makes you tick," grated Orne. "When I do, I'm going to smash your main-spring!"

Bakrish frowned, swallowed. "You *must* be exposed to the holy mysteries," he said. His yellow skin paled.

Orne leaned back. His sudden burst of bravado had left an aftermath of embarrassment. He thought: *This joker should've laughed at me. He's in the driver's seat. But my threat frightened him. Why?*

"Do you submit to your ordeal?" asked Bakrish.

Orne pushed himself up out of the chair. "You said it for me: I really don't have any choice."

"This is the cell of meditation-on-faith," said Bakrish. "Stretch out on the floor, flat on your back. Do not try to sit up or stand until I give you permission. It is very dangerous."

"Why?" Orne looked around the room. It was high and narrow. Walls, floor and ceiling looked like white stone veined by thin brown lines like insect tracks. Pale white light, sourceless and as flat as skimmed milk, filled the room. A damp stone smell permeated the place.

"Flat on your back you are relatively safe," said Bakrish.

"Accept my word for it. I have seen the results of disbelief."

Orne cleared his throat, feeling suddenly cold. He sat down, stretched out on the floor. The stone was chill against his back.

"Once started on your ordeal, the only way out is to go through it," said Bakrish.

"Have you been through this?" asked Orne.

"But of course."

Orne probed for the other's motive-emotions, met a sense of cold sympathy . . . if the psi awareness could be trusted. After all, much of it had come from Emolirido, a traitor.

"So I've crawled into your tunnel . . . or is it a cave?" said Orne. "What's at the other end?"

"That's for you to discover."

"You're using me to find out something, Bakrish. What if I refuse to cooperate? Is that stalemate?"

A sense of tentative regret radiated from Bakrish. "When the scientist sees that his experiment has failed, he is not necessarily barred from further experiments . . . with new equipment. You truly have no choice."

"Then let's get on with it."

"As you will." Bakrish

moved to the end wall. It swung open to reveal the outer hallway, closed behind the priest. There was an abrupt feeling of increased pressure.

Orne studied the cell. It appeared to be about four meters long, two meters wide, some ten meters high. But the mottled stone ceiling appeared blurred. Perhaps the room was higher. The pale lighting could be designed for confusing the senses. He probed the prescient sense, felt its amorphous twinge—peril.

The priest's voice suddenly filled the room, booming from a concealed speaker: "You are enclosed within a psi machine. This ordeal is ancient and exacting: to test the quality of your faith. Failure means loss of your life, your soul or both."

Orne clenched his hands. Perspiration made his palms oily. An abrupt increase in background psi activity registered on his booster.

"Immerse yourself in the mystical stream," said Bakrish. "Of what are you afraid?"

Orne thought of the pressures focused on him, all the evidence of deep and hidden intent. "I don't like to act just on faith. I like to know where I'm going."

"Sometimes you must go for the sake of going," said Bakrish. "In fact, you do this all the time when . . ."

"Nuts!"

"When you press the stud to turn on a room's lights, you act on faith that there will be light," said Bakrish.

"Faith in past experience."

"And what about the first time?"

"I guess I must've been surprised at the light."

"Then prepare yourself for surprises, because there is no lighting mechanism in your cell. The light you see there exists because you desire it, and for no other reason."

"What . . ."

Darkness engulfed the room.

Bakrish's voice filled the darkness with a husky whisper. "Have faith."

The prescient warning gripped Orne: writhing terror. He fought down the desire to jump up and dash for the door-wall. The priest's warning, grimly matter of fact, had rung true. Death lay in flight.

Smokey glowing appeared near the ceiling, coiled down toward Orne.

Light?

Orne lifted his right hand. He couldn't see the hand. The radiance cast no light into the

rest of the cell. The sense of pressure in the cell increased with each heartbeat.

Light if I wish it? Well . . . it became dark when I doubted.

He thought of the milky light.

A shadowless illumination flickered into being, but near the ceiling where he had seen the glowing radiance there boiled a black cloud. It beckoned like the outer darkness of space.

Orne froze, staring.

Darkness filled the room.

Again, radiance glowed at the ceiling.

The claxon of prescient fear cried through Orne. He closed his eyes in the effort of concentration. Immediately fear lessened. His eyes snapped open in shock.

Fear!

And the ghostly glowing crawled nearer.

Eyes closed.

Still the sense of peril, but without immediacy.

Fear equals darkness. Even in the light, darkness beckons. He stilled his breathing, concentrated on the inner focus. Faith? Blind faith? What do they want of me? Fear brings the dark.

He forced his eyes to open, stared into the lightless void of the cell. Radiance coiling

downward. *Even in the darkness there is light. But it's not really light because I can't see by it.*

It was like a time he could remember—long ago in childhood: darkness in his own bedroom. Mooncast shadows transmuted to monsters. He had clenched his eyes tightly closed, fearful that if he opened them he would see a thing too horrible to face.

Orne stared up at the coiling radiance. *False light. Like false hope.* The radiance coiled backward into itself, receding. *Utter darkness equals utter fear.*

The radiance winked out.

Dank, stone-smelling darkness permeated the cell, a darkness infected with creeping sounds—claw scabbles and hisses, little slitherings . . .

Orne invested the sounds with every shape of terror his imagination could produce; poisonous lizards, insane monsters . . . The peril sense enfolded him, and he hung there suspended in it.

Bakrish's hoarse whisper snaked through the darkness: "Orne? Are your eyes open?"

His lips trembled with the effort to speak: "Yes."

"What do you see, Orne?"

An image suddenly danced onto the black field in front

of Orne: Bakrish in an eerie red light, leaping and capering, grimacing . . .

"What do you see?" hissed Bakrish.

"You. I see you in Sadun's inferno."

"The hell of Mahmud?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Orne, do you not prefer the light?"

"Why do I see you?"

"Orne, I beg of you! Choose the . . ."

"Why do I see you in . . ."

Orne broke off. He had the feeling that something peered inside him with heavy deliberation, checked his thoughts, his vital processes, weighed them. He knew suddenly that if he willed it, Bakrish would be cast into the deepest torture pit dreamed of in Mahmud's nightmares. *Why not? Then again: why? Who am I to decide? He may not be the right one. Perhaps the Halmyrach Abbod . . .*

Groaning, creaking filled the stones of the cell. A tongue of flame lanced out of the darkness above Orne, poised. It cast a ruddy glow on the stone walls.

Prescient fear clawed at him.

Faith? He had the inner knowledge—not faith—that in this instant he could do a

dangerous and devilish thing: cast a man into eternal torture. *Which man and why? No man.* He rejected the choice.

Above him, the dancing flame receded, winked out, leaving only darkness and its slithering noises. Realization swept over Orne: he felt his own fingernails trembling and scrabbling against the stone floor—*claws!* He laughed aloud, stilled his hands. The claw sound stopped. He felt his feet writhing with involuntary efforts at flight. He stilled his feet, recognized the absence of the suggestive slithering sound. And the hissing! He focused on it, realized that it was his own breath fighting through clenched teeth.

Orne laughed.

Light?

In sudden perversity, he rejected the idea of light. Somehow, he knew this machine was responding to his innermost wishes, but only to those wishes uncensored by a doubting consciousness. Light was his for the willing of it, but he chose the darkness, and in the sudden release of tension, ignored Bakrish's warning, got to his feet. He smiled into the darkness, said: "Open the door, Bakrish."

Again, Orne felt something peer inside him, and recognized it for a psi probe—greatly magnified from the training probe used by Emolirido. Someone was checking his motives.

"I'm not afraid," said Orne. "Open the door."

A scraping sound grated in the cell. Light fanned inward from the hall as the end wall swung open. Orne looked out at Bakrish, a shadow framed against the light like a robed statue.

The Hynd stepped forward, jerked to a halt as he saw Orne standing.

"Did you not prefer the light, Orne?"

"No."

"But you must have understood this test: you're standing . . . unafraid of my warning."

"This machine obeys my uncensored will," said Orne. "That's faith: the uncensored will."

"You *do* understand. And still you preferred the dark?"

"Does that bother you, Bakrish?"

"Yes, it does."

"Good."

"I see." Bakrish bowed. "Thank you for sparing me."

"You know about that?"

"I felt flames and heat, smelled the burning . . ." The

priest shook his head. "The life of a guru here is not safe. Too many possibilities."

"You were safe," said Orne. "I censored my will."

"The most enlightened degree of faith," murmured Bakrish.

"Is that all there is to my ordeal?" Orne then glanced around at the darkened cell walls.

"Merely the first step," said Bakrish. "There are seven steps in all: the test of faith, the test of the miracle's two faces, the test of dogma and ceremony, the test of ethics, the test of the religious ideal, the test of service to life, and the test of the mystical experience. They do not necessarily fall in that order."

Orne felt the absence of immediate prescient fear. He tasted a sense of exhilaration. "Then let's get on with it."

Bakrish sighed. "Holy Empress defend me," he muttered, then: "Yes, of course. Your next step: the miracle's two faces."

And the prescient sense of peril began to flicker within Orne. Angrily, he put it aside. *I have faith*, he thought. *Faith in myself. I've proved I can conquer my fear.*

"Well, what're we waiting for?" he demanded.

"Come along," said Bakrish. He turned with a swirl of his white robe, led the way down the hall.

Orne followed. "By miracle, do you mean psi focus?"

"What difference does it make what we call it?" asked Bakrish.

"If I solve all your riddles, do you take the heat off the I-A?" asked Orne.

"The heat . . . Oh, you mean . . . That is a question for the Halmyrach Abbod to decide."

"He's nearby, eh?"

"Very near."

Bakrish stopped before a heavy bronze door at the end of the hall, turned an ornate handle at one side, threw his shoulder against the door. It creaked open. "We generally don't come this way," he said. "These two tests seldom are included in the same ordeal."

Orne blinked, followed the priest through the door into a gigantic round room. Stone walls curved away to a domed ceiling far above them. In the high curve of the ceiling slit windows admitted thin shafts of light that glittered downward through gilt dust. Orne followed the light downward to its focus on a straight barrier wall about twenty meters high and forty or fifty meters long, chopped

off and looking incomplete in the middle of the room. The wall was dwarfed in the immensity of the domed space.

Bakrish circled around behind Orne, swung the heavy door closed, nodded toward the central barrier. "We go over there." He led the way.

Their slapping footsteps echoed off the walls. The damp stone smell was strong, like a bitter taste. Orne glanced left, saw doors evenly spaced around the room's perimeter, bronze doors like the one they had entered.

As they approached the barrier, Orne centered his attention on it. The surface looked to be a smooth gray plastic—featureless, but somehow menacing.

Bakrish stopped about ten meters from the middle of the wall. Orne stopped beside him, became conscious of prescient fear: something to do with the wall. Within him there was a surging and receding like waves on a beach. Emolirido had described this sensation and interpreted it: *Infinite possibilities in a situation basically perilous.*

A blank wall?

"Orne, is it not true that a man should obey the orders of his superiors?" Bakrish's voice carried a hollow echo in the immensity of the room.

Orne's throat felt dry. He cleared it, rasped: "I suppose so . . . if the orders make sense. Why?"

"You were sent here as a spy, Orne. By rights, anything that happens to you is no concern of ours. Is that not so?"

Orne tensed. "What're you driving at?"

Bakrish looked down at Orne, large eyes dark and glistening. "Sometimes these machines frighten us. Their methods are so unpredictable, and anyone who comes within the field of one of them can be subjected to its power."

"Like back there in that cell when you hung at the edge of the inferno?"

Bakrish shuddered. "Yes."

"But I still have to go through with this thing?"

"You must. It is the only way you will accomplish what you were sent here to do . . . and . . . you could not stop now, anyway. The ball is rolling down the hill. You don't even want to stop."

Orne tested this against his own feelings, shrugged. "I am curious."

"The thing is, Orne, you suspect us and fear us. These lead to hate. We saw that back there at the cell. But hate can be supremely dan-

gerous to you in this present test. You . . .”

A scraping sound behind them brought Orne's attention around. Two oblate brothers deposited a heavy, square-armed chair on the stone floor facing the wall. They cast frightened glances at Orne, the wall, turned and scampered toward one of the heavy bronze doors.

“As I was saying, Orne, I am merely following orders here. I beg of you not to hate me, nor to hate anyone. You should not harbor hate during this test.”

“What frightened those two fellows who brought that chair?” asked Orne. He watched the pair scurry through their door, slam it behind them.

“They know the reputation of this test. The very fabric of our world is woven into it. Many things can hang in the balance here. Infinite possibilities.”

Cautiously, Orne probed for Bakrish's motives. The priest obviously sensed the probe. He said: “I am afraid, Orne. Is that what you wanted to know?”

“Why are you afraid?”

“In *my* ordeal, this test proved nearly fatal. I had sequestered a core of hate. This

place clutches at me even now.” He shivered.

Orne found the priest's fright unsteady. He looked at the chair. It was squat, ugly. An inverted metallic bowl projected on an arm over the seat. “What's the chair?”

“You must sit down in it.”

Orne glanced at the gray wall, at Bakrish, back to the chair. There was tension here as though each heartbeat pumped pressure into the room. The surging and receding of his prescient sense increased, but he felt himself committed to this blind course.

“*Sometimes we must go for the sake of going.*” The words rang in his memory. Who had said them?

He crossed to the chair, turned, sat down. In the act of sitting, the prescient sense of peril came to full surge, stayed. But there was no time for a change of heart. Metal bands leaped from concealed openings in the chair, pinned his arms, circled his chest and legs. Orne surged against them, twisting.

“Do not struggle,” warned Bakrish. “You cannot escape.”

Orne sank back.

“Please, Orne: you must not hate us. Your danger is

magnified manyfold if you do. Hate could make you fail."

"Dragging you down with me, eh?"

"Quite possibly," muttered Bakrish. "One never quite escapes the consequences of his hate." He stepped behind the chair, lowered the inverted bowl over Orne's head. "If you move suddenly or try to jerk away the microfilament probes within this bowl will cause you great pain."

Orne felt something touch his scalp, crawling, tickling. "What is this?"

"One of the great psi machines." Bakrish adjusted something on the chair. Metal clicked. "Observe the wall. It can manifest your most latent urges. You can bring about miracles, call forth the dead, do many wonders. You may be on the brink of a deep mystical experience."

Orne swallowed in a dry throat. "You mean if I wanted my father to appear here he would?"

"He is deceased?"

"Yes."

"Then it could happen. But I must caution you. The things you see here will not be hallucination. And one thing more: If you are successful in calling forth the dead, you must realize that what you call forth will be

that dead person, and yet not that dead person."

The back of Orne's right arm itched. He longed to scratch it. "How can . . ."

"The paradox is like this: any living creature manifested here through your will must be invested with your psyche as well as its own. The original matter is not present. Therefore, the new matter will impinge on your matter. All of your memories will be available to whatever living flesh you call forth."

"But . . ."

"Hear me out, Orne. In some cases, your *creates* may fully understand their duality. Others will reject your half out of hand because they have not the capacity. Some may even lack sentience."

Orne felt the fear driving Bakrish's words, sensed truth in them. *He believes this, anyway.* He said: "But why trap me here in this chair?"

"It's important that you do not run away from yourself." Bakrish's hand fell on Orne's shoulder. "I must leave you now. May grace guide you."

There was a swishing of robes as the priest strode away. Presently, a door closed, its sound a hollow sharpness. Orne felt infinitely alone.

A faint humming became audible—distant bee sound. The booster in his neck tugged sharply, and he felt the flare of a psi field around him. The barrier wall blinked alive to the color of grass green, and immediately began to crawl with iridescent purple lines. They squirmed and writhed like countless glowing worms trapped in a viscid green aquarium.

Orne drew in a shuddering breath. Prescient fear hammered at him. The crawling purple lines held hypnotic fascination. Some appeared to waft out toward him. The shape of Diana's face glowed momentarily among them. He tried to hold the image, saw it melt away.

Because she's alive? he wondered.

Shapeless deformities squirmed across the wall, coalesced abruptly into the outline of a *shriggar*, the saw-toothed lizard that Chargonian mothers invoked to frighten their children into obedience. The image took on more substance, developed yellow scale plates, stalk eyes.

Time suddenly slowed to a grinding, creeping pace within Orne. He thought back to his childhood on Chargon: terror memories.

But even then shriggar were extinct, he told himself.

Memory persisted down a long corridor full of empty echoes that suggested gibbering insanity. Down . . . down . . . down . . . He remembered childish laughter, a kitchen, his mother. And there were his sisters screaming derisively. And he remembered himself cowering, ashamed. He couldn't have been more than three years old. He had come running into the house to babble that he had seen a *shriggar* . . . in the deep shadows of the creek gully.

Laughing girls! Hateful little girls! "He thinks he saw a shriggar!" "Hush now, you two!"

On the green wall, the *shriggar* outline bulged outward. A taloned foot extended. It stepped from the wall onto the stone floor: half again as tall as a man, stalked eyes swivelling right, left . . .

Orne jerked out of his reverie, felt sudden throbbing in his head as movement disturbed the microfilament probes.

There was the scratching of talons on stone as the *shriggar* took three tentative steps away from the wall. Orne tasted the fear within

himself, thought: *Some ancestor of mine was hunted by such a creature! The panic goes too deep!* It was a clear thought that flickered through his mind while every sense remained focused on the nightmare lizard.

Its yellow scales rasped with every breath it took. The narrow, birdlike head twisted to one side, lowered. Its beak mouth opened to reveal a forked tongue and saw teeth.

Primordial instinct pressed Orne back in his chair. He smelled the stink of the creature: sickly sweet with overtones of sour cheese.

The *shriggar* bobbed its head, coughed: "*Chunk!*" Its stalk eyes moved, centered on Orne. One taloned foot lifted and it plunged into motion toward the figure trapped in the chair. Its high-stepping lope stopped about four meters away, and the lizard cocked its head to one side while it examined Orne.

He stared up at it, his only bodily sensation a vague awareness of tightness across chest and stomach. The beast stink was almost overpowering.

Behind the *shriggar*, the green wall continued to wriggle with iridescent purple lines. It was a background blur on Orne's eyes. The liz-

ard moved closer, and he smelled a draft of breath as fetid as swamp ooze.

No matter what Bakrish said, this has to be hallucination, he told himself. *Shriggar have been extinct for centuries*. But then another thought blinked at him: *The priests could have bred zoo specimens to maintain the species. How does anyone know what's been done here in the name of religion?*

The *shriggar* cocked its head to the other side.

At the green wall, lines solidified. Two children dressed in scanty sun aprons skipped out onto the stone floor. Their footsteps echoed, and childish giggling sounded in the vast emptiness. One child appeared to be about five years old, the other slightly older—possibly eight. The older child carried a small bucket with a toy shovel protruding from it. They stopped, looked around, confused.

The *shriggar* turned its head, bent its stalk eyes toward them. It swivelled its body back toward the wall, poised one foot, lunged into its high-stepping lope.

The youngest child looked up, squealed.

The *shriggar* increased its speed.

Shocked, Orne recognized the children: his two sisters, the ones who had laughed at his fearful cries on that long ago day. It was as though he had brought this incident to life for the sole purpose of venting his hate, inflicting on these children the thing they had derided.

The lizard swooped down, blocked the children from view. Orne tried to close his eyes, could not. There came a shriek cut off with abrupt finality. Unable to stop, the *shriggar* hit the green wall, melted into it!

The older child lay sprawled on the floor still clutching her bucket and toy shovel. A red smear spread across the stones beside her. She stared across the room at Orne, slowly got to her feet.

No matter what Bakrish said, this can't be real, thought Orne. Yet he felt an odd wash of relief that the *shriggar* had vanished.

The child began walking toward Orne, swinging her bucket. Her right hand clutched the toy shovel. She stared fixedly at Orne. He brought her name into his mind: *Lurie, my sister, Lurie. But she's a grown woman now, married and with children of her own.*

Flecks of sand marked the child's legs and cheeks. One of her two blonde braids hung down partly undone. She looked angry, shivering with an eight-year-old's fury. About two meters away she stopped.

"You did that!" she screamed.

Orne shuddered at the madness in the child voice. She lifted the bucket, hurled its contents at him. He shut his eyes, felt coarse sand deluge his face, pelt the silver dome, run down his cheeks. Pain coursed through him as he shook his head, disrupting the microfilaments against his scalp. Through slitted eyes he saw the dancing lines on the green wall leap into wild motion—bending, twisting, flinging. Orne stared at the purple frenzy through a red haze of pain. And he remembered the guru's warning that any life he called forth here would contain his own psyche as well as its own.

"Lurie," he said, "please try to . . ."

"You tried to get into my head!" she screamed. "But I pushed you out!"

Bakrish had said it: "*Others will reject your half out of hand because they have not the capacity.*" This dual create had rejected him

because her eight-year-old mind could not accept such an experience. And Orne realized that he was taking this scene as reality and not as hallucination.

"I'm going to kill you!" screamed Lurie.

She hurled herself at him, the toy shovel swinging. Light glinted from the tiny blade. It slashed down on his right arm. *Abrupt pain!* Blood darkened the sleeve of his gown.

Orne felt himself caught up in a nightmare. Words leaped to his lips: "Stop that, Lurie! God will punish you!"

Movement behind the child. He looked up.

A toga-clad figure in red turban came striding out of the green wall: a tall man with gleaming eyes, the face of a tortured ascetic—long gray beard parted in the *sufi* manner.

Orne whispered the name: "*Mahmud!*"

A gigantic tri-di of that face dominated the inner mosque of Chargon.

God will punish you!

Orne remembered standing beside his father, staring up at the image in the mosque, bowing to it.

The Mahmud figure strode up behind Lurie, caught her arm as she started another

blow. She turned, struggling, but he held her, twisted the arm slowly, methodically. A bone snapped with sickening sharpness. The child screamed and screamed and kept screaming.

"Don't!" protested Orne.

Mahmud had a low, rumbling voice. He said: "One does not command God's agent to stop His just punishment." He held the child's hair, stooped, caught up the fallen shovel, slashed it across her neck. The screaming stopped. Blood spurted over his gown. He let the now limp figure fall to the floor, dropped the shovel, turned to Orne.

Nightmare! thought Orne. *This has to be a nightmare!*

"You are thinking this is a nightmare," rumbled Mahmud.

And Orne remembered: this creature, too, if it were real, could think with his reactions and memories. He rejected the thought. "You *are* a nightmare!"

"Your *create* had done its work," said Mahmud. "It had to be disposed of, you know, because it was embodied by hate, not by love."

Orne felt sickened, guilty, angry. He remembered that this test involved understand-

ing miracles. "This was a miracle?" he demanded.

"What is a miracle?" asked Mahmud.

Abruptly, an air of suspense enclosed Orne. Precipitous fear sucked at his vitals.

"What is a miracle?" repeated Mahmud.

Orne felt his heart hammering. He couldn't seem to focus on the words, stammered: "Are you really an agent of God?"

"Quibbles and labels!" barked Mahmud. "Don't you know about labels? An expediency! There's something *beyond* your labels. Where the zone of the word stops, something else begins."

A tingling sense of madness pricked through Orne. He felt himself balanced on the edge of chaos. "What is a miracle?" he whispered. And he thought back to Emolirido: *words . . . chaos . . . energy. Psi equals miracle! No. More labels. Energy.*

"Energy from chaos moulded into duration," he said.

"Very close for words," murmured Mahmud. "Is a miracle good or evil?"

"Everybody says miracles are good." Orne took a deep breath. "But they don't have to be either. Good and evil are all tied up in motives."

"Man has motives," said Mahmud.

"Man can be good or evil in his miracles by any definition he wants," said Orne.

Mahmud lifted his head, stared down his nose at Orne. "Yes?"

After a moment of tension, Orne returned the stare. Success in this test had taken on a deep meaning for him. He could feel the inner goading. "Do you want me to say that men create gods to enforce their definitions of good and evil?"

"Do I?"

"So I've said it!"

"Is that all you have to say?"

Orne had to force his attention onto the meanings of words. It was like wading upstream in a swift river. So easy to relax and forget it all. His thoughts showed a tendency to scatter. *Is what all I have to say?*

"What is it about men's creations?" demanded Mahmud. "What is it about any creation?"

Orne recalled the nightmare sequence of events in this test. He wondered: *Could this psi machine amplify the energy we call religion? Bakrish said I could bring the dead to life here.*

Religion's supposed to have a monopoly on that. And the original Mahmud's certainly dead. Been dead for centuries. Provided it isn't hallucination, this whole thing makes a peculiar kind of sense. Even then . . .

"You know the answer," said Mahmud.

Orne nodded. "Creations may act independently of their creators."

"Ah-hah! You have learned this lesson!"

Mahmud stooped, lifted the dead child figure. There was an odd tenderness to his motions. He turned away, marched back into the writhings of the green wall. Silence blanketed the room. The dancing purple lines became almost static, moved in viscous torpor.

Orne felt drained of energy. His arms and legs ached as though he had been using their muscles to the absolute limit. He felt that he must rest for awhile.

A bronze clangor echoed behind him, and the green wall returned to its featureless gray. Footsteps slapped against the stone floor. Hands worked at the metallic bowl, lifted it off his head. The straps that held him to the chair fell away. Bakrish came

around to stand in front of Orne.

"Did I pass this test?" asked Orne.

"You are alive and still in possession of your soul, are you not?"

"How do I know if I still have my soul?"

"One knows by the absence," murmured Bakrish. He glanced down at Orne's wounded arm. "We must get that bandaged. It's night and time for the next step in your ordeal."

"Night?" Orne glanced up at the slitted windows in the dome, saw darkness punctured by stars. He looked around, realized that shadowless exciter light had replaced the daylight. "Time goes quickly here."

"For some . . . not for others."

"I feel so tired."

"We'll give you an energy pill when we fix the arm. Come along."

"What's this next test?"

"You must walk through the shadow of dogma and ceremony, Orne. For it is written that motive is the father of ethics, and caution is the brother of fear . . ." he paused ". . . and fear is the daughter of pain."

There was a nip of chill in the night air. Orne felt

thankful now for the thickness of the robe around him. A cooing of birds sounded from the deeper shadows of a park area ahead. Beyond the park arose a hill outlined against the stars, and up the hill marched a snake-track of moving lights.

Bakrish spoke from beside Orne. "The lights are carried by students. Each student has a pole, and on its top a translucent box. The four sides of the boxes each show a different color: red, blue, yellow and green."

Orne watched the lights. They flickered like weird phosphorescent insects in the dark. "What's the reason for that?"

"They show their piety."

"I mean the four colors?"

"Ah. Red for the blood you dedicate to your god, blue for the truth, yellow for the richness of religious experience, and green for the growth of that experience."

"So they march up the mountain."

"Yes. To show their piety." Bakrish took Orne's arm. "The procession is coming out of the city through a gate in the wall over here. There will be a light for you there. Come along."

They crossed the park,

stopped by a narrow gate. Bakrish took a pole from a rack beside the wall, twisted the handle and light glowed at the top. "Here."

The pole felt slippery smooth in Orne's hand. The light above him was turned to cast a red glow on the people passing through the gate: a student, then a priest, a student, then a priest . . . Their faces carried a uniform gravity.

The end of the procession appeared. "Stay behind that priest," said Bakrish. He urged Orne into the line, fell in behind.

Immediately, prescient fear tugged at Orne's energy. He stumbled, faltered, heard Bakrish grunt: "Keep up! Keep up!"

Orne recovered his balance. His light cast a dull green reflection off the back of the priest ahead. A murmuring, shuffling sounded from the procession. Insects chattered in the tall grass beside their trail. Orne looked up. The bobbing lights wove a meander line up the hill.

The prescient fear grew stronger. Orne fell fragmented. Part of him cowered sickly with the thought that he could fail here. Another part groped out for the chimera of this ordeal. He sensed tremendous

elation only a heartbeat away, but this only piled fuel on his fear. It was as though he struggled to awaken from a nightmare within a nightmare, knowing that the pseudo-awakening would only precipitate him into new terror.

The line halted. Orne stumbled to a stop, focused on what was happening around him. Students bunched into a semi-circle. Their lights bounced multicolored gleams off a stone stupa about twice the height of a man. A bearded priest, his head covered by a red three-cornered hat, his body vague motions under a long black robe, stood in front of the stupa like a dark judge at some mysterious trial.

Orne found a place in the outer ring of students, peered between two of them.

The red-hatted priest bowed, spoke in a resonant bass voice: "You stand before the shrine of purity and the law, the two inseparables of all true belief. Here before you is a key to the great mystery that can lead you to paradise. Observe well."

Orne felt tension, then the impact of a strong psi field, realized abruptly that this psi field was different. It beat like a metronome with the cadence of the priest's words ris-

ing with the passion of his speech.

"... the immortal goodness and purity of all the great prophets!" he was saying. "Conceived in purity, born in purity, their thoughts ever bathed in goodness! Untouched by base nature in all their aspects!"

With a shock, Orne realized that this psi field around him arose not from some machine, but from a blending of emotions in the rapt students here. The emotions he sensed played subtle harmonics on the overriding field. It was as though the priest played these people as a musician might play his instrument.

"... the eternal truth of this divine dogma!" shouted the priest.

Incense wafted across Orne's nostrils. A hidden voder began to emit low organ notes: a rumbling, sonorous melody. To the right, Orne saw a graveman circling the ring of students and priests waving a censer. Blue smoke hung over the mass of people in ghostly curls. From off in the darkness a bell tinkled seven times.

Orne felt like a man hypnotized, thinking: *Massed emotions act like a psi field! Great God! What is a psi field?*

The priest raised both arms, fists clenched. "Eternal paradise to all true believers! Eternal damnation to all unbelievers!" His voice lowered. "You students seeking the eternal truth, fall down to your knees and beg for enlightenment. Pray for the veil to be lifted from your eyes."

There was a shuffling and whisper of robes as the students around Orne sank to their knees. Still Orne stared ahead, all attention caught up in his discovery. *Massed emotions act like a psi field!*

A muttering sound passed through the students.

What is a psi field? Orne asked himself. He felt an answer lurking in a hidden corner of his mind.

Angry glances were directed at Orne from the kneeling students. The muttering grew louder. Belatedly, Orne became aware of danger. Precipitous fear was like a claxon roaring within him.

Bakrish leaned close, whispered: "There's a trail into the woods off to your right. Better start working toward it."

At the far side of the kneeling crowd a student lifted an arm, pointed at Orne. "What about him? He's a student!"

Someone lost in the mass of people shouted: "Unbeliev-

er!" Others took it up like a mindless chant.

Orne grasped his light standard tightly, began inching his way to the right. Tension in the crowd was like a fuse smoking and sizzling toward a mass of explosives.

The red-hatted priest glared at Orne, dark face contorted in the kaleidoscopic gleams of the students' lights. He thrust out an arm toward Orne. "Death to unbelievers!"

Students began climbing to their feet.

Orne moved faster, stumbling back into the darkness beyond the lights, realized he still carried his own light like a waving beacon. Its colored reflections picked out a side trail leading off into blackness.

The priest's voice behind him leaped to an insane pitch: "Bring me the head of that blasphemer!"

Orne hurled his light standard like a spear at the suddenly congested group behind him, whirled, fled along the trail.

A ragged, demoniacal yell lifted into the night from the mass of students. A thunder of footsteps pounded after him.

Orne put on more speed. His eyes adjusted to the star-

light, and he could just make out the line of the trail curving around the slope to the left. A blotch of deeper blackness loomed ahead.

The woods?

The scrambling mob sound filled the night behind him.

Under Orne's feet, the path became uneven, twisted to the right down to a steep slope, turned left. He tripped, almost fell. His robe caught on bushes, and he lost seconds freeing himself, glanced back. Another few seconds and the lights of the mob would reveal him. He came to a split second decision, plunged off the trail downhill to the right and parallel to the line of trees. Bushes snagged his robe. He fumbled with the belt, shed the robe.

"I hear him!" someone screamed from above.

The mob came to a plunging stop, held silent. Orne's crashing progress dominated the night sounds.

"Down there!"

And they were after him.

"His head!" someone screamed. "Tear his head off him!"

Orne plunged on, feeling cold and exposed in nothing but sandals and the light shorts he had worn beneath the robe. The mob was a crashing avalanche on the hill

above him: curses, thumps and tearing sounds, waving lights. Abruptly, Orne stumbled onto another trail, was almost across it before he could turn left. His legs ached. There was a tight band across his chest. He plunged into deeper darkness, glanced up to see trees outlined against the stars. The mob was a confused clamor behind him.

Orne stopped, listened to the voices: "Part of you go that way! We'll go this way!"

He drew in gasping breaths, looked around. *Like a hunted animal!* he thought. And he remembered Bakrish's words: ". . . caution is the brother of fear . . ." He smiled grimly, slipped off the trail downhill to the right, ducked beneath low limbs, crawled behind a log. Moving softly, silently, he dug dirt from beside the log, smeared it over his face and chest.

Lights came closer along the trail. He heard the angry voices.

Keeping his head down, Orne wriggled deeper into the trees, arose to his knees, slid down a hill. He worked his way to the right down the hill. The mob sounds grew dim, faded. He crossed another trail, melted through more

trees and bushes. His wounded arm ached, and unaccountably this reminded him of the itching sensation he had felt while strapped in the chair . . . *an itching like a healing wound but before the wound!* He felt that he had met another clue, but its meaning baffled him.

The trees thinned, bushes grew farther apart. He came out onto the flat park area, a lawn underfoot. Beyond the park he saw the wall, and above that streetlights and glowing windows.

Bakrish said the Halmyrach Abbod is in this city, thought Orne. *Why bother with the lower echelons? I'm a field agent of the I-A. It's time I got down to work.* And in the back of his mind another thought niggled: *Did I pass that last test?* Angrily, he pushed the thought aside, crouched as footsteps sounded on a path to his left.

Through the thin starlight filtered by scattered trees he saw a priest in white walking along the path. Orne flattened himself against a tree, waited. Fragrance of night blooming flowers crossed his nostrils. Birds whirring and rustling sounded from the branches overhead. The footsteps came closer.

Orne waited for the priest

to pass, slipped out behind him.

Presently, Orne strode toward the wall and the streetlights. The priest's robe hung a little long. He tucked a fold under the belt, smiled. In the dark bushes at the edge of the park lay an unconscious figure bound and gagged with strips torn from his own underclothing.

Now, we see what makes this place tick, thought Orne. He paused while still in the shadows of the park, scrubbed at the dirt on his face and chest with an undercorner of the robe, then continued on his way calmly—a priest out on normal business. Or so it would seem.

No movement showed beyond the low wall. Orne walked along it, entered by a gate, crossed to an alley. A sour smell of cooking tainted the narrow way. The slapping of his sandalled feet made a double echo off the stone walls. Ahead, a standard light showed the crossing of another narrow alley.

Orne stopped as thin shadows projected across the intersection. Two priests strode into view. Orne hurried ahead, recalled a religious greeting from his own childhood training on Chargon. "Shari'a,

gentle sirs," he said. "God grant you peace."

The pair stopped with their faces in shadows, half turned in his direction. The near one spoke: "May you follow the highway of divine command and guidance." The other said: "May we be of service?"

"I am from another sector and have been summoned to the Halmyrach Abbod," said Orne. "I seem to have lost my way." He waited, alert to every movement from the pair.

"These alleys are like a maze," said the nearest priest. "But you are near." He turned, and the street light revealed a pinched-in face, narrow eyes. "Take the next turning to your right. Follow that way to the third turning left. That street ends at the court of the Abbod."

"I am grateful," murmured Orne.

"A service to one of God's creatures is a service to God," said the priest. "May you find wisdom." The pair bowed, passed around Orne, went on their way.

Orne smiled into the darkness, thinking: *Old I-A maxim—Go straight to the top.*

The street of the Abbod proved to be even narrower than the others. Orne could

have stretched out his arms to touch both walls. At the end of the alley a door glowed dimly grey in reflected starlight. The door proved to be locked.

A locked door? he thought. *Can all be sweetness and purity here?* He stepped back, peered up at the wall. Dark irregularities there suggested spikes or a similar barrier. His thought was cynically amused: *Such civilized appointments on this peaceful planet!*

A glance back up the alley showed it still empty. He shed the priestly robe, swung a hemmed corner up onto the wall, pulled. The robe slipped back slightly, caught. There was a small tearing sound as he tested it, but the robe held. He tried his weight on it. The fabric stretched, but remained firmly caught.

Scrabbling sounds marked his passage up the wall. He avoided sharp spikes on the top, crouched there. One window in the building wall opposite him glowed with a dim rose color behind loose draperies. He glanced down, saw a starlit courtyard, tall pots in rows topped with flowering bushes. Another glance at the window, and he felt the abrupt stab of prescient fear. *Danger there!* An air of ten-

sion hung over the courtyard.

Orne freed the robe from the spike, dropped into the courtyard, crouched in shadows while he slipped back into the priest's garment. One deep breath, and he began working his way around the courtyard to the left, hugging the shadows. Vines dropped from a balcony below the lighted window. He tested one, found it too fragile, moved farther along the wall. A draft touched his left cheek. Darker blackness there—an open door.

Prescient fear tingled along his nerves. Angrily, he put down the fear, slipped through the door into the hall.

Light glared in the hall!

Orne froze, then suppressed laughter as he saw the beam switch beside the door. He stepped back: darkness. Forward: light.

Stairs climbed curving to the left at the end of the hall. Orne moved quietly along the hall, paused at the foot of the stairs, looked up at a heavy wooden door with golden initials on it in bas relief: "H.A."

Halmyrach Abbod! Right to the top!

He slipped up the stairs, cautiously gripped the door handle, turned it with the

gentlest of pressure. The lock clicked. He threw the door open, lunged through, slammed the door behind him.

"Ah, Mr. Orne. Very resourceful of you." It was a faintly tenor masculine voice with just an edge of quaver to it.

Orne slewed around, saw a wide hooded bed. Remote in the bed like a dark-skinned doll sat a man in a nightshirt. He was propped up by a mound of pillows. The face looked familiar. It was narrow, smooth-skinned with a nose that hung like a precipice over a wide mouth. His head was polished dark baldness.

The wide mouth moved, and the faintly quavering tenor voice said: "I am the Halmyrach Abbod. You wished to see me?"

An aura of oldness hung over the man in the bed like an ancient odor of parchment.

Orne took two steps toward the bed, his prescient fear clamoring. He paused, recalling the resemblance. "You look like Emolirido."

"My younger brother, Mr. Orne. Do be seated." He gestured toward a chair beside the bed. "Forgive me for receiving you this way, but I find myself jealous of my rest in these later years."

Orne moved to the chair.

Something about this skinny ancient spoke of deadliness beyond anything Orne had ever before encountered. He glanced around the room, saw dark hangings on the walls covered with weird shapes: curves and squares, pyramids, swastikas and a repetitive symbol like an anchor—a vertical line with an arc at its base. The floor was black and white tile of gigantic pentagonal pieces, each at least two meters across. Furniture of polished woods was crowded into the corners: a desk, a low table, chairs, a tape rack and a stand in the shape of a spiral staircase.

"Have you already summoned your guards?" asked Orne.

"I have no need of them, Mr. Orne. Please sit down." Again the skeletal arm gestured toward the chair.

Orne looked at the chair. It had no arms to conceal secret bindings.

"The chair is just a chair," said the Abbod.

Orne sat down like a man plunging into cold water, tensed.

The Abbod smiled. "You see?"

Orne wet his lips with his tongue. Something was wrong here. This was not working

out at all as he had imagined. "I came here to find out some things," he said.

"Good. We shall share information."

"Why're you people out to get the I-A?"

"First things first, Mr. Orne. Have you deciphered the intent of your ordeal?" The Abbod's large eyes, brown and glossy, stared at Orne. "Do you know why you cooperated with us?"

"What else could I do?"

"Many things, as you have demonstrated just this night."

"All right, I was curious."

"About what?"

Orne lowered his eyes, felt something quicken within himself.

"Be honest with yourself, Mr. Orne."

"I . . . I suspected you were teaching me things about myself that . . . that I didn't already know."

"Superb!" The Abbod was smiling. "But you were a product of the Marakian civilization. All aberative tendencies had been removed at an early age by microsurgical *atenture*. How, then, could there be left anything about yourself that you did not know?"

"There just *was*. I found out I could be afraid without knowing why. I . . ."

"Had you ever heard of the thaumaturgic psychiatrists of the ancient Christian era?"

"What era was that?"

"Long ago. So long ago that there are left only small, tantalizing fragments to tell us of those days. The Christeros religion derives from that period."

"What about it?"

"You have not heard of these ancient practices?"

"I know there were mental sciences before the microsurgical techniques were developed. Is that what you mean?"

"In a way." The Abbod fell silent, waiting.

Orne swallowed. This was not going the way it should have gone. He felt on the defensive, and all he faced was one skinny old man in a ridiculous nightshirt. Anger swelled in Orne. "I came here to find out if you people were fomenting war!"

"And what if we were? What then? Were you prepared to be the surgeon, to cut out the infection and leave society in its former health?"

Orne's anger receded.

"Do you not see the parallel, Mr. Orne?" The Abbod frowned. "The best of a supreme mechanistic science worked you over and declared you sane, balanced, clear. Yet

there remained something more that they had not touched."

"Then there's something the I-A isn't . . . touching?"

"But of course."

"What?"

"Most of every iceberg is beneath the surface of the sea," said the Abbod.

A tiny wave of Orne's anger surged back. Now what's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Then let us approach it this way," said the Abbod. "The Guru called Pasawan, who led the Ramakrishnanas into the Great Unifying we know as the Ecumenical Truce, was a follower of the Hynd doctrine. This has always taught the divinity of the soul, the unity of all existence, the oneness of the Godhead and the harmony of all religions."

Orne stiffened. "You're not going to get anywhere trying to force a lot of religious pap down my throat!"

"One does not successfully force religion onto anyone," murmured the Abbod. "If it pleases you to do so, you may consider this in the nature of a history lesson."

Orne sank back in the chair. "So get on with it."

"Thanks to Pasawan, we

believe we have developed here a science of religion. The discovery of psi powers and an interpretation of their significance tends to confirm our postulates."

"Which are?"

"That mankind, acting somewhat as a great psi machine, does create a force, an energy system. We may refer to this system as religion, and invest it with an independent focus of action which we will call God. But remember that a god without discipline faces the same fate as the merest human under the same circumstances. It is unfortunate that mankind has always been so attracted by visions of absolutes—even in his gods."

Orne recalled his experience that night when he had felt a psi field surging out of the emotions in the massed students. He rubbed his chin.

"Let us consider this idea of absolutes," said the Abbod. "Let us postulate a finite system in which a given *being* may exhaust all avenues of knowledge—know everything, as it were."

In an intuitive leap, Orne saw the image being painted by the Abbod's words. He blurted: "It'd be worse than death!"

"Unutterable, deadly boredom would face such a being.

It's future would be endless repetition, replaying all of its old tapes. A boredom worse than extinction."

"But boredom is a kind of stasis," said Orne. "Stasis would lead to chaos."

"And what do we have?" asked the Abbod. "We have chaos: an infinite system where *anything* can happen—a place of constant change. And let us recognize one of the inevitable properties of this infinite system. If *anything* can happen, then our hypothetical *being* could be extinguished. Quite a price to pay to escape boredom, eh?"

"All right, I'll go along with your game and your hypothetical *being*. Couldn't it find some kind of . . . well, insurance?"

"Such as scattering its eggs in an infinite number of baskets, eh?"

"Life's done just that, hasn't it? It's scattered all over the universe in billions of forms."

"Yet *anything* can happen," murmured the Abbod. "So we have two choices: infinite boredom or infinite chance."

"So what?"

"Do you wish me to continue with the history lesson?"

"Go ahead."

"Now, behind or beneath or projecting into this scattered *Life*, let us postulate a kind of consciousness that . . ." He raised a hand as Orne's face darkened. "Hear me out, Mr. Orne. This *other* consciousness has been suspected for countless centuries. It has been called such things as 'collective unconscious', 'the paramatman', 'urgrund', 'santana dharma', 'super mind', 'ober palliat' . . . It has been called many things."

"None of which makes it any more real!" snapped Orne. "Let's not mistake *clear* reasoning for *correct* reasoning. The fact that a name exists for something doesn't mean that thing exists."

"You are then an empiricist," said the Abbod. "Good. Did you ever hear the legend of Doubting Thomas?"

"No."

"No matter," said the Abbod. "He was always one of my favorite characters. He refused to take crucial facts on faith."

"Sounds to me like a wise man."

The Abbod smiled. "A moment ago I said that mankind generates a power we may call religion, and within that religion a focus of independent action you may refer to as God."

"Are you sure it isn't the other way around?"

"That's of no importance at the moment, Mr. Orne. Let us go on to a corollary of the original postulate, which is that mankind also generates prophets in the same way—men who point out the paths that lead to degeneracy and failure. And here we come to a function of our order as we see it. We find these prophets and educate them."

"You educate men like Mahmud?"

"Mahmud escaped us."

Orne suddenly sat up straight. "Are you implying that *I'm* a prophet?"

"But of course you are. You're a man with extraordinary powers. Psi instruments have only sharpened and brought to focus what was already there, latent within you."

Orne slapped a hand onto his right knee. "If this isn't the wildest train of . . ."

"I'm serious, Mr. Orne. In the past, prophets have tended to preach without restriction—uninhibited and really undisciplined. The results were always the same: temporary order that climbed toward greater and greater power, then the inevitable degeneration. We, on the other

hand, have another method. We seek the slow, self-disciplined accumulation of data that will extend our science of religion. The broad course ahead of us is already becoming . . ."

"Do you mean to tell me that you people presume to educate prophets?"

An inner light glittered in the Abbod's glossy eyes. "Mr. Orne, have you any idea how many innocents have been tortured to death in the name of religion during the course of Man's bloody history?"

Orne shrugged. "There's no way of knowing how many."

"Countless?"

"Certainly."

"That is one of the things which always happens when religions run wild, Mr. Orne. War and bloodshed of countless sorts develop from undisciplined religion."

"And you think I'm a prophet?"

"We know you are. It is uncertain whether you could start a new religion, but you *are* a prophet. We had you out on that mountainside tonight for just one purpose. Your fellow students did not turn out to be prophets. They will never rise above the oblate brotherhood. We know their character, however, and we know your character. Put the

two together, and you should have learned a lesson."

"Sure! That I could get my head torn off by a mob!"

"That would have meant you failed the test," said the Abbod. "Now, please be calm and tell me the basic significance of your experience out there."

"Wait a minute," said Orne. "How'd *you* know what happened out there?"

"I knew within seconds when you ran away from the mob," said the Abbod. "I was waiting for the report. We suspected you would come here."

"Of course. And you just sat here and waited for me."

"Of course. Now answer the question: What's the basic significance of your experience?"

Orne turned his head, looked out of the corners of his eyes at the Abbod. "That there's a great amount of explosive energy in religion. That's what I learned."

"You already knew this, naturally."

"Yes. You just made the fact important to me."

"Mr. Orne, I will tell you about just one of the many prophets we have on Amel. His talents are extreme. He can cause a glowing aura to

appear around his body. He can levitate. What we understand as space does not exist for him. Seemingly, he can step from planet to planet as easily as a normal person would cross the street. He can . . ."

"Is this that fellow who was on Wessen? The one the feature scribes went nuts over when . . ."

"I see you've heard of him. We got to him barely in time, Mr. Orne. I ask you now: What would happen if he were to appear to a crowd, say, on Marak, that enlightened center of our government, and display there his full powers?"

Orne frowned.

"Is it likely they would put a religious interpretation on his activities?" demanded the Abbod.

"Well . . . probably."

"Most certainly! And what if he did not fully understand his own talents. Picture it. He knows the true from the false by some inner sense—call it instinct. Around him he sees much that is false. What's he likely to do?"

"All right!" barked Orne. "He'd probably start a new religion! You've made your point."

"A *wild* religion," corrected the Abbod. He glared at Orne,

pointed to Orne's left, "Look there!"

Orne turned, saw a dancing sword of flame about two meters away. Its point was aimed at his head. He shivered, felt perspiration drench his body. Prescient fear screamed within him.

"The first lone man to tap that source of energy was burned alive as a sorcerer by his fellow humans," said the Abbod. "The ancients thought that flame was alive. They gave it religious significance, called it a *salamander*. They thought of it as a demon. And when you don't know how to control it, the thing does act like a wild demon with a life and will of its own. It's raw energy, Mr. Orne. I direct it through a psi focus. You act so superior. You think of yourself as a servant of a great organization that prevents war. Yet I—one man alone—could utterly annihilate any military force you could bring against me—and I would use nothing but this ancient discovery!"

The old man sank back against his pillows, closed his eyes. Presently, he opened his eyes, said: "Sometimes I forget my years, but they never forget me."

Orne drew in a ragged

breath. The deadline that he had suspected in this skeletal human had taken on form and dimension: deadline magnified to *new* dimensions.

"When Emolirido informed us of you, we had to bring you here, test you, see for ourselves," murmured the Abbod. "So many do not test out. In your case, though, the tests proved Emolirido correct. You . . ."

"I did things Emolirido taught me how to do, and with equipment he had put in my body!"

"Your *equipment* has been nullified by a dampening projection since your interview with Bakrish at your arrival," said the Abbod.

Orne opened his mouth to protest, closed it. He recalled his sensation of strangeness during that first interview. *Nullified?* Yet he still sensed danger all around.

"What Emolirido did was to force you to accept the things you already could do," said the Abbod. "Your first lesson: faith in yourself." He looked grimly amused. "But it is plain that you still cherish doubts."

"You're damn' right I do! I think this whole hocus pocus was designed to confuse me, put me off the track!"

"You doubt the existence of

a superior consciousness that manifests itself in gods and prophets and even sometimes in our machines," said the Abbod.

"I think you may have stumbled onto something with your psi powers, but you've mucked it up with your mystical hogwash! There's a scientific explanation for these things that'd appear if you blew away all this fog!"

"The empiricist demands his demonstration," murmured the Abbod. "Very well. Let us introduce you to the graduate school, Mr. Orne. Thus far, you've been playing with toys. Let's see how you react when we threaten the basic fiber of your being!"

Orne pushed himself to his feet, reached behind for the back of the chair. He glanced left at the dancing point of flame, saw it sweep around in front of his eyes. Burning, prickling sensations crawled along his skin. The flame grew to a ball almost a meter in diameter, pressed forward. Orne stumbled backward, knocked over the chair. Heat blasted his face.

"How now?" cried the Abbod.

He's trying to panic me, thought Orne. *This could be an illusion.* He darted to the

left, and the flame shot ahead of him, cutting him off, pressed even closer.

Orne retreated. His face burned where the flame seared against it.

"Is this illusion, Mr. Orne?" called the Abbod.

Doggedly, Orne shook his head. His eyes smarted. The flaming ball pressed him backward. He shook perspiration from his head, glanced down at the floor. *Pentagonal tiles. Giant pentagonal tiles at least two meters across.* He stepped to the center of a white tile, immediately felt the heat diminish.

"Psi must be faced with psi," called the Abbod.

Orne nodded, wet his lips with his tongue, swallowed. He tried to focus on the inner awareness as Emolirido had taught him. Nothing. He closed his eyes, concentrated, felt something give.

Somewhere, there was a great howling of not-sound. He was being pulled inward, distorted. Twisted in a vortex that sucked him down . . . down . . . down . . . down . . .

The thought of ticking seconds blazed within him.

TIME!

No sensation except a dim touch of the pentagram as though it pressed against his

body at every point: a pentagram, a box, a cage. And the ticking seconds. His mind boiled with the thought of TIME!

Time and tension, he thought. And his mind juggled symbols like blocks of energy, manipulated energy like discreet signals. There was a problem. That was it, a problem. *Tension! Tension = energy source. Energy + opposition = growth of energy. To strengthen a thing, oppose it. Growth of energy + opposition = opposites blending into a new identity.*

"*You become like the worst in what you oppose,*" he thought. It was a quotation. He had heard it somewhere. *Priest slips into evil. The great degenerates into the small.*

And he remembered his wounded arm, the itching before the wound.

TIME!

Beyond the pentagram he sensed a place where chaotic energy flowed. A great blank not-darkness filled with not-light and a ceaseless flowing. And he felt himself as on a mountaintop—as though he *were* the mountaintop. Pressing upward but still connected to a living earth below. Somewhere he felt the touch of the pentagram: a shape that

could be remembered and located.

A voice came from below the mountain: "Mr. Orne?"

He felt the pentagram press more tightly.

"Mr. Orne?"

The Abbod's voice.

Orne felt himself flowing back, compressed, twisted. The shape of his body became a new distortion to his senses. He wanted to resist.

"Don't fight it, Mr. Orne."

Pressure against side and arms: the floor. He opened his eyes, found that he was stretched out on the tiles, his head at one corner of the white pentagram, his feet at the opposite corner. The Abbod stood over him in a belted white robe: a dark, monkey-like creature with overlarge, staring eyes.

"What did you see, Mr. Orne?"

Orne drew in a deep, gasping breath. He felt dizzy, weak. "Nothing," he gasped.

"Oh, yes. You *saw* with every sense you possess. One does not walk without seeing the path."

Walk? Path? Orne remembered the sense of flowing chaos. He pulled his arms back, pushed himself up. The floor felt cold against his palms. The wound in his arm

itched. He shook his head. "What do you *want* from me?"

The Abbod's gaze bored into him. "You tell me."

Orne swallowed in a dry throat. "I saw chaos."

The Abbod leaned forward. "And *where* is this chaos?"

Orne looked down at his feet extended along the floor, glanced around the room, back to the Abbod. "Here. It was this world, this universe, this . . ."

"Why could you see it as chaos?"

Orne shook his head. *Why? I was threatened. I . . . TIME!* He looked up. "It has something to do with time."

"Mr. Orne, have you ever seen a jungle?"

"Yes."

"The plant life, its growth is not immediately apparent to your senses, is it?"

"Not . . . immediately. But over a period of days, of course, you . . ." He broke off.

"Precisely!" barked the Abbod. "If you could, as it were, speed up the jungle, it would become a place of writhing contention. Vines would shoot up like snakes to clutch and strangle the trees. Plants would leap upward, blast forth with pods, hurl out their

seeds. You would see a great strangling battle for sunlight."

"Time," said Orne. And he recalled Emolirdo's analogy: the three-dimensional shadow cast into the two-dimensional world. "How does the person in the two-dimensional world interpret the shadow of a three-dimensional object?" he murmured.

The Abbod smiled. "Emolirdo so enjoys that analogy."

"The two-dimensional being can interpolate," said Orne. "He can stretch his imagination to create . . . *things* that reach into the other dimension."

"So?"

Orne felt the tension. Nerves trembled along his arms. "Psi machines!" he blurted. "They manipulate time!"

"Psi phenomena are time phenomena," said the Abbod.

It was like veils falling away from Orne's senses. He remembered his wounded arm, the itching he had felt before the arm was wounded in that exact place. He recalled a small psi instrument that Emolirdo had displayed: loops, condensers, electronic tubes, all focusing on a thin square of plastic. Rubbed one way, the plastic felt tacky. Rubbed the other way, the

plastic felt as slick as glass, greased.

In a half-musing way, he said: "There was a thin layer of time flow along the plastic. One direction, my hand moved with the flow; the other direction, my hand opposed the flow."

"Eh?" The Abbod looked puzzled.

"I was remembering something," said Orne.

"Oh." The Abbod turned, shuffled back to his bed, sat on the edge. His robe opened, revealing thin shanks under his nightshirt. He looked incredibly old and tired.

Orne felt a pang of sympathy for the old man. The sense of dread that had surrounded this place was gone. In its place he felt an awakening akin to awe.

"Life projects matter through the dimension of time," said the Abbod.

"A kind of time machine?"

The Abbod nodded. "Yes. Our awareness is split. It exists within these three dimensions and outside of them. We have known this for centuries. Thoughts can blaze through a lifetime in the merest fraction of a second. Threaten the human life, and you can force awareness to retreat into no-time. One can weigh countless

alternatives, select the course of action that has the greatest survival potential. All of this you can do while time in this dimension stands still."

Orne took a deep breath. He knew this was true. He recalled that final terrible instant in the Heleb uprising. There he had sat at the controls of his escape ship while around him great weapons swung about to bear on the vessel's flimsy walls. There had seemed no way to avoid blasting energies that were sure to come. And he remembered the myriad alternatives that had flitted through his mind while outside the terrible weapons seemed to hang frozen. And he *had* escaped. The one sure way had been seen.

The Abbod pushed himself back into the bed, pulled covers over his legs. "I am a very old man." He looked sideways at Orne. "But it still pleasures me to see a person make the *old* discovery."

Orne took a step forward. "Old?"

"Ancient. Thousands of years before the first man ventured into space from the original home world, a scattered few were discovering this way of looking at the universe. They called it *Mayá*. The tongue was Sanskrit. Our

view of the matter is a little more . . . sophisticated. But there's no essential difference. The ancients said: '*Abandon forms; direct yourself toward temporal reality.*' You know, Mr. Orne, it's amazing. Man has such an . . . *appetite* to encompass . . . everything."

Like a sleep walker, Orne moved forward, righted the chair beside the bed, sank into it. Extensions of his awakening captured his attention. "The prophet who calls forth the dead," he said. "He returns the matter of the body to a time when it was alive. That flame you threatened me with. You bring it out of a time when the matter around us was gaseous incandescence. The man from Wessen who walks from planet to planet like you would cross a stream on stepping stones." Orne held up his hands. "Of course. Without time to stretch across it, there can be no space. To him, time is a specific location!"

"Think of the universe as an expanding balloon," said the Abbod. "A balloon of weird shape and unexplored convolutions. Suppose you have a transparent grid, three-dimensional. Like graph paper. You look through it at the universe. It is a matrix

against which you can plot out the shapes and motions of the universe."

"Education," said Orne.

The Abbod spoke like a teacher praising a pupil. "Very good!" He smiled. "This grid, this matrix is trained into human beings. They project it onto the universe. With this matrix they break nature into bits. Usable bits. But, somehow, they too often get the idea that nature . . . the universe *is* the bits. The matrix is so very useful, permitting us to communicate our ideas, for example. But it is so near-sighted. It's like an old man reading script with his nose pressed almost to the page. He sees one thing at a time. But our universe is *not* one thing at a time. It's an enormous complex. Still we concentrate on the bits." He shook his head. "Do you know how we see the bits, Mr. Orne?"

Orne snapped out of a half-reverie in which the Abbod's words had been like gross areas of understanding that flowed into his awareness. "We see them by contrast. Each bit moves differently, has a different color, or . . ."

"Very good! We see them by contrast. To see a bit we must see also its background. Bit and background are in-

separable. Without one you cannot discern the other. Without evil you cannot determine good. Without war, you cannot determine peace. Without . . ."

"Wait a minute!" Orne jerked to attention. "Is that why you're out to ruin the I-A?"

"Mr. Orne, a compulsive peace is not peace. To compel peace, you must use warlike methods. It is nonsense to think that you can get rid of one of a pair and possess only the other. You are doing this by force! You create a vacuum into which chaos will flow."

Orne shook his head. He felt trapped in a maze, caught by the idea that something *had* to be wrong with the Abbod's words.

"It is like a drug habit," said the Abbod. "If you enforce peace, it will take greater and greater amounts of peace to satisfy you. And you will use more and more violence to obtain it. The cycle will end in cataclysm. Think rather of how light reaches your eyes. When you are reading you do not seek out, striving for the light. In the same way, peace comes to your senses. Pleasure comes to you. Good comes to you. As the light comes to your eyes.

These are functions of your nerves. You cannot make an effort with your nerves. You *can* make an effort with your muscles. That is the way it is with our universe. Our matrix must be a direct function of reality, of actual matter. In this, it is like our nerves. If we distort the matrix, we do not change reality, but only our way of seeing it. If we destroy one half of a pair, the remaining half overwhelms us. Take away the predator, and the creature preyed upon undergoes a population explosion. All of these things fit the basic law."

"And the I-A has broken that law?"

"It has." The Abbod frowned. "You see, peace is an internal matter. It's a *self* discipline. It *must* come from within. If you set up an outside power to *enforce* peace, that outside power grows stronger and stronger. It must. Inevitably, it degenerates. Comes the cataclysm."

"You people on Amel look on yourselves as a kind of super I-A, don't you."

"In a sense," the Abbod agreed. "But we want to go to the root. We wish to plant the seed of self discipline wherever it will take root. And to do this, we prepare certain ground for cultivation."

"Ground?"

"Worlds. Societies." The Abbod stared at Orne. "And we desperately need farmers, Mr. Orne."

"Meaning me?"

"Would you care to enlist?"

Orne cleared his throat, broke his attention away from the Abbod's intent gaze. He felt that he was being stampeded.

The Abbod's voice intruded. "This is a chaotic universe, Mr. Orne. Things are changing. Things *will* change. There is an instinct in human beings that realizes this. Our instinct foments a feeling of insecurity. We seek something unchanging. Beliefs are temporary because the bits we believe *about* are in motion. They change. And periodically, we go through the cataclysm. We tear down the things that refuse to work. They don't do what we expect them to do, and we become children, smashing the toys that refuse to obey. In such times, the teachers of self discipline are much needed."

"You say we're approaching some great smashing up, some cataclysm?"

"We are always approaching it. Always ahead of us is the great burning from which the Phoenix arises. Only one

thing endures: Faith. The object changes, but faith endures. It's the absolute we yearn after in a changing universe."

Orne felt overwhelmed by a sense of outrage. "Faith? That's nonsense! There's no logic, no scientific . . ."

"Trust your senses!" barked the Abbod. "Do not try to distort the matrix to fit what you *want* to believe! You have experienced another dimension. Many have done this without realizing it. *You* realize it."

"But . . . faith? In what?"

"In our appetite. Faith that we will encompass this other dimension and find there a new area of mystery to beckon our senses. Faith that there is something enduring in all this chaos . . . and if not, that we can create a thing that will endure. *That* faith, Mr. Orne."

Orne lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry. I . . . didn't understand."

The Abbod's voice lowered almost to a whisper. "Of course you didn't. You had not heard our simple definition of a religion. A religion is the faith that something will endure beyond the apparent chaos surrounding us. The central concepts are Faith and Endurance."

Orne turned the thought over in his mind.

"Our faith here is in the linear endurance of humankind," said the Abbod. "On Amel we call it the Great Continuity. It is our faith that there will always be a descendant of humankind—evolved, changed, unrecognizable to today's humans, no matter what, but still our descendant."

Cynicism, his most dependable defense, took over Orne's thinking. "Very high sounding," he said. "And if that's what you're really doing here, quite attractive. But how can I be certain what you're doing? You use lots of words. Some even make sense."

"But all it takes is one weak link, eh?"

Orne shrugged.

"That's why we seek out only the strong, the prophets," said the Abbod. "That is why the testing and the education. If we tame the wild religions and harness their energies to our purpose, that makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Certainly."

"Then we will give you this, Mr. Orne: You may go anywhere on Amel, ask any questions, look at any records, request any cooperation that does not oppose our purpose. Satisfy yourself. And even

then, you do not have to decide to stay with us. You may return to any of the outer worlds, to Marak, to Chargon, wherever you wish to go. We insist only that you subject your talents to our instructions, that you permit us to show you how they may be tamed."

Orne wet his lips with his tongue. A tentative probe at the Abbod's emotions revealed candor and faint amusement. The amusement annoyed Orne. He had the feeling that this was an old story to the Abbod, that the reactions of one Lewis Orne could be classified as type such and so. A kind of pique made him say: "Aren't you afraid I might . . . well, double-cross you once I was off Amel?"

"We have faith in *you*, Mr. Orne. Your ordeal has given us grounds for that, at least. We are not worried."

Orne chuckled. "The least I can do is return the favor, eh?"

"After you've pried and tested us to your satisfaction, yes. You said it yourself, you know: Faith is the uncensored will. Doubt is a censor we'd rather you didn't have."

Orne nodded, and a new thought hit him. "Do you have enough faith in me to let me return to Marak and make

over the I-A along lines you'd approve?"

The Abbod shook his head. "Faith in you, we have that. But your I-A has gone too far along the road to power. You understand, my son, that a bureau is like an individual. It will fight for survival. It will seek power. Your I-A has a personality made up of all its parts. Some such as yourself we would trust. Others . . . I'm afraid not. No. Before we permit you to leave here, the I-A will be dead, and other bureaus will be feeding on the remains."

Orne stared at the ancient face. Presently, he said: "I guess I failed them."

"Perhaps not. Your original purpose is still intact. Peace as a self discipline can be more gratifying than any other kind. It grows more slowly, to be sure, but it's confident growth that counts."

Orne still tasted a certain bitterness. "You seem pretty *confident* that I'll join you."

"You've already passed that decision," murmured the Abbod. "When you asked to return and make over the I-A."

This time Orne's chuckle was aimed at himself. "Know me pretty well, don't you."

"We know your purpose, your religion, as it were. You

share our faith in humankind. When we learned that, we knew you were already one of us." The Abbod smiled, and the old face seemed to light up. "There's much ground to prepare, and we have need of many farmers."

"Yeah, I'm a hayseed, all right," said Orne.

"After you have pried into Amel to your heart's content, come back and talk to me. I know there's a certain young lady awaiting you on Marak. Perhaps we could discuss your returning to another bureau—Recovery & Re-education."

"R & R! Those bumbleheads! They're the . . ."

"You have an interesting conditioned reaction there," said the Abbod. "For now, I will only remind you that any bureau is the sum of its parts."

In his office on Marak, Tyler Gemine, director of Rediscovery & Re-education, faced Orne across an immense black wood desk. Behind Gemine a wide window looked out on the packed office buildings of Marak's central government quarter. The director was a rounded outline against the window, a fat and genial surface with smiling mouth and hard eyes. Frown wrinkles creased his forehead.

The office fitted Gemine. On the surface it seemed built for comfort: soft chairs, thick carpet, unobtrusive lighting. But three walls held file cases geared to a remote search control at the desk. Six auto-secretaries flanked the desk.

Sitting opposite the director, Orne still wore his aqua toga from Amel. R & R security police had rushed him here from the spaceport, giving him no time to change his garb.

"All of this haste must appear unseemly to you, Mr. Orne," said Gemine. "Separating you from your fiancée at the spaceport like that. Rude of us." The hard eyes bored into Orne.

Orne hid his amusement under a mask of concern. "I know you must have good reasons, sir."

Gemine leaned back. "Indeed we do." He pulled a stack of papers toward him on the desk, squared them. "Before the I-A took you away from us, Mr. Orne, you were an agent of the R & R."

"Yes, sir. They drafted me."

"That unfortunate business on Hamal!"

"There was nothing I could do, sir."

"No blame attaches to you, Mr. Orne. But you understand that we do have some curios-

ity about you now that we have superseded the I-A."

"You want to know where my loyalties are?"

"Precisely."

"The R & R's purpose is still my purpose, sir."

"Good! Good!" Gemine patted the stack of papers in front of him. "Ahhh, this mission to Amel. What about that?"

"Why was I sent?"

Gemine's stare was cold and measuring, "Yes."

"It was very simple. The I-A executive staff heard about the move to do away with their department. They had reason to believe the priests were a prime factor in the move. I was sent to Amel to see if they could be circumvented."

"And you failed." It was a flat statement.

"Sir, I beg to remind you that I once volunteered for the R & R. I was one of your agents before the I-A took me away from you." He managed a tight smile. "And it didn't take a giant brain to realize that you would take over the I-A's functions once they were out of the way."

Gemine's eyes clouded with thought. He cleared his throat. "What about this psi thing? In the final audit of I-A we came across this odd depart-

ment. Unfortunately . . ." Gemine studied a paper in front of him. ". . . the director, one Ag Emolirido, has disappeared. There were records, though, showing that you were trained by him before your recent . . . ah, mission."

So Agony took it on the lam, thought Orne. Gone home to report, no doubt. He said: "It was a questionable field. Oriented along ESP lines." (And he thought: *That'll fit this little hack's executive logic!*) "They were looking for rules to explain certain non-chance phenomena," he went on. "Their results were debatable."

Gemine restacked the papers in front of him. "As I suspected. Well . . . we can go into it in more detail later. I confess it sounded extremely far-fetched in outline. Typical of I-A wastefulness." He leaned back, steepled his hands in front of him. "Now, Mr. Orne, as you know, we are taking over the key functions of the I-A. But we're running into stupid resistance. That's where I've hoped you could come in."

"My record with R & R is clear, sir."

Gemine swivelled his chair, looked out the window at Marak's executive warren.

"You know both the R & R and the I-A, Mr. Orne. It's in my mind to attach you to my office—as a special executive assistant. Your duties would be to facilitate absorption of the I-A." He turned back to look at Orne. "What would you say to that?"

Orne hesitated just the right length of time. "I'd . . . I'd consider that an honor, sir."

"Excellent!" Gemine bent forward. "You'll want to get situated first, of course." His manner became more confidential. "You'll be getting married, I understand. Take what time you need. Say, a month. How's that sound?"

"That's very kind of you, sir."

"Not at all. I want you to be happy with us." He wet his lips with his tongue. "Miss Bullone may not have had the time to tell you . . . about her father, that is. He is no longer our high commissioner. Lost out in the recent shake-up. A pity after so many years of excellent service."

"Has he stayed on in the Assembly?"

"Oh, yes. He's still an important member. Minority leader." Gemine stared at Orne. "We'd like to have you act—unofficially, you under-

stand—as a sort of liaison with Mr. Bullone."

"I'm sure something could be worked out, sir."

Gemine smiled, relaxed. He nodded.

Orne said: "What about my staff, sir?"

"Staff?"

"I'll need assistants of my own if I'm to do this job correctly."

Sudden tension filled the room. "Anyone special in mind?"

Gently, thought Orne. *This is the delicate part*. He said: "All the time I was in the I-A, I was directly under one man. When he said frog, I jumped. Wherever he pointed, that's where I went."

"Ahhh . . . Mr. Umbo Stetson."

"I see you know him."

"Know him? He's a major source of resistance!"

"That'd make it even more pleasant," said Orne.

Gemine chortled. He radiated gleeful sadism. "Take him! Any authority you need to whip him into line, it's yours!"

Orne matched Gemine's smile. "This is going to be even more fun than I thought."

Gemine arose. "I'll have an office fitted for you next to mine, Lewis. Want everything

cozy and neat." He nodded. "I think this is going to work out very well. Indeed I do."

Orne stood up. "I hope I'll live up to all your expectations, sir."

"You already are, my boy! You know what's expected of you, and you know how to deliver." He gave Orne a knowing smile. "And I won't soon forget your *failure* on Amel." He chortled. "Eh?"

From the secret report:
Lewis Orne to the Halmyrach Abbod:

"Gemine was every bit as easy as you said he would be. He has already given me Stetson, and through Stetson I'll bring in the others. This is fallow ground, indeed. Needs the ministrations of a trained farmer.

"It was fascinating to talk to Gemine. There was the pattern just as you anticipated it. The weak was absorbing the strong, completely unaware that the strong could

eat it up from within. But this time, only a selective seed of the strong.

"Stetson raised no objections at all. The idea he found particularly intriguing was this: *We must find a way of preventing war without making war impossible.* For myself, I find this no paradox. In a universe without limits, Life must grow through self-imposed limits. Every teaching turns on its *discipline.* And what is a discipline but a limit self-imposed for the benefits derived? My new *matrix* needs no distortion to encompass this concept.

"Out of all this, one thought keeps coming back to me. I will mention it this once. It occurs to me that the most effective government is that one where the governed do not know they are being governed, but believe they govern themselves.

"Your obed't farmer,
"Lewis Orne."

THE END



IN THE COMPLAINTS SERVICE

By DAVID R. BUNCH

*Another problem for Slonk and his men.
But they are up to solving any difficulty
—even one concerning love.*

I'M NOT a pleasure-crowded man with a feel-suit lounging back in one of those big-deal bubble-dome homes soaking up sensations. I'm a Servicer. Been in some phase of the Complaints Service for about forty years, and proud of it too. The Complaints Service, if I may be allowed to explain myself a little, is an absolute necessity to modern living, and we're really the most important workers in the world, if I may be allowed to brag a bit, though we're not paid like it, if I may be allowed to complain at a pay scale. Complaints Service, in short, is what our modern pleasure-loving people require to complete their kicks in modern living by, pardon the expression, kicking about what they think is lacking in

modern living. It's as simple as that. And when we get a complaint about a pleasure lack we just send out a crew and a machine to fix things up.

But let me give you a run-down on a job we went on yesterday, and maybe that'll help explain the service as well as give you a little idea of how we're living out here in Brave New Hap, the happiest, the most modern, the most complete country in the world. I was part of the on-crew that day—it was yesterday—when the word came in, that big blue-green EMERGENCY on our Alert Screen, meaning that some desperate lack had arisen in one of the bubble huts, those modern domed homes in the hinterland of Brave New Hap. We

didn't slide down the pole like those dramatic firemen are expected to do at any little blaze; we went upfloor slowly, with dignity, in our bucket ride, thinking things over. Slonk, our crew leader, was grim, the way he gets when that blue-green word comes in, and the rest of us were resting in the bucket ride, thoughtful and attentive—eyes wide open and breathing—as befits a member of the Complaints Service at all times.

Slonk broke the silence, as befit him, being the leader, and said, "Gott tam, husband-wife again." We nodded drowsily, our eyes open and attentive, at something we already knew. Blue-green meant husband-wife EMERGENCY, no doubt about that. Red-pink was for children, yellowish-orange for old aunts, purple-violet for widowed fathers, and on like that. Each hue has its meaning in the broad range of EMERGENCY as it flashes in to us from the Complain Units of the bubble huts. Other than that and the hut's location our information is usually skimpy, which translated into terms you can understand means we usually go with a General. The Generals, the latest things in the

Complaints Service, are machines designed to analyze individuals, evaluate situations and cope generally with all eventualities. We used to go with the Basics and then call in the Specials when we saw we had to have them. But the Generals do the job now of both the Basics and the Specials, maybe not quite to the fine line we used to have, but you have to give up something when you broaden your base. Don't you? And we've broadened our base! Those Generals are huge machines.

Upfloor we of the crew lounged around on our yellow float-bunks for ten minutes, cracked a few jokes into the Joy Booster if we felt like it, and generally we got in that relaxed fine mood necessary for the blue-green EMERGENCY. Slonk sat at a gently undulating nylon kidney desk, muttered Gott tam, Gott tam, as befit him being a leader, and read a few case histories of blue-green EMERGENCIES of the past. Then Slonk, in that terribly dignified and dramatic way he has, belched, and he stood up tall, very tall in his spangled cream and silver uniform of a crew leader of the Complaints Service, and his

shapely thighs sloped toward his black guardsman's boots like two good limbs of the old Mr. Americas. We of the crew, all four of us, popped from our soof-air bunks and stood tall as we could and respectful in our night-black garb of the inconspicuous uniform of the crew. We knew the time of the grimness was on us. We went to select a General. We chose Kelly.

Kelly is of the K-5 design, the latest of the Generals, a huge ball on wheels that can unfold wings and take to the air when time is precious, say in the triple-A EMERGENCY, pink-red for bored-kids-fighting. But this was the husband - and - wife blue - green, which in the long run would probably be worse than a pink-red bored-kids-fighting, but not so immediately so. So we stuck to the wheels, and Kelly sped with the special homing devices toward the bubble hut from whence the distress signals had originated. Across the plastic yards and fields of Hap we raced—it was yesterday—a jolly crew, spring, you know, plastic flowers and metal blooms up everywhere through the yard holes, the winery smell of gardens on the wind from the smells sent out by the

Central Seasons Committee for spring, and the birds, the tin birds popping up everywhere and spurting off across the spring-blue sky and singing, singing until their tapes gave out. Ah spring!

But here was Kelly homing in on a bubble hut where husband-wife trouble was. And we were the crew of the Complaints Service on the spot. Kelly braked in and set wheels before a hut and we sprang down, jaunty, you know, and yet assault-like, in that special invasion efficiency we use in the Complaints Service. Puts bounce in our work and makes us seem all business, which we are. We surrounded the place and peeped in through small glass portholes in the thick plastic walls. And we saw the young husband sitting encased in all the usual pleasure-and-sensation devices that are standard equipment for a young man's evening-at-home in Hap. A tiny suction device in his mouth was gently and soothingly smoking a flip-tip cigarette for him, a fine set of masticators just outside his lips was daintily chewing a creamy nougat-centered candy bar for him and pouring a wonderful nectar into his mouth, the soof-air chair was

massaging and relaxing his muscles as he sat, a soothing yet commanding kind of melody was booming through the room, and I'm sure the smells were on, because I saw different colored smoke coming out of little cups. In addition to all this his eyes were enjoying a shape-feast on the picture walls. In short, that young man was about as happy as anyone is ever supposed to be in Brave New Hap.

But when we saw the young wife we hesitated not an instant. She sat all bereft, without a stitch of her pleasure on, as you might say. Her sensation-and-feel gear was strewn about her, as if she had taken it off in a kind of hapless desperation. "Open in the name of the Complaints Service!" Slonk yelled as he beat on an entrance panel with his orange and pink-striped swagger stick. Dreamy and pleasure-stuffed the young husband pressed the button that opened the wall. We poured through and seized him. We took him into the sunlight. We showed him it was spring. We took him and gave him to Kelly. We let Kelly have him for fifteen minutes. We knew Kelly would know what to do.

"How long has this been going on?" asked Slonk, joshing with the young wife, quite a pretty and blue-eyed blonde little thing, in something of an artificial way, however, as women are apt to be in Brave New Hap, let's admit it.

"Oh, generally it's O.K.," she said. "I mean, usually it's fine for him to just be in his pleasure rig. But, well—"—she seemed delightfully embarrassed—"it is spring, you know. And I felt so funny when I stripped out of my pleasure suit this morning. And in the spring a young man's fancy is supposed to—well, you know about that. Isn't it?"

We did know. We did know, indeed! So we turned Kelly up a few notches higher on what we knew Kelly was doing to that young man. When we opened the panel, Kelly coughed him out, and he looked like he had been through a massage, among other things. He looked like he had muscles. He looked like a lover. He ran to ship some tin flowers and came rushing to his love. "I do love you," he said solidly and completely. We watched at the door. They went inside, the door closed and we rushed for the portholes. We saw them kiss, once, very very gently. And

then he climbed back into his pleasure apparatus and went ahead with the shape show! "Gott tam," I heard Slonk mutter. The wife slipped into her own pleasure things and turned to her special color show on the other side of the wall, and Slonk in a kind of cold dismay cursed twice before he screamed, "Open again, in the name of the Complaints Service!"

They both came to the panel this time and Slonk snarled at the wife, "Why did you let him get back into his pleasure rig, without anything happening?"

She, dreamy and pleasure-stuffed already from her color wall and the rest of it, said, "It did happen. Flowers! And he said he loved me. He kissed me! Didn't he? Ah spring!"

"Well, Gott tam," Slonk said slowly, sadly and with genuine disgust. Then we seized them both for Kelly. For a full hour we left them both to Kelly, and we outside

could only surmise, from our past experience with the Basics and the Specials, what methods of persuasion Kelly was employing to change these two young members of Hap into something approximating human beings again. When they came out they were smiling—hungrily—at each other.

Before we left, looking into a porthole, we could make out two shriveled and empty pleasure suits abandoned on the floor, and hearing little sounds we knew two lovers were together in the spring in another part of the dome. Then Slonk flipped out the periviewer tube, which he has a right to use being a Captain, and ran it up for a look down the top of the dome. "Well Gott tam," he said, "with enough prompting from the Complaints Service —" Then one ice-colored eye flapped shut in a sly wink which we understood. "Mission completed!" Slonk said crisply, and we climbed into Kelly for the dash back to our station.

THE END

I WANT YOU, I WANT YOU

By SOLOMON SCHEELE

When is a fantasy not
a fantasy? When it
tells the story of the
true secret desire of
every man—whether
he's made a deal with
Satan or not.

KILLING the black cock had been unpleasant enough, but draining the blood out of him was really a gruesome business. I caught the blood in an empty milk container. When I couldn't squeeze another drop out I pulled the three longest tail feathers, just as the *Grimoire* said. I didn't really believe the spell would work, but I was following the book to the letter.

I threw the body of the bird aside and swiftly sharpened the tail feathers, fearful that the blood in the milk container would coagulate. It did harden rapidly, but there was enough liquid for me to draw the pentagram on my living room floor.

That did it, I thought. I glanced into the open *Grimoire*

again. The faded writing was hard to read . . . oh, yes. I threw the container and the remainder of the blood onto the smouldering charcoal in my fireplace. The wax caught fire and a flame shot up. I swallowed hard and stared at the empty pentagram. Now . . .

The telephone rang.

Impatiently, I picked it up. "Long distance call for Mr. Andrew Benedict," said an unpleasantly nasal female voice. "Will you accept the charges?"

Who could be calling me from out of town — or from right here in New York, for that matter? There was no one in the world who would have had even the mildest desire to telephone me. That was one reason I was sitting alone

in my apartment with a mouldy *Grimoire*, experimenting with an ancient spell for summoning — I glanced at the empty pentagram and my eyes widened.

"This is Andrew Benedict," I said. "Could you tell me who's calling, and from where?"

"Long distance call for Mr. Andrew Benedict. Will you accept the charges?"

Same words, same detached tone, same unpleasant nasal female voice.

I took a deep breath and shifted the phone from one sweating palm to the other. "I accept the charges," I said.

"Go ahead, please," said the unpleasant female. "You have three minutes. I will notify you when your time is up—"

A booming male . . . *voice* cut in on her. "Benedict! Andrew Benedict! Is that you?"

The moment I heard my name booming over the phone I had no further doubt. Still, I hesitated. I had to be sure. "Yes, who's calling?"

"You know damned well who this is!" the *voice* boomed angrily. "You summoned me yourself. Now — what do you want?"

"But — you didn't . . . I mean, I thought you were go-

ing to materialize in the pentagram—"

"Pentagram? *Pentagram!*" The phone quivered in my hand. "I'm too busy for that nonsense these days. If I made a personal appearance every time—but enough of that. We had only three minutes, you know. So speak up—*what do you want?*"

What did I want? Oh, what *didn't* I want! I thought of all the people who had laughed at me, taken advantage of me, ignored me, cheated me, pushed me casually out of the way. Mostly, I thought of the people who grimaced slightly when they saw me . . . which was almost everybody. There was a burning feeling in my throat, and I swallowed hard but it wouldn't go away.

"How many wishes do I get?" I asked huskily.

The receiver crackled furiously. "How *many*? What do you think this is—a lousy quiz show? You get one damned request granted. And you'd better be quick about it, or you won't even get that!"

One wish. I held the phone at arm's length and stared at it resentfully. This whole thing was certainly running true to form. Someone else would be sure to get two, three—maybe more—wishes, but not Andrew Benedict. He

gets one scraggy wish, and 'be quick about it.'

I could almost visualize the speaker at the other end of the phone. Self-assured. Businesslike. Tearing hurry. Eager to have me off his hands. Aunt Agatha's lawyer telling me the old goat had left the bulk of her fortune to a cat hospital, and had left me a thin yearly income. Or the renting-agent who had tied me to a three-year lease for this lousy apartment. "Snap it up before someone else comes along—a real bargain," he'd pressured. A bargain. The incinerator on one side, so I could never get rid of the cockroaches. The elevator on the other side, so every drunk going to or coming from a party pushed my bell by mistake. "Oh, hell," they'd say, staring at me. "'scuse me." Never: "Come and join the party." They didn't want me. No one did. Even Aunt Agatha, may she rot in hell. . . .

Hell. I glanced up at the clock. Less than a minute left. One wish. Okay, boy, I told myself, for once get it right—there won't be another chance. My eyes left the clock and I caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror. I averted my eyes quickly as I always did. What a face! Only a

mother could love it—only in this case even my mother couldn't quite manage it. She never came to see me once after I went to live with Aunt Agatha. I didn't even know where she was, or if she was still alive. And Aunt Agatha detested me. She enjoyed telling me that. But you can't hit maids and trained nurses with a cane, even if you're rich as Aunt Agatha. And there are things even a maid or a nurse won't do. But I did them. Even Aunt Agatha hadn't been as vicious as some of the maids and nurses. The best of them had just ignored me. No one had ever loved me. And as for girls my own age—the same, only worse.

I made up my mind. It would have been nice to have political power, or a long life, or physical beauty, or strength, or the ability to read minds—but there was something I *had* to have.

I put the phone back to my ear. The *voice* was shouting, "Benedict! Damn you, man! Speak up! Do you want—"

"Listen," I said quietly, "I know what I want. I want—" and I took a deep, deep breath— "I want to be absolutely irresistible to women. They'll fall madly in love with me, understand? Give in to my

every wish. Live only to please me. That's my wish."

"All women?" He sounded a little awed.

I thought about it for a second, then I shrugged. "No," I amended, "only beautiful women. But the more beautiful they are, the more they love me, is that clear?"

"Right. Beautiful women. Madly in love." He sounded as if he were jotting down notes. "Fine—that takes care of that. Goodbye—"

"No! Wait!" I shouted frantically. "What about payment?"

"Payment? You accepted the charges, didn't you? You'll be billed in due course."

The unpleasantly nasal female spoke up suddenly. "Sorry— your three minutes are up."

"One second more!" I pleaded. "What—what do I pay? I mean—do I really have an immortal soul that will—"

"Your time is up," she said, and I heard the click of a broken connection.

My hand was shaking so much I had to make two tries before I could hang up the phone. I was aware suddenly that my shirt was wringing wet and my throat was painfully dry. Shivering uncon-

trollably, I poured myself a drink of water.

So now I was irresistible to beautiful women. I didn't really believe it. I had never gone out with a girl in my life. Most of the girls I had ever met treated me as if I were part of the woodwork. Even that one in the "house" in New Orleans . . . I flushed as I remembered the way she had stopped in the doorway, stared at me, and called over her shoulder, "For Pete's sake, Mae, what did I ever do that you wished *this* on me?"

I slammed the glass of water to the floor. Water and pieces of glass splattered. The bottom of the glass bounced high and landed in the pentagram.

The apartment was a mess, I realized suddenly. The body of the black cock was a huddled mass of feathers in the corner. The floor was covered with blood, ashes, candles, herbs and all the assorted paraphernalia the spell had called for. The cleaning woman would be here in the morning, and I couldn't let her find all these things lying about.

It took me over half an hour. The hardest part was scrubbing away the pentagram. Finally, though, most of the stain was gone, and I had

all the junk I had used jammed into a big paper bag.

The bag was heavy and awkward and I staggered slightly as I opened my door. For once I was glad that the incinerator was right next to my apartment. Only there was someone else ahead of me, stuffing a paper bag into the tiny door.

Her back was to me, but I didn't have to see her face to know who she was. Hell, I'd dreamed about her often enough. She was the beautiful blonde in the apartment at the end of the corridor. The renting-agent had introduced us the day I took the apartment, but she had stared through me during the introduction. I passed her in the hall lots of times, but she never even noticed me. Well, what girl ever had?

I shifted the bag of garbage and waited for her to move away from the incinerator door. She was a model, I thought, or an aspiring actress. For a while I had thought she was some rich old guy's mistress, but then he disappeared and there was a succession of handsome young men visiting her. She was wearing a kind of thin, filmy robe tonight—a negligee, I guessed. I could see her body outlined against the thin material, and I fell into my usual

daydream. She would turn around, and she would see me, and her whole face would light up as she would say—

"Why, Mr. Benedict! What a lovely surprise!"

I jumped. The bag of garbage shot out of my arms and plopped on the floor. She *had* said it! She was smiling at me!

The smile changed to a pout. "Oh, you poor man! I startled you. I'm so sorry. Here, let me help."

We both bent down and picked up the bag. Her robe slipped open. I goggled and gasped. She wasn't wearing anything underneath it!

At my gasp she looked up at me, then down at herself. Her eyes met mine, and she bit her lower lip in playful, mock embarrassment. Then, leisurely, casually, she pulled her robe together—but not all the way.

What was happening to me?

I fumbled with the bag of garbage while she held the incinerator door open, smiling at me gently with her blonde head on one shoulder and her eyes half closed. I was so rattled I could hardly remember my own name. *Was this some kind of a gag?* Maybe she was trying to get me to make a

pass at her, and then a bunch of people in party hats would jump up shrieking with laughter. Or maybe it was the old badger game. I had read about that. She'd get me into her apartment, and then her husband would come in and I'd have to pay plenty.

Whenever I get really rattled my hands start shaking, and this time was no exception. The paper bag shook, and two black feathers and a piece of mandrake root fell out. I stared down at them, making no attempt to pick them up. So help me, I had forgotten all about the spell—and the telephone call! I thought it was all a mistake.

I raised my eyes slowly and stared into hers. She squirmed delightedly against the wall and her face brightened. I felt the blood come roaring up from my toes to my ears. I was irresistible. She was mine for the taking.

Only—how did I go about it? What should I say? I mean, I'd hardly said a dozen words to a pretty girl—or to any girl, for that matter—in my life. Then I shrugged mentally. What difference did it make? I was irresistible. wasn't I? I could say and do whatever I pleased. And I'd seen enough movies and read

enough novels to have some idea.

"You're beautiful," I said. The robe had fallen away from one shoulder, and I put my hand on the bare flesh. It was smooth and cool to my touch. I had always wondered what a girl's skin felt like. . . .

She rested her cheek against my hand and rubbed it gently. I could smell her now . . . that mixture of perfume and bath salts and—*woman*—that, until this moment, I had known only on crowded subway trains. I had to put my other hand on the wall to steady myself. My knees were weak.

"You're very sweet to say that," she whispered huskily. "Mr. Benedict . . . oh, I can't call you *that*. What's your first name? I'm so ashamed of myself, but I've forgotten."

I cleared my throat. "Uh, Andrew," I said. "And your name is Diane, isn't it?"

"Imagine you remembering." Her full red lips brushed the back of my hand. "Diane de Vrieds—it's my stage name. My agent picked it. I'm not supposed to tell anyone my real name." She giggled softly. "But I'll tell it to you, Andrew, later on, when we have no more secrets from each other." Her fingertips wandered under my sleeve,

caressing my wrist. Each touch was like an electric probe. "Andrew," she said thoughtfully. "Andy. . . . I know—Drew! I'm going to call you Drew. It's more . . . more masculine — it fits you better."

She looked at me anxiously, her red lips parted slightly. "You don't mind, do you? I mean, if I call you Drew. Because if you would rather I didn't—"

"No, that's all right," I told her gruffly. "You call me whatever you please, Diane." I put my arm around her neck and she snuggled her head against my shoulder. The blonde hair tickled my nose. It was so fine, so shiny. . . .

She pulled away from me suddenly, drawing her robe tight around her. Terror swept over me. Had I done something wrong? Was this the end of it? Would she yell for help, or start laughing now?

She glanced quickly around the corridor. There was no one there. If she laughed at me, I'd, I'd—

"We *are* being silly, Drew—out here in the cold hall—when there's a lovely roaring fire just going to waste in my apartment."

Again that anxious look came into her eyes. "You do

have time to drop in for a moment? Just for a drink, if you can't stay longer," she pleaded.

"I'm—I'm free for the evening," I said.

"Oh, *good!*" She grabbed my hand in hers and swung it joyfully. "Quick! Before someone comes along and interrupts us!"

Holding my hand, she skipped lightly down the corridor to her door. I lumbered after her, tripping over my own feet.

As soon as we were inside she slammed the door shut and snapped the safety lock.

"There!" she announced. "Now no one can come in even if they happen to have a key." She grinned impishly at me. "And if they ring the bell, whoever they are, we'll just hold our breath until they go away, won't we, Drew?"

She leaned back against the door, putting her hands behind her head and ruffling the loose golden hair. Her breasts were firm and strong, thrusting against the flimsy fabric of the robe.

"How funny," she mused. "Here we are, neighbors, and we've never really met until tonight. All that time wasted. What a shame."

I clenched my fists and

stepped close to her. "Kiss me!" I said.

Her eyes shone with delight. "Yes, sir!" she said, with mock seriousness, and stuck out her tongue at me. Then she put her arms softly around my neck and kissed me. For a second I panicked—I hardly knew what to do. But Diane knew . . . and not only with her lips. Her body moved gently against mine. Her hands stroked the back of my neck.

I pulled away, gasping for breath. I seemed to see her through a red haze.

She smiled sweetly. "You're cute," she whispered, and wrinkled her tiny nose at me.

I reached for her again, urgently, and she pressed her face against my shoulder and whispered, so softly I could just make out the words, "Shall we have a drink first, Drew, my darling?"

My tongue was too numb to form words. I nodded dumbly and released her. She led me slowly into the next room. We passed her hall mirror and she blew a kiss at my reflection. I avoided my own image and stared at hers. She kissed me twice more—little pecks—before we reached her living room.

The fire was dying down in

the fireplace. I would have fixed it, but she pushed me onto the gaily covered studio couch opposite the fire. She kissed me lightly on the top of the head and then danced over to the basket of firewood. In a few seconds the flames danced up, crackling. Diane switched off the lamp so that the only light in the room came from the fire. I sat hunched on the couch, my body stiff with desire, watching her as she tripped around the room. The flimsy silked robe danced as she moved, veiling and unveiling her gleaming white body.

She walked toward me, carrying a tray of glasses and bottles. The robe was hanging loosely open, and she made no effort to close it. Her blonde hair hung down to her shoulders. The flames behind her gave her body a reddish-pinkish hue. And what a body . . . the long, clean legs, the thin waist, the jutting breasts . . .

She kissed me on the forehead as she went by, and set the tray down on the little coffee table at the side of the couch. I studied her face as she mixed a drink for me. She seemed so happy—as if this were the most wonderful moment of her life.

Sinking down on her knees

in front of me, she took a sip from the glass, staring at me wide-eyed over the rim. Then she placed the glass gently in my hand and rested her chin on my knee, without removing her eyes from mine.

I tried to drink, but I could hardly swallow. I hadn't the slightest idea what was in the glass. I put the glass down on the tray and it tipped over, spilling. Neither of us glanced at it. I bent my head down over hers, searching for her lips, while my hands went down over her body.

"Oh, Drew," she whispered, as my lips found hers. "My darling . . . you're so — so handsome. . . ."

I jerked my head away and stood up, knocking her to her hands and knees.

"Darling!" she cried. "Tell me what's wrong?"

"Don't call me handsome!" I snarled. "I'm not handsome and you know it!" That—that damned spell is making you say that. You're blinded and you don't really see *me*! If you did you'd turn away in disgust—just like everyone else!"

She scrambled frantically to her feet. Her robe was hanging from one arm and her hair was tumbled about her face. There were tears in her eyes.

"Oh, my darling!" she sob-

bed, trying to put her arms around me. "What did I do that was wrong?" I do love you so—I *do*!"

I grabbed her wrists and stared into her eyes, trying to see the truth. "But is it *me* you love — me, *me* — Andrew Benedict, not some dream image?"

She was weeping now. "Yes, yes! Of course it's you! You're so handsome, so virile, so witty, so—so—*wonderful*! There's no one else in the—"

I cursed wildly and pushed her away. She fell to the floor, sobbing pitifully. I took one despairing look at her and strode from the room. I could hear her wailing my name as I forced the hall door open. Only when I slammed the door behind me was her voice cut off.

I staggered down the corridor and into my own apartment. I fell into a chair, and then the tears came to my own eyes.

I had been cheated again!

Diane was irresistibly attracted to me, all right—but not to *me*, not to the ugly, uncouth, disgusting slob I knew I was. When she looked at me, she saw a handsome, suave, fascinating man of the world. The kind of man who always took advantage of me,

and who always would. The kind of man who had everything, when I would always have nothing. When she kissed me, she was really kissing him. It was worse agony than being ignored, than being laughed at.

Diane didn't want me. She wanted a debonair, witty, he-man. The spell had made her think she saw all that in me. Making love to her would be about as pleasureable as making love to a woman who had been hypnotized into thinking you were her husband. I had lost all desire for Diane. Her

body had become a Dead Sea fruit for me. Diane didn't want me.

I had been wrong. I had answered too quickly and I had made the wrong wish. I didn't want a woman to find me irresistible; I wanted a woman to *want* me—to want *me*—with all my faults and all my ugliness.

Nobody wanted me—nobody ever had.

I noticed my telephone suddenly. No, I was wrong. Somebody did want me, after all.

And would get me.

THE END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF FANTASTIC, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1959.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 434 So. Wabash Avenue, Chicago 5, Illinois.
Editor, Cele Goldsmith, 1 Park Avenue, New York 16, New York.
Managing editor, None.

Business manager, Leonard O'Donnell, 1 Park Avenue, New York 16, New York.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member must be given.)

Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 434 So. Wabash Avenue, Chicago 5, Illinois.

A. M. Ziff, 1 Park Avenue, New York 16, New York.

Estate of William B. Ziff, 1 Park Avenue, New York 16, New York.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and tri-weekly newspapers only.)

LEONARD O'DONNELL,
Business Manager

[SEAL]

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 17th day of September, 1959.

WILLIAM PROEHMER, Notary Public
(My commission expires March 30, 1960.)

OFF HIS ROCKER

By ARTHUR PORGES

*There's more than one disturbing
kind of rock 'n' role...*

I WANT to clear up this confusion right now—there isn't much time left. For the city, I mean. You can feel it even out here, and we're—how far?—at least three miles away. See that vase quiver? Before long it'll be rocking eight, ten degrees. That's not a temblor, no matter what they say. If the "Record" building holds together much longer, don't be surprised to lose this place, too.

Hell! You still don't believe a word. You think I'm crazy. Well, I'm not. I didn't file forty-nine top patents because I'm feeble-minded. Unless you show some sense in a hurry, and use your influence to do something soon, more houses are going to collapse. They go first—no steel frames. Look, all you have to do is send somebody to my office—ten twelve—there's a little switch on the wall behind the desk. Just have him press the black button, and everything will be over. He'll need to be a guy with guts and good coordination, because by

now that floor must be swaying thirty or more degrees from the vertical. Don't run out on me now—you're the only one who can save the center of town. Don't look at me that way; I'm no crazier than you are. Maybe if I start from the beginning...

One month ago today, that's when it started. The Los Angeles "Record" sent that wise-guy reporter to cover the gadgets in my "miracle" house. That's what the neighbors call it.

He asked me a lot of questions, and I gave him straight answers. I don't believe in false modesty. What I'm doing will eventually make Einstein seem a baby by comparison. I'm getting really close to the secrets of gravitation and electromagnetism.

But all this young fool could do was make fun of my gadgets. You may have seen the article he wrote; it made me look like a damned idiot. I wrote a sharp letter. They chopped it up to give the worst impression. From then on, they never let up on me.

I decided to contact the editor; he's Harvey Brace Lemon. There was no reply to my note. I tried to see him in person; they gave me the runaround. A reporter obviously hoped to get me mad so he could fake up another unfair story.

I thought of suing, but knew that would be a waste of time. Nobody wins against a big paper. They can tie up the case for years with their top lawyers, so that it costs you thousands of dollars to get a hearing. Then, even if they lose, you're likely to end up with a lousy dollar and a hypocritical apology. Besides, people like that are insured against libel suits. I didn't want insurance company money—I was out for their mangy hides.

Then I got the idea of dealing with the publisher. Maybe he wasn't aware of their scummy tactics. He has the power to take steps. I wired him at Carmel, where he has a mansion or two. He never bothered to answer, even when I tried a couple more times.

I was beginning to get mad. It was clear that the whole staff was to blame. Probably the publisher himself set the tone.

As a last resort, I stated my case to the other papers in town. Fat lot of good that did. They wouldn't print a word. One paper will never oppose another on behalf of a third party, no matter how hotly they may feud among themselves.

Well, now I was really mad.

Constant misrepresentation and arrogance—that's what it is—plain, nasty arrogance; the public be damned. Too big for their breeches, those executives of the "Record".

Now I don't get angry very easily; I'm a tolerant guy. In scientific work, you've got to be open-minded; to get along with all kinds. I cooperate with any type of people: radicals, reactionaries, cranks, neurotics, sour old maids, and wild-eyed playboys. We're all human, and as Mark Twain cracked, that's so bad in itself that nothing worse can be cited against us.

But when I really get my Irish up—not that I'm Irish; that's just an expression—things happen fast. That damn newspaper infuriated me with its unfairness, and I figured I'd teach them a lesson about public relations they wouldn't forget in a hurry.

But here am I, a lousy physicist—really, I'm a good one; a genius; I mean, though, what's an individual against a bunch of power-drunk pirates like that? Society puts all its weight on their side. What could one man accomplish with a whole oligarchy of money and prestige? The "Record," biggest paper on the West Coast. Printing plant in a new fifty story building that cost millions. What would happen, by the way, if you or I wanted to build a skyscraper here in Los Angeles? Zoning laws didn't permit it; too many earthquakes in this area. But the "Record" changes that ordinance in a hur-

ry. A few quiet words to the City Fathers is all it takes. Of course, they did erect a good, solid steel structure, so that the danger was negligible.

Well, that's when I got an idea. If I could wreck their nice new building, it would knock some of the arrogance out of them fast, and get in a good blow for other people they'd lied about.

I began to consider the problem seriously. A tough proposition, you'll agree. I doubt if anybody else in the world could have solved it. Real genius is called for. I could rent an office in their building easily enough, but then what? Start a fire? I thought of that; but the automatic sprinklers would kill it in no time; and even if I jimmied up the ones around my floor, the flames wouldn't do much damage. Besides, they have insurance. They might be inconvenienced, but the underwriters would take the real loss, and I had nothing against them.

Explosives? It would take a whole freight train to carry enough to wreck a modern steel structure like that. And, anyway, I'm not callous; you mustn't think that. Why do you suppose I'm trying to stop the mess now? An explosion would have hurt innocent people and their property—even Billy Button fans.

I thought of blowing up just the presses, but the floor was crowded with people day and night. And insurance was still involved. You can't even put the fool paper out of business for a

few weeks; they'd probably get to use the "Mirror's" presses temporarily. Publishers help each other that way, even though they're red-hot rivals. So I seemed to be up against a dead-end.

But in my work, that's nothing new. When Oldenburger and I tried to design a new missile governor to operate with a point zero zero three per cent variation at 1500 degrees fahrenheit, we backed out of at least six blind alleys, and still found a solution. There's always a way past, around, or under.

But fire wouldn't do, nor explosives. How else does a big structure get into trouble? I thought about it hard. The Empire State Building—it sways a foot or two at the top; even more in a gale. And that Tacoma bridge; it blew down in—1940, I think. Not one big gust, but a rhythmic series of smaller puffs. Resonance—that's the key. Take a pendulum. You tap it, using maybe ten grams of force. It barely moves. But then you push it again, just at the right time, and it swings in a slightly bigger arc. Keep that up, and in a minute or two, the bob, weighing maybe six or eight ounces, will acquire enough momentum to turn through ninety degrees or more. Like troops marching in step over a long bridge; they could break it down by matching its own period of vibration. Best of all, no insurance trouble. Who would ever try to protect a mod-

ern skyscraper against general collapse? The architect would foam at the mouth, he'd be so insulted. Yes, it was the perfect solution—in theory, but hardly practicable at first. I continued to mull it over.

Then I remembered Tesla. Nikola Tesla. He died in 1943, more than eighty years old. Funny how few people can place him. He revolutionized power transmission by high voltage alternating current. He was using radio—and controlling models with it—before Marconi and that bunch knew a crystal from a condenser. Why, he was sending hundred million volt lightning flashes dozens of feet when other scientists were piddling with little two inch sparks. The man was fifty years ahead of his time, and got a dirty deal from history. He was a bigger genius than Edison, Bell, and Westinghouse combined.

Well, Tesla had done some remarkable things with plain, ordinary resonance, too. I suddenly remembered that, and looked up everything available, which isn't much. You see, he kept practically no records, since he was blessed with a mind able to visualize clearly in three dimensions. He could build a new type of dynamo mentally, test it and run it that way, and see every part in operation. When he actually put the machine together, it always worked exactly as he'd expected; the construction was mere routine. That's how he invented the

polyphase alternating current system so basic today.

Things were looking up for me now, so I rented an office on the tenth floor of the "Record" building, near the center of percussion, according to my calculations. It was a simple matter to chip away the plaster and concrete of the outside wall, and locate a good, solid steel member. And no office on that side to get suspicious over the noise or vibration—just empty air a hundred feet over the street. Working from my Tesla notes, I built a simple vibrator, using a compact, modern two horsepower electric motor no bigger than a shoe-box. It drove a heavy, tough little piston by means of an eccentric cam. I smuggled a lightweight welding outfit into the office with a suitcase, and spot-welded the assembly to the steel girder, using plenty of reinforcing bands as well. I had loads of time, since my office "work" was imaginary. One improvement over Tesla was called for. I put together a neat little electronic feed-back unit, using the best transistors available. This device would record the vibrator against the building's motion, and when the period matched, would lock them together for good, so that the amplitude of sway would grow in a hurry.

I wondered whether to include a good battery, but decided that the building's own current ought to do. There was a chance the leads might tear out before the steel frame failed, but I didn't

think it too likely. They were heavy, flexible cables, well armored, and should outlast everything else.

When the whole set-up was ready, I filled the rest of the hole in the wall with shredded newspaper—the “Record” itself, too: how’s that for a laugh?—and did a professional re-plastering job. All that showed on the outside was a simple switch, just like one for the lights, with a red and black button. Nobody would see it except me and maybe a cleaning woman, and it wouldn’t mean a thing to her, although I purposely jammed it during my brief absence from the office.

Well, the building was now at my mercy, but I thought I’d give the “Record” crowd a last chance, so I phoned the editor’s office. I finally got him, but when I mentioned my name, and demanded retractions, he got mad and told me not to bother him again, or he’d have me committed to an asylum. Imagine that—as if I were unbalanced or something. Talk about arrogance!

But my conscience was clear, now; he’d had his chance. So back I went to the building last night at seven, when the place was pretty well deserted except for the floor with the presses. The watchman went to my office with me; that’s the rule at night—nobody is allowed in the building alone except on the paper’s own premises. But, naturally, while he stood outside the door, it was easy to unjam and press

the right button, and the first vibrations were hardly apparent a few inches from the wall. Then I brought out the suitcase with the welder and bits of plaster: that was my excuse for going back—the luggage.

If Telsa was right, and I knew damn well he was, my vibrator was soon locked into the correct period, and the building would be swaying a little more each second. In 1896, he had started a tiny vibrator against a beam in his lab, and in a few hours windows were breaking in nearby buildings, and many houses were swaying to the point of collapse. Simple resonance. The police, knowing Nikola, came hot-footing over, and he smashed the thing with a hammer; there wasn’t even time to handle it any other way. In a few more minutes half the area might have been in ruins. And that was less than three horsepower at work!

Well, you know the rest; it’s all in the papers. The watchman got scared at ten. By that time the swaying was more than obvious, and he thought it was a big temblor. So out he ran, and plenty of the newspaper men followed. The building was rocking like crazy, and the presses were slammed out of true. I see they’re a total wreck, which causes me no pain.

But I goofed in one way. I never stopped to think that a new steel building is a lot tougher than the older ones around it. Now the whole area’s ready to collapse—the hotels, stores, and

houses. Quite a few down already. Nobody knows what's going on except me—and you. They're calling it an earthquake, but that's absurd. Who ever heard of a quake going on for five hours? At increasing magnitude, too. I tell you, Doctor, we've got to stop that vibrator. All you have to do is get the city to stop delivering current in that area. As soon as they do that, the motor will cut out, and everything will go back to normal. Then they can send a crew up to my office and disconnect the whole works. That's

what I was trying to do—get to the master switches in the building, when cops grabbed me and took me here.

Now it's up to you—that's the only way: stop the electricity immediately. If you don't, what with the resonance—don't go; you must believe me. I don't need any shot; tell her to get away from me. Strong arm—that's all you know; I can't fight three internes. If you put me out with that damned needle—you fools! You stupid fools —!

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

Two long novelets by two ranking authors feature the March issue of **FANTASTIC Stories**.



One, *Merlin*, by **J. F. McIntosh**, is the story of a retiring young man on an Arthurian Cycle planet who takes advantage of a quirk of Fate to reveal his true colors—and to make several women reveal theirs!

Lloyd Biggle, Jr.'s, Boticelli Horror is the other—a pulse-quickenning story which adapts Gothic terror to the modern world; it is one of the most strikingly imaginative stories we have ever published.

In addition, the March **FANTASTIC** will offer a handful of top-drawer short stories, a coruscating cover by a brand-new artist, Paul Frame—and all our regular features. The March **FANTASTIC** goes on sale February 18.

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FIRST BORN

By MARY ARMOCK

*I wonder what dying is. And death.
I listened hard and heard Mother
talking about it, but I guess even
she doesn't know.*

MOTHER talks to me a lot. I'm even getting so I can talk to her a little. I think she likes that. But Mother talks to me even when I don't ask anything. That's how I know I'll be going Outside pretty soon. I'm glad because even though Mother has told me all about it, it's not the same as seeing it for yourself. Of course, I wouldn't tell Mother that. It might make her unhappy and I couldn't do that. Not to anyone. Especially Mother.

I remember a long time ago—anyhow it seems like a long time ago—I woke up and rolled over and touched Mother. That's when she started talking to me. She told me how long she'd been waiting for me to do that and how much she loved me and

wanted me. I felt kind of ashamed. I'd been so busy with other things that I hadn't even thought of her. So I rolled over as close to her as I could to make up for it. The love-feeling grew and grew until we—laughed, I guess. Just because we were happy. At least, Mother laughed and maybe I did, too. I'm not sure. Mother said I just had the hiccups. I was very happy, though.

We were happy for a long time, Mother, Daddy and I. We live on a farm and Daddy is a farmer. He wasn't always a farmer, though. Once he worked in a big white room with all kinds and shapes of bottles sitting on long white tables all over the room. And people went scurrying among the bottles checking and

changing and adding bubbly colored stuff to more bubbly colored stuff and it was all very exciting. At least, that's what Mother says and she should know because that's where she met Daddy. But Daddy says he's sorry he ever knew one chemical from another. So now he's a farmer and goes out in the fields every day or into the woods to hunt and fish and get firewood.

Mother jokes about how Daddy and I will be going off hunting and fishing and leaving her home alone. This gave me a bad worry for awhile but Mother loved it away. That's how I knew she was joking. I didn't really understand but if it makes her happy, it makes me happy, too.

I know it's got something to do with Daddy and I being "pals." Not yet, because I can't even go Outside yet. But they talk about it even now. One day at breakfast, Daddy and Mother were talking about it "over a second cup of coffee." Daddy said he sure wished I could go with him today and Mother said, "Time enough when the time comes."

Daddy's voice was dreaming. "We'd go chop the wood first and load it onto the sledge. I'd let him drive the

team while I loaded the heavy stuff. And then we'd take our poles and nets and catch a mess of fish for you."

Mother laughed. "You'd better clean them, too."

"He'll help me clean them. I'll teach him. Like I'll teach him to hunt and fish and farm. The things you've got to know to live decently these days." He put an arm around us. "It's not a bad life, though, is it? All things considered?"

"No, darling," Mother kissed him, "it's a good life."

She didn't tell him about the alley cat she had shot the day before and how scared she'd been. A big cat—almost as high up as me, with great long teeth and green and white fur. She just kissed him again and said, "It's a good life."

Daddy sounded relieved. "And it'll be even better for David. He won't be able to remember how things were . . . I think that's the worst—seeing how things are—and remembering how they were. And could have been," he added softly.

"If you don't get those fish," Mother laughed too quickly, "you'll have no supper with your remembering."

Daddy laughed too and finished his coffee. Just as he

was going out the door he stopped. "Sure be glad when he can go with me. Not so lonely." He smiled at Mother. "Won't be so lonely for you then, either."

"I'm not lonely now. He's lots of company."

Daddy came back quickly and hugged her, "Good girl." Then he patted me on my behind and laughed, "Be a good boy today." He was still laughing when he left. But Mother wasn't. That was how the worry kept popping up at first.

It was worse when the man came to see us. Daddy calls him the Copdoc. He and Mother would talk for awhile about the farm and how Daddy was and how she was and then how I was. That's when the worry would get real bad. Mother would say, "Oh, just fine" and the Copdoc would say, "Well, now, let's just check and make sure." And then he'd laugh. He has a funny kind of laugh that isn't funny. It makes me shiver. Then he'd listen to my heart and poke and prod around until I felt like kicking him. I tried to once but I missed. He just laughed and said, "Strong little fellow, isn't he?" While he was putting his things away he'd ask Mother some more questions. By this

time the worry would be almost as bad as it is now. Just before he left, he'd say, "Well, I can't detect any mutation. Everything seems to be quite normal." The worry would drain away slow-like and Mother would say, "Thank God." But the man would laugh his funny laugh and say, "Don't let your hopes run too high now. The hospital will have to run a few checks before we're absolutely sure." Then the worry would come back with a rush and Mother would say, "Of course, of course" in a hurry like she didn't want to talk about it anymore. "We have to be absolutely sure," he would say. "Have to keep the race pure, you know." Mother would always agree with him and so would I. Because pure means that there's nothing wrong with it, that it's perfect. Like the water in the new well. After he'd left, Mother would sit down and cry a little. A sort of nice easy crying, not like now.

There were still good times. Sometimes Mother would take Daddy's lunch out to him and they'd have a picnic and in the evenings Daddy would read aloud while Mother did some mending and sometimes they would just sit and talk.

I think Daddy is lonely. It isn't so bad for Mother because I'm with her all the time but Daddy has to go out every day and I think he must be very lonely with no one to talk to or anything. Lots of times he'd tell Mother all the things we're going to do when I can go Outside and all the places we'll go. All sorts of places. Except, of course, the Hot Spots. But when Daddy clears the rest of the trees below the house, we'll be able to sit on the porch at night and see them glowing way off in the distance. Mother says a Big City used to be there but now all that's left is a flat place that glows in the dark. But we'll be together and happy and all the bad and worry will be gone.

It's been real bad ever since the last time the Copdoc visited us. Daddy came home early and found Mother crying. Only it wasn't the nice easy crying. It made me shiver and Daddy sounded real worried when he asked her what was the matter. Mother just cried harder so Daddy took us both on his lap and made little quiet noises until the crying was all gone. Then we got out of Daddy's lap and he went into the kitchen to get some coffee. Mother told me to go

to sleep because she had to talk to Daddy about grown-up things. I tried to go to sleep, really I did, but I couldn't. I curled up and pretended I was, though, so Mother wouldn't worry. I heard all they said but I didn't understand most of it.

Daddy handed Mother her coffee and said, "Well, now, what's wrong here?" He sounded as if he were laughing with just his mouth. His whole heart wasn't in it.

I thought Mother was going to start crying again but she didn't. She just sat very tight and still and when she answered it was as if she had to tell every little muscle what to do. "He was here. This afternoon."

"The Copdoc?"

Mother nodded a queer stiff little nod. "He said David and I will have to go to the hospital."

"Yes," Daddy urged her gently.

"Next week."

Daddy took her hand. "Are you afraid of going to the hospital?"

"Do we have to go?" Mother's voice lit up. "Do we? Couldn't we go away somewhere—"

Daddy sounded puzzled, "But you know there isn't anyplace we could go, even if

they would let us. Besides, at the hospital—”

“Hospital!” Mother said it as if she were scraping maggots off her tongue.

“Honey,” the words were slow, “just why are you so afraid? If you’re holding back something, as my wife you should tell me. And as a responsible citizen, you should—”

“Responsible citizen!” Mother’s voice rose and crackled. “Why am I afraid? Because David is a mutant. Do you understand? A mutant, mutant, MUTANT!”

Daddy’s voice cut across the shrill echoes of the word. “Be quiet!”

Mother just stood there, gasping for breath. There was so much pain in the silence that I wanted to move and cry but I couldn’t because I’d promised Mother I’d go to sleep.

“Oh, yes.” Her words hissed into the pain. “It’s different now, isn’t it? It isn’t someone else’s child now. It’s yours. It makes you wonder, doesn’t it, if mutant actually does equal monster. And if it doesn’t—?” She smashed her cup into the fireplace. “*Responsible citizens!* We know what *that* means!”

“How can you be sure he’s a . . .?” Daddy’s voice was

shaky. “You’re just upset. You—”

“Yes, I’m upset! Aren’t you?” Mother gripped the back of the sofa. “Sure? I’m not just *sure*. I *know*. At first I thought it was my imagination. Delusions. Anything but what it was. But the last few months I gave up hoping.” She reached down and touched the little curled up ball that was me. “I loved him and watched him grow and learn and—” she swallowed hard “—and now he’s going to die—because he’s a mutant. He’s going to die before he’s really lived.” A tear tickled the corner of her mouth. “So now you know. David is a mutant and David must die.” She nudged the broken cup with her toe. “We nearly blew the whole world into this many pieces. Now we’ve settled on individual worlds.”

Daddy came up behind her and stroked her hair like a kitten. “Honey, honey—we can try again. There’ll be others . . .”

“Not unless we adopt one. And who would give up their child when there are so few left?”

“But—”

“Darling,” the words were quiet and gentle. “Have you ever known a woman who had

a mutant child ever to have another child?"

"No . . . but we're so isolated. We know so few—"

"They're sterilized," she said simply.

Daddy stared at her a few seconds and then sort of folded up and put his head in his hands. "Good God." And they weren't words really, just hurt noises. Mother looked at him the same way she'd looked at the puppy we'd had to kill because it got so hurt. She sat down beside him and looked at him.

He found her hand and held it. "There must be some way out. After all, if the Copdoc didn't find anything, maybe the hospital won't either."

"Maybe." Mother put her head on his shoulder and they sat in front of the fire all night. I couldn't sleep but I kept on pretending.

Yesterday Mother and I came to the hospital. The worry was real bad and when I tried to tell her it was all right that just made her more worried and frightened, so I stopped. I was very still, not even moving at all, so she could tell everything was all right, that I wasn't worried or frightened. But that seemed to make it worse so I

started to play, even turned a somersault. After that she seemed to feel a little better. I played as hard as I could until Mother started to talk to someone. But just as I stopped to listen, Mother screamed and started to run. We were jostled around quite a bit and then Mother fainted, I guess. After that they brought us here and left us alone. Mother says we are locked in. Then she cried and cried for a long time even though I tried everything I know to make her feel better. Finally I just curled up in a little ball and cried, too. This time Mother didn't even tell me it was just hiccups.

A man comes in to see us quite often and Mother talks and talks to him. She talks about the things I don't understand at all. It frightens me. After the man goes away I try to ask her about them but she's always crying so hard she can't hear me. And talking the terrible, sad talk that's all mixed up. The last time he came, Mother started crying right away and making little hurting sounds. Her hurt and unhappy was so bad that I started to shake all over. I curled into a littlest ball and rolled back and forth and back and forth but it wouldn't stop. I cried and

called to her that I loved her too and to please stop crying and that it was all right but her hurt just got worse. As soon as I'm Outside, I'll try very hard to make her laugh again and maybe her hurt will go away.

It should be soon now. Mother stopped talking a little while ago and went to sleep. It isn't an ordinary sleep. I can tell because I

can't reach her at all. All there is is a little bubble way down deep in her mind that keeps saying, "No . . . no . . ." Just like crying, only worse. I wish I could talk to Mother just once more before I'm born so she could love away this frightened thing that's shaking inside me.

Mother . . .? What is a mutant . . .? Mother, *why* can't an X-ray show love?

THE END

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TYRANTS NEED TO BE LOVED

By MURRAY LEINSTER

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

DOCTOR ZOCH had said that nobody wants to be loved as much as a tyrant, because to be all-powerful is to live in constant fear. But tonight Igor felt no love at all for the Ruler. He felt a sickening terror, which he tried to turn into fury for the sake of courage. But it did not work for him.

All of Diane's moons were below the horizon, and the night was pitch-dark, but there was light ahead and his teeth tended to chatter. The light was that rectangular lane of pitiless glare which was the fence about the prison-camp. Doctor Zoch was a prisoner in it. Already Igor could see the fence itself—woven barbed wire—and the guard-towers—raised on stilt-like metal legs—and he imagined that he

could see in the center that huddle of noisesomeness which was the barracks for the prisoners condemned to hard labor on one-fourth rations until they died.

He halted and looked at his companions. Like himself they wore dark clothing, with dark masks and thick dark gloves. Two of them carried stunners—bulky, hand-made objects good for three hundred yards. Two others carried spidery, insulated aluminum ladders. Igor carried other hand-made pocket stunners—they had been developed at the Institute and discreetly kept secret—and a flask for Doctor Zoch if the impossible happened and they got him out of the prison-camp.

"We're getting too close," said Igor, in a tone which sur-



The prisoners loudly denounced the Ruler when he appeared on the screen.

prised him by its steadiness. "We crawl from here."

Teeth chattered for answer. The five of them went down on their hands and knees. They crawled forward. There was only silence everywhere in the night. Now again a searchlight on a guard-tower flicked to brightness. Its beam wandered lazily and erratically over the enclosure and the hovels at its center. Then it winked out. It did not search the outside darkness.

They crawled interminably. Igor kept his teeth tightly clamped shut. Doctor Zoch had said that the Ruler, as a tyrant, wanted desperately to be beloved by his people. This event followed from that statement. Doctor Zoch had designed a machine, to be built in the shops of the Parapsychological Institute. He had begun to build it and it was almost finished. But he had reported it and its theory to Research Supervision, and he'd been arrested in consequence. Now Igor and the others had been commanded to finish the job Doctor Zoch could not complete because of his arrest. Obviously, the police could not release him without admitting that they'd made a mistake. But the Ruler wanted the Machine. If it worked, it would make him as much beloved as

any tyrant could desire. It would give him control over even the imagination of his subjects. So Igor and the others had been commanded to complete the Machine that Doctor Zoch designed. It would be fatal to know its workings after it was done, so they needed Doctor Zoch.

One of the crawling figures made a sound. All five stopped. Igor said in the lowest of tones:

"Take your time, but don't pull the trigger until you're both ready. Then say so and pull the trigger. We don't want to waste a second."

There were no stunners anywhere but these. The big ones wavered and steadied. The signal came. Igor and the others leaped to their feet and rushed for the charged barbed-wire fence. They rushed toward the light. They could be seen from two of the watch-towers. There should have come a stabbing, flickering burst of machine-gun fire. They should have fallen, while other guns leisurely pumped more bullets into them. Flares should have leaped up, illuminating everything.

But nothing happened. And there was no alarm. Panting, they reached the fence, under a tower. In the dark space they

set up a ladder. One climbed swiftly and set up the other ladder on the inside. He half-slid to the ground within. The others followed swiftly. All three raced across the brightly-lit area inside the line of electrified fence. They reached the darkness of the massed, matted, filthy buildings which were the shelters for persons suspected of unkind thoughts about the Ruler.

They vanished. And then it was as if the guards returned to duty. A searchlight turned on. It swept along the crazy, unsanitary shacks containing the prisoners. From those shacks smells came out to contaminate the night. From them came moanings of men in exhausted sleep. The searchlight beam flickered back. It went out.

Igor was sickened, inside the barracks. The three of them, of course, turned on their pocket-sized stunners. No prisoner stirred. Because of the stunners they were unaware of them or anything else for the time being—which was good fortune for the prisoners. The three intruders searched fiercely. They found Doctor Zoch, and the sight of him roused fury.

Igor gave the signal, a flicker of light in one of the bar-

racks windows. The three of them went out, half-carrying Doctor Zoch. They rushed him across the brightly lighted ground. One of them swarmed up the ladder. The others passed Doctor Zoch up to him. They got him down on the other side and hurried away toward the outer blackness. The last man followed, carrying both the ladders.

There was no alarm. Presently, a searchlight flicked on in one of the guard-towers. It wavered lazily here and there, lighting the walls of the hovels in which the prisoners remained at night, so long as they continued to live.

The two men who'd used the big stunners crawled away. When far enough from the guard-towers, they also got up and ran, panting, for the waiting car. Incredibly, everything had gone according to schedule. They were still alive. Doctor Zoch was free. There was no suspicion of his escape. The whole thing had been managed because of the stunners. They had made the stunners within the past four days—since Doctor Zoch's arrest—because the Ruler wanted the Machine, and they were afraid to complete it without Doctor Zoch's specific advice.

They were afraid the Ma-

chine would operate as expected.

On one hemisphere of the planet Diane the Ruler reigned without limit to his power. On the other half, things were more satisfactory. But under the Ruler there was terror everywhere. The Ruler himself was afraid, because very many people wished very desperately to be rid of him because he had secret police and prison-camps and used them mercilessly against his opponents. But he had to have them because people wanted desperately to be rid of him. He knew there were plots against him. He suspected there were more than his secret police discovered. There were times when he wished bitterly that he were beloved by his people. It would be very good indeed to stop being afraid.

It seemed that the Institute was near when they were only minutes from the prison-camp. As they entered the city, Igor held the flask to Doctor Zoch's mouth. The old man was pitifully weak, but he tried to protest the risk that had been taken for his rescue.

"Hush!" said Igor gently, "drink this. It is milk and eggs and good brandy. We

have more troubles ahead, Drink, for strength."

"But it is madness!" protested Doctor Zoch. "I am only one man! I would not have lived long! It was madness to risk so much for me! You could not have feared that I would speak!"

Igor tilted the flask. Doctor Zoch drank. Igor felt very strange, very much, he considered, as one would feel when he had newly died. What was past was irretrievable. Nothing could matter any more. The worst had happened. From now on there could be only tranquility or purest horror. One could only wait to find out which.

The car threaded streets. It braked and stopped in darkness. Three of them slipped out like eels. They lifted Doctor Zoch to the ground. The car sped away. Trezk drove it. He took a very desperate chance, did Trezk. He would go back to his tiny house and put into the petrol-tank the exact amount of fuel this night's work had used up. Then he'd burn the plastic bags the fuel had been in, and drink heavily of brandy so he would be convincingly stupefied if the police came to his house in the morning. Drake would be far away by daylight. He'd have disposed of the lad-

ders and masks and gloves beyond any imaginable search.

But Lechy and Igor and Sohn hustled Doctor Zoch through a garden gate. It was pitch-dark. They went ten feet. Twenty. Thirty. They stopped, and Igor bent down and heaved. A flagstone lifted. They descended swiftly, all but Sohn, who remained behind to make absolutely sure that the flagstone would show no sign of having been disturbed when morning came. When that was attended to, he would turn up in a disreputable place, seemingly very drunk and in no condition to have taken part in any conspiracy. The flagstone had been arranged two years before, when Igor discovered the drain going from the Institute to nowhere. It was an old drain, three feet in diameter, and before the Institute was built it had doubtless served some purpose for the buildings then occupying the Institute's site. Now it was a bolt-hole, with its flagstoned exit outside a house that Kett—since dead—had rented on pretense that he meant to throw improper parties in it.

Igor marvelled at their forethought as he tucked Doctor Zoch in the makeshift subway vehicle they had built in the Institute's shops. When they

prepared this, they'd had no real idea that to be a member of the staff would ever constitute a deadly danger. Then they'd been under the Ruler's direct protection. They'd devised the highly convincing demonstration of an appalling weapon that was then needed to avert a war the Ruler couldn't have won. Enemy spies must have found out since that it was a fake, but the Ruler'd gained time to seat himself firmly in power and build up military might nobody wanted to challenge. The Ruler had thought well of the Institute in those good old days. Nowadays. Now . . . well, now things were quite different.

"Just lie quiet," said Igor almost humorously, in the inky and ill-smelling darkness underneath the flagstone. "We will have you home in minutes."

The vehicle moved swiftly through the drain with its three passengers. It ran almost four hundred yards, beneath two streets with policemen on them, and under the line of sentries about the Institute. It rolled silently past the appliance-room and into a spare tank that nobody could imagine was the terminus of a railroad built without the knowledge of the Ruler's spies.

Nobody would suspect anything like this!

Igor checked for presences outside. He opened the tank's manhole, which seemed so firmly bolted shut. He wriggled out and helped Doctor Zoch while Lechy boosted. He got the old man to the floor. Lechy scrambled out of the tank. Igor said:

"The man-hole, Lechy."

"Ridiculous!" said Doctor Zoch, reproachfully. "This is the Institute! You have brought me back here! It is suicide! But it was also suicide to come after me. Why did you, Igor?"

"We need you," said Igor. "The Ruler wants the Machine you designed. But he does not want anybody who could design another to be left alive. So he ordered your murder. When the Machine is finished, he will not want anybody able to duplicate it to be left alive. So he will have us killed. Yet if we fail we will be killed for failure. So we need you to tell us what to do."

"I fear," said Doctor Zoch very sadly, "that all my plan is spoiled. I will be discovered here."

"No," said Igor grimly. "There are sentries all about, inside and outside the building. But we have stunners. We made them from your first test

of the principles of the Machine. So, though nobody could have left the building undiscovered, we did. Nobody could have taken you from the prison-camp. But we did. Certainly no one could bring you here and hide you successfully. But we will. Lechy?"

He pulled out a pocket stunner—it was crudity itself, to look at it—and nodded to Lechy. The stunners had made everything possible. Doctor Zoch had tested the Machine's theory by such an improvisation. He'd proved that those odd-shaped waves which produced the experience of consciousness could be inhibited. Then he went on to design the Machine to enhance them selectively. But the stunners were essential first steps. The Machine would be a powerful stimulator of certain groups of waves. The stunner prevented them. The Machine would produce certain experiences in all the brains within its range. The stunners prevented any experiences at all.

Lechy went up the stairway from the basement. Moving silently, he peered out. He signalled; one sentry in the hall above. He aimed a pocket stunner. He went out the door.

Igor helped Doctor Zoch be-

gin the climb. He almost carried the old man. He tried not to notice the bloody places on Doctor Zoch's face. He did note that touching certain spots made Doctor Zoch wince. Probably broken bones gotten when he was arrested, though he'd offered no resistance. But they might have been broken when he was first beaten to make him confess treason to the Ruler. No sensible man would confess, of course. If one denied everything convincingly, there was a chance that the secret police would end it quickly. Of course, they would never release one. That would be to admit that they'd been mistaken. Nobody could admit to a mistake in the Ruler's service!

Doctor Zoch was pitifully frail. Igor felt an almost maternal yearning over his feebleness as they climbed the stairway. They reached the upper hall. There was a sentry there, uniformed and armed. But Lechy held a stunner on him. His consciousness was suspended. He did not fall, but he did not see or hear or feel or know anything. When the stunner-beam went off, he would not know that he had momentarily ceased to know anything. He looked perfectly natural, even now. But his eyes were blank.

Igor helped Doctor Zoch across the hall under the very nose of the sentry who had no awareness of anything, not even of his lack of awareness. They went through the door beyond the hall. Lechy backed into it, holding the stunner steady. He closed the door and flicked off the stunner. He listened, and mopped his forehead. Only a very few seconds later Igor helped Doctor Zoch to a chair. They had reached his own private quarters in the Institute's main building.

"Now," said Igor, "we bandage you and tape you where needful. I think you should rest. Then we can get to business."

"I do not need rest," said Doctor Zoch faintly. "I had too much pain to sleep, but they did not exhaust me, I would have died too soon. But I insist that it was not wise to bring me here!"

"Hush!" said Igor gently. "I will let you talk presently. First let me wash off this blood. And you have broken ribs, haven't you? . . . Hm. Your hand . . . Your . . ."

Despite himself his voice changed. But Doctor Zoch did not notice. He went suddenly into the deep, deep sleep of weakness and exhaustion.

Over the hemisphere under

the Ruler, parents went anxiously over the home-work papers of their children, lest there be some incautious statement implying less than blind admiration of the Ruler and the State. Children were graded for loyalty. It was an indication of parental attitudes, too. Loyal students never failed of good marks. On graduation, they got the good jobs the State employment offices had to pass out. It was essential that one's children get good grades in loyalty! And loyalty also involved slavish respect for any governmental functionary who wore a uniform.

But the Ruler was not satisfied. Before he could feel really secure he must have the inner loyalty of his subjects, too. To be safe against assassination, he needed to be loved by his people.

As of now, he wasn't.

It was a full general who came to the Institute next day. He arrived as Igor stood before the incomplete Machine with an expression of helplessness on his face. He straightened to attention at sight of the general. The general beamed at him.

"I am General Tilsit," he explained. "Research Supervision. I have been assigned to

the special supervision of the making of the Machine."

"Ah, yes!" said Igor respectfully. "I am apprehensive about the Machine. It is so completely the design of Doctor Zoch and the theory is so complex that it is frightening to try to complete it."

There was silence. Doctor Zoch had been arrested five days before. Officially, the rest was silence. One did not inquire about a person who had been arrested. One did not even ask questions if the police took one's wife or daughter into custody. There was the splendor of the State to contemplate. The Ruler had decreed that no personal sorrow should diminish one's rejoicing in the magnificence of the State. He did not put it that way, but people bitterly understood him to mean that it should make up for murder and brutality, and the madness taught in the public schools, and every foulness practised by everybody who could wangle a uniformed State position.

The general tapped a cigarette delicately on his wrist. "You do not despair of success?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" said Igor quickly. "The Ruler himself—" and he wondered ironically if he'd seemed to capitalize the pronoun—"the Ruler himself or-

dered the work done. Of course, I shall accomplish anything the Ruler commands me to."

"Except," said General Tilsit, "that he might order an impossibility."

Igor made his face go blank. General Tilsit was talking pure treason. Nobody should admit to any thought that the Ruler might make a mistake! But Research Supervision officials were privileged. They were even ordered to talk treason on occasion. They had trapped many people that way. Kett, poor devil, was one of them. But he'd managed to make the soldiers kill him when they came for his arrest. Igor was not to be tricked so easily.

"I am sorry, sir," he said stiffly, "but I cannot agree that the Ruler could be in error!"

The general lighted his cigarette. Igor knew that he was aware of Doctor Zoch's disappearance from a slave-labor camp, and that he would pounce if Igor showed that he knew it too.

"Tell me about the Machine," ordered the general abruptly.

Igor took a deep breath.

"It has been found," he said carefully, "that there is a complex substance in the brain which breaks down in differ-

ent ways. The result of each breakdown is the experience of emotion. One way of breakdown produces fear. Others yield other emotional experiences—anger, grief, love, and so on."

The general frowned.

"Well?"

"The Machine," said Igor, "broadcasts wave-forms which cause the breakdown of that substance in different ways. In effect, the Machine broadcasts emotions. Anyone within its range will feel whatever emotion the operator desires, the kind of emotion being determined by the wave-form, and its intensity by the frequency. Therefore, it can be modulated and the emotions of an entire population can be made simultaneous. Of course, they will be associated with simultaneous stimuli."

The general looked puzzled. He wasn't. He'd heard all this before. He'd been briefed. But he would trap Igor if he could.

"And what possible use would that be?" he demanded.

Igor said with a fine air of sincerity:

"No intelligent man could oppose the Ruler, sir. But there are stupid ones with emotional associations which lead them to do so. The Ruler himself has mentioned dissi-

dents. His plans for the State and for his people are hampered by individuals who are emotionally driven to oppose him and harm the State. With the Machine, the Ruler can make a speech with everyone in the nation listening, and with the Machine broadcasting the emotions intelligent men already feel when they hear the Ruler speak."

The general regarded Igor out of the corners of his eyes. He hesitated, then spoke.

"What then?"

"Why," said Igor earnestly, "if the Ruler speaks of his enemies, and all his hearers experience overwhelming anger, an association is formed, a conditioning association. Afterward no one will be able even to think of the Ruler's enemies without anger. If the Ruler speaks of his love and care for his people, and they feel overwhelming love as they listen, they will be unable to think of him without experiencing a surge of affection. So everybody will become unanimous in loyalty to him. Everyone will be what the Ruler wishes each of us to be. Everyone will be loyal to the Ruler, even the stupid ones who are now emotionally disturbed."

He hoped that no trace of irony had crept into his voice.

"Pavlov's dogs, eh?" said the general drily.

"It is not the same thing at all, sir!" protested Igor instantly. "That ancient process had no purpose! But this—this is a way to bring every person in the nation into complete accord with the State! It will remove the seeds of crime! It will make treason unthinkable!"

He seemed tense. He was. The general regarded him sardonically.

"Very well. You are convincing. But there will be no work done on the Machine without a Research Supervision general officer present. The Machine will be guarded night and day. No doubt this is it. Now, exactly how does it or will it operate?"

Igor explained the theory and the process. The general listened noncommittally. When he left, Igor's clothing felt clammy from the cold sweat that had poured out on his skin. His life had hung in the balance with every word of his explanation.

The Ruler found the strain excessive. He sent a Cabinet Officer to a prison-camp and had an army colonel shot. Their loyalty had become doubtful, which could be a prelude to conspiracy. He was

bitter because he could not fully trust anybody. Those around him were opportunists, seeking greatness and riches through him. They'd betrayed him in an instant . . . He wished that there was someone he could trust. Even the people would be a protection against conspirators. If they could be persuaded to love him as subjects should love their Ruler, he would have less reason to be afraid. . . .

Igor closed the door of his private quarters. As usual, after a session of work upon the Machine with a Research Supervision general officer glaring at him, and a dozen sentries with loaded rifles in the room, he was nerve-racked but he tried to speak casually to Doctor Zoch.

"You may be pleased to hear," he observed, "that you are dead."

Doctor Zoch said mildly:
"How did I die?"

"You crept from your barrack," Igor told him, "and crawled into the camp crematory. There you cut your throat. When the morgue-wagon came around with the bodies of prisoners who had died during the night, they simply dumped the other bodies on top of yours. All

were disposed of together. The prison-camp officials were very pleased to find a prisoner to whom you had confided your intention. They would have been in a nice fix if the Ruler ordered you questioned again, and they could not find you!"

"Poor devil!" said Doctor Zoch sadly. "I hope the guards gave him a loaf of bread. The prisoner would have invented that story in hope of such a reward."

Igor moved restlessly. His nerves were taut and jangling.

"The Machine is nearly finished," he said abruptly. "It could be used at low power tomorrow. You must tell me what to do!"

Doctor Zoch said gently;

"You must finish it. Properly. It must work as I said it would."

"Why?" demanded Igor.

"Because," said Doctor Zoch in the same tone, "it has to pass tests. It would not be used at full scale and full power unless it had been proved to work without defect. It is to be used to make the Ruler beloved and his enemies hated. Do you think he will risk that it work backwards, if at all?"

Igor ground his teeth.

"Then it must work exactly as you promised."

"Exactly," said Doctor Zoch mildly.

"It has to be capable of turning everyone within its range into a zombie, a robot, a slave so degraded that he wishes nothing more than to be a slave!"

"In theory that should be its effect," agreed Doctor Zoch. "I designed it. There is no other way to bring about what must happen, unless by bloody war. But I am not a traitor to you, Igor, nor to my fellow sub-citizens."

Igor said irresolutely;

"Will you tell me the trick—the secret part of the device which will make it—make it weaken the Ruler's power? You must have designed it for something like that!"

Doctor Zoch made a movement as if to put the tips of his fingers together in a well-remembered gesture. But one of his hands was heavily bandaged. There were broken bones in it. He shrugged and peered at Igor.

"I will not even say that it will weaken the power of the Ruler. I will say nothing that could be extracted from you under torture." His tone was firm. It was almost brisk.

Igor stared at him. Then he said desperately:

"Then I will finish it. But

if the Machine is to subdue all Diane to the Ruler, with other worlds after it, so that tyrants turn humanity into a race of slaves . . . If that is to happen, you will have to hide very deep in hell to escape the dead who will hunt you through all eternity!"

Doctor Zoch looked somberly after him as he turned away.

The Ruler moved restlessly about his palace. His secret police were on the trail of conspirators who seemed to be linked to persons in his very palace. But some of those hinted at had been so loyal for so long that the Ruler darkly suspected the secret police of trying to remove everybody who would serve him loyally, so they alone could control the State. But he could not be sure! He did not know who was loyal and who was not. . . .

Cautiously, he considered the Machine now under construction at the Parapsychological Institute. Its former head, one Doctor Zoch, had respectfully proposed it as a way by which everybody — everybody! — could be conditioned to perfect loyalty to the Ruler, and bitter hatred of his enemies. The Ruler had dis-

posed of Doctor Zoch because he was dangerous. But the machine — if it could be made — if all his people could be conditioned to impassioned, emotional loyalty. If all his subjects could be made forcibly into his adorers. . . .

He struck a gong. He ordered a report on the progress of the Machine.

General Tilsit sardonically supervised the small-scale test. Troop-carrier loads of prisoners from jails and prison-camps arrived by night at the Parapsychological Institute. They were not only handcuffed but chained to each other, and Igor gagged at the smell of degradation when they shuffled into the lecture-hall of the Institute. Some were sunk in apathy so complete that they were like automatons. But some were bright-eyed scarecrows who defied torture and death and spat at him and at the general as they passed.

Guards herded them into place. They filled half the hall intended for sedate and learned lectures on aspects of the physical nature of consciousness. General Tilsit regarded them sardonically. He nodded to Igor, and he approached the Machine. There was a

screen on which the Ruler's more-than-life-size image would presently appear. There were speaker-units to give out his recorded voice. And there was the Machine.

Igor took his place at the controls.

"You are quite ready?" asked the general. "All is in order?"

"Yes, general," said Igor nervously. "I believe everything is as Doctor Zoch designed it. I have tested everything. But I am nervous. Naturally!"

A squalling minor uproar came from the prisoners. Some of them guessed that a novel and deadly weapon was to be tested on them. They snarled at the guards, at Igor, at everything.

"The Machine's waves," said the general. "The ones that create emotions. They will not go through the walls?"

"No," said Igor. "The walls are metal foil."

"And you and I, will we be affected like the prisoners?"

Igor pointed to a woven copper cage which almost surrounded the Machine. Its open side was toward the prisoners.

"The waves cannot pass that screen," he explained. "They will strike only the

prisoners. They are not reflected."

"Proceed," said the general.

Matter-of-factly he drew a weapon and held it bearing negligently upon Igor. It was, of course, a precaution.

Igor threw a switch. The image of the Ruler appeared on the screen. His deep-sunk eyes seemed to gaze at the chained prisoners, whose degradation was a consequence of his rule. The uproar multiplied. Snarls and catcalls, screamed imprecations and shrieks pleading innocence, all mingled with hissings and oaths to make an horrific din. Some of these men had nothing left to fear, not even the Ruler. They cursed him defiantly.

Then the Ruler's voice boomed out from the speakers. Igor reflected bitterly that the Institute had designed that recorded voice, and the microphone and amplifiers which made it resonant and fatherly and splendidly masculine. The prisoners howled at it.

Then Igor touched the first emotional control on the Machine. Its function was to produce the emotion of awe.

It did.

The record of image and speech, together, lasted half an hour. It was one of the

Ruler's shorter speeches. Igor had a typescript of it, with cues for the operation of the Machine to synchronize violent, appropriate emotions with every word. He felt extraordinary personal sensations as he swayed and ruled the poor devils who were the guineapigs for this test.

When the Ruler's voice died away and his image faded from the screen, the prisoners were changed. They were fanatics. They had roared in ardent echoing of his defiance of foreign enemies. They had wept when he spoke of his sorrow that he needed to ask sacrifices of his people. They shouted crazy, adoring assurances when he begged his people for their loyalty. And the emaciated, half-starved, doomed victims of his rule snarled with rage when he spoke of those who hated and opposed and would depose him.

When the thing was ended, General Tilsit was very pale.

"I walked beyond the copper cage," he told Igor. "I felt the emotions I saw you impose. The thing is astounding! The State the Ruler has founded will last for a thousand years!" He added, "I shall increase the guard over the machine. Hold yourself ready to operate it when the Ruler shall command. There

must be no fumbling. The matter is too important."

Igor swallowed. The guards herded the prisoners back into the courtyard of the Institute and into the troop-carriers which had brought them. They shambled as they walked. Some staggered from weakness. But they babbled to each other with a pathetic enthusiasm of the Ruler and their love for him. On the way back to the prisons where they would die within weeks or days, they piped up feebly, singing in praise of the Ruler.

The demonstration was conclusive. The Ruler heard the report of it, and brooded, and twice made gestures toward the arrest and execution not only of Igor, but of General Tilsit as well. The Machine was very dangerous. But if it were used . . .

The Ruler proclaimed a great occasion. He would make an address to all his people. He would make announcements of an unparalleled kind. He might even grant amnesty to some offenders. He would show his benevolence to all his people and every man and woman and child must see and hear him on penalty of being considered a traitor.

The population of one whole hemisphere of the planet

Diane prepared to obey. The Ruler's speeches did not mean much. There had been too many of them. But nobody wanted the secret police to suspect he hadn't listened.

The sun shone brightly, and white clouds floated in the sky—which was blue as on all human-occupied planets—and there was self-evident preparation by nature itself for so important a matter as a speech by the Ruler. All business stopped. Every store and office closed. There were no schools. All traffic suspended so passengers could stand before one of the great screens set up even in villages for passersby to watch. There were no picnics, secret-police floaters made sure of that! Nobody in the Ruler's domain seriously considered any other activity than seeing and hearing—and being seen to be doing so—while the Ruler's address was in progress.

He spoke from the head of the great white-stone stairway that led up from the Avenue of the State to his palace. The stairs were three hundred feet wide. The columns of the palace portico loomed above them. Flags and banners floated bravely in the sunshine. Tens of thousands of inhabitants of his capital

city thronged to see him in person—at whatever distance—and there was not an inch of ground space or on nearby roofs which was not colored by the garments of his subjects. Loudspeakers were everywhere to repeat his words. All over the hemisphere all other activity stopped while the Ruler spoke.

Magnificent, blaring trumpets sounded. Then drums beat, and the trumpets sounded again.

Then the Ruler appeared on the great stairway before his palace. He was surrounded by his guards and officials, of course, but he appeared convincingly in the midst of his beloved people. They crowded the lower steps within tens of yards of him. He raised his hand gravely, and a roar of sharply supervised applause replied.

(In the Institute, watching a television monitor for his cues and with a script of the Ruler's speech before him for guidance, Igor pressed the first button on the Machine's control-board. It was the button for awe.)

The roar of greeting ceased, and the people of the Ruler, as if involuntarily, bowed down before him.

("Splendid!" said General Tilsit, with a weapon pointing negligently at Igor's body.)

The Ruler spoke, and for a long minute there was a deep and astonishing silence while his words rolled out of many resonant loud-speakers. There was no one before the palace—nor before any of the screens which gave even clearer pictures of the Ruler all over his domain—who did not listen with a feeling of astonished admiration to his beginning. Then there came a feeling of ecstatic joy as he spoke of his love for his people. They cheered, vast volumes of sound before his palace; thin and reedy shouts before the screens in tiny villages. He touched upon his unremitting labor for the welfare of his subjects. An enormous feeling of affection overwhelmed his audience over an entire hemisphere. They shouted again.

(The monitor swept over the crowds, and Igor in the Institute saw rapt and eager faces, flushed and suffused with emotion. He glanced at the script and prepared to rouse frenzied hatred of the Ruler's enemies when they were mentioned. He did. The image on the monitor showed the Ruler's face close-up, and it was triumphant and hun-

gry and eager. It had been a long time since the Ruler could believe in the total sincerity of all who listened to him. Now he knew it again. He had the feel of his audience. It loved him. It adored him!)

The Ruler spoke of those traitors and dissidents who had wished him ill, and the crowd uttered a roaring growl. Had any man present been named as his enemy, the mob would have torn him to bits. But the Ruler assured his people that such folk were very few. They bellowed their joy. He promised them that he would continue to serve them without remission, without respite, without rest, and with unflinching love. And a booming, screaming tumult of hysterical adulation answered.

(General Tilsit put aside his weapon and said with an amazement that was not in the least sardonic: "Think of it! This is happening all over the nation! Everywhere!")

Igor compressed his lips. He followed the script of the Ruler's speech with conscientious exactitude. But a cold sensation ran up and down his spine. The Machine did all that it was supposed to do.

The monitor showed other crowds in other cities, in transports of emotion which

followed exactly the buttons that Igor pressed. Everywhere there was a tumult of loyalty and love for the Ruler which urgently needed expression, but could only be shown by cries and swayings so long as his figure stayed on the screens and his voice came out of loudspeakers. Never before had any man been adored as the Ruler was. The blood drained from Igor's cheeks. From this moment on, his people would worship the Ruler blindly. They would enslave themselves joyfully to him. They would perform anything he might command. And this insane conditioning was permanent! It would last. They would never be released from it!

Igor numbly pressed down the button to arouse extravagances of affection, appropriate to the conclusion of the Ruler's speech. He held it down. He saw even the guards about the Ruler turn to regard him with warmly shining eyes. He saw the Ruler's generals shouting incoherently of their love for him. They crowded about him to swear undying fealty. Igor saw a vast, slow, irresistible movement of the crowds in the streets. Shouting, screaming, stumbling and rising, with

open mouths babbling of love and loyalty and rejoicing, the Ruler's listeners moved to protest their impassioned affection from the nearest possible position. The guards crowded about him, shouting joyously.

Igor was still dazed when he faced Doctor Zoch in his quarters, after it was all over. He'd been unable to talk to the older man. He was partly ashamed and partly exultant and wholly confused. He stammered out some words.

"No, Igor," said Doctor Zoch mildly. "I did not expect what happened. I expected something, of course. I knew the Ruler would make a speech telling his people how he loved them, and how passionately he wished everybody to be happy and free of fear and hunger and sadness. I knew he would tell them—and the Machine would condition them so they had to believe—that he desired nothing but their happiness and their love. The Machine would make them believe every syllable. This much I expected. I even expected his government to fall apart before he was half through his speech, and it did. But I did not expect what took place where he was."

Igor paced back and forth.

There were no sentries anywhere about the Institute, now. Tacitly, but openly, Doctor Zoch was again the Institute's head. There were other pleasing changes in the state of things on this hemisphere.

"But I don't understand!" protested Igor. "You must have planned." . . .

Doctor Zoch nodded his head comfortably.

"I planned to invoke a natural law," he said gently. "The Ruler wished his people to think him kind and gentle and wise and benevolent. So I designed a machine to produce such emotions as would condition them so they could think nothing else. And when the Machine was used, the law of nature operated. As soon as he finished his speech, and while the television screens showed his generals cheering him and the people moving toward him, weeping with joy and love,—why—in other cities the people began to massacre the secret police because the Ruler did not want anybody to act as they did, and to tear down the prison-camps because he did not want anyone oppressed or sad or hungry or in fear. The Ruler had said he disapproved of very nearly every agency of his rule, though not by name. So the people, out of

love for him, destroyed what he disapproved of. It was a perfectly natural thing. It is a natural law that we try to do what is wished by people we love!"

Igor swallowed. Doctor Zoch said regretfully: "But it is sad about the people on the palace steps. I do not think of the Ruler, but—how many were killed there?"

Igor did not answer. He felt horrible. He'd sat at the controls of the machine, his finger frozen on the button that called up extravagant love, when he realized what must happen. He couldn't take it away. In the monitor he saw the crowd surging forward, shouting happily, pressing to get closer to the Ruler they now loved beyond imagination. They were irresistibly impelled to move toward him to tell him nearby of their feelings of loyalty, of their resolve to be his perfect subjects. They stumbled in their haste. They did not

think. Faces shining, they crowded closer and closer. . . .

Igor did not like to remember what the monitors had shown him while he sat at the controls of the Machine. The cameraman there must have been frozen as Igor was, too much stunned by horror to turn his camera away. So Igor had seen every bit of the tragedy — though mercifully from a distance—as the crowd swept up the palace steps, cheering, and crowded about the Ruler's cheering guards, and was pushed on terribly from behind so that nobody could stop. Nobody.

More than a hundred of the crowd had been crushed to death in their attempt to tell the Ruler of their love. That was not the whole list, of course. The whole list included nearly every one of the Ruler's guards, and all his generals.

The Ruler could only be recognized by his decorations. The rest of him was trampled past any possible recognition.

THE END

MARIANA

By
FRITZ
LEIBER

*Jonathan told her
not to touch the
switches, but it
was cold and lone-
ly and isolated....*

MARIANA had been living in the big villa and hating the tall pine trees around it for what seemed like an eternity when she found the secret panel in the master control panel of the house.

The secret panel was simply a narrow blank of aluminum—she'd thought of it as room for more switches, if they ever needed any, perish the thought! — between the air-conditioning controls and the gravity controls. Above the switches for the three-dimensional TV but below those for the robot butler and maids.

Jonathan had told her not to fool with the master control panel while he was in the city, because she would wreck anything electrical, so when the secret panel came loose under

her aimlessly questing fingers and fell to the solid rock floor of the patio with a musical *twing* her first reaction was fear.

Then she saw it was only a small blank oblong of sheet aluminum that had fallen and that in the space it had covered was a column of six little switches. Only the top one was identified. Tiny glowing letters beside it spelled TREES and it was on.

When Jonathan got home from the city that evening she gathered her courage and told him about it. He was neither particularly angry nor impressed.

"Of course there's a switch for the trees," he informed her deflatingly, motioning the robot butler to cut his steak.

"Didn't you know they were radio trees? I didn't want to wait 25 years for them and they couldn't grow in this rock anyway. A station in the city broadcasts a master pine tree and sets like ours pick it up and project it around homes. It's vulgar but convenient."

After a bit she asked timidly, "Jonathan, are the radio pine trees ghostly as you drive through them?"

"Of course not! They're solid as this house and the rock under it—to the eye and to the touch too. If you ever stirred outside you'd know these things. The city station transmits pulses of matter at 60 cycles a second like alternating current. The science of it is over your head."

She ventured one more question: "Why did they have the tree switch covered up?"

"So you wouldn't monkey with it—same as the fine controls on the TV. And so you wouldn't get ideas and start changing the trees. It would unsettle *me*, let me tell you, to come home to oaks one day and birches the next. I like consistency and I like pines." He looked at them out of the dining-room picture window and grunted with satisfaction.

She had been meaning to tell him about hating the

pinces, but that discouraged her and she dropped the topic.

About noon the next day, however, she went to the secret panel and switched off the pine trees and quickly turned around to watch them.

At first nothing happened and she was beginning to think that Jonathan was wrong again, as he so often was though would never admit, but then they began to waver and specks of pale green light churned across them and then they faded and were gone, leaving behind only an intolerably bright single point of light—just as when the TV is switched off. The star hovered motionless for what seemed a long time, then backed away and raced off toward the horizon.

Now that the pine trees were out of the way Mariana could see the real landscape. It was flat gray rock, endless miles of it, exactly the same as the rock on which the house was set and which formed the floor of the patio. It was the same in every direction. One black two-lane road drove straight across it—nothing more.

She disliked the view almost at once—it was dreadfully lonely and depressing. She switched the gravity to moon - normal and danced

about dreamily, floating over the middle-of-the-room bookshelves and the grand piano and even having the robot maids dance with her, but it did not cheer her. About two o'clock she went to switch on the pine trees again, as she had intended to do in any case before Jonathan came home and was furious.

However, she found there had been changes in the column of six little switches. The TREES switch no longer had its glowing name. She remembered that it had been the top one, but the top one would not turn on again. She tried to force it from "off" to "on" but it would not move.

All the rest of the afternoon she sat on the steps outside the front door watching the black two-lane road. Never a car or a person came into view until Jonathan's tan roadster appeared, seeming at first to hang motionless in the distance and then to move only like a microscopic snail although she knew he always drove at top speed—it was one of the reasons she would never get in the car with him.

Jonathan was not as furious as she had feared. "Your own damn fault for meddling with it," he said curtly. "Now we'll have to get a man out here.

Dammit, I hate to eat supper looking at nothing but those rocks! Bad enough driving through them twice a day."

She asked him haltingly about the barrenness of the landscape and the absence of neighbors.

"Well, you wanted to live *way out*," he told her. "You wouldn't ever have known about it if you hadn't turned off the trees."

"There's one other thing I've got to bother you with, Jonathan," she said. "Now the second switch—the one next below—has got a name that glows. It just says HOUSE. It's turned on—I haven't touched it! Do you suppose . . ."

"I want to look at this," he said, bounding up from the couch and slamming his martini - on - the - rocks tumbler down on the tray of the robot maid so that she rattled. "I bought this house as solid, but there are swindles. Ordinarily I'd spot a broadcast style in a flash, but they just might have slipped me a job relayed from some other planet or solar system. Fine thing if me and fifty other multi-megabuck men were spotted around in identical houses, each thinking his was unique."

"But if the house is based on rock like it is . . ."

"That would just make it easier for them to pull the trick, you dumb bunny!"

They reached the master control panel. "There it is," she said helpfully, jabbing out a finger . . . and hit the HOUSE switch.

For a moment nothing happened, then a white churning ran across the ceiling, the walls and furniture started to swell and bubble like cold lava, and then they were alone on a rock table big as three tennis courts. Even the master control panel was gone. The only thing that was left was a slender rod coming out of the gray stone at their feet and bearing at the top, like some mechanistic fruit, a small block with the six switches—that and an intolerably bright star hanging in the air where the master bedroom had been.

Mariana pushed frantically at the HOUSE switch, but it was unlabeled now and locked in the "off" position, although she threw her weight at it stiff-armed.

The upstairs star sped off like an incendiary bullet, but its last flashbulb glare showed her Jonathan's face set in lines of fury. He lifted his hands like talons.

"You little idiot!" he screamed, coming at her.

"No, Jonathan, no!" she wailed, backing off, but he kept coming.

She realized that the block of switches had broken off in her hands. The third switch had a glowing name now: JONATHAN. She flipped it.

As his fingers dug into her bare shoulders they seemed to turn to foam rubber, then to air. His face and gray flannel suit seethed iridescently, like a leprous ghost's, then melted and ran. His star, smaller than that of the house but much closer, seared her eyes. When she opened them again there was nothing at all left of the star or Jonathan but a dancing dark after-image like a black tennis ball.

She was alone on an infinite flat rock plain under the cloudless, star-specked sky.

The fourth switch had its glowing name now: STARS.

It was almost dawn by her radium-dialed wristwatch and she was thoroughly chilled, when she finally decided to switch off the stars. She did not want to do it—in their slow wheeling across the sky they were the last sign of orderly reality—but it seemed the only move she could make.

She wondered what the fifth switch would say. ROCKS? AIR? Or even . . .?

She switched off the stars.

The Milky Way, arching in all its unalterable glory, began to churn, its component stars darting about like midges. Soon only one remained, brighter even than Sirius or Venus—until it jerked back, fading, and darted to infinity.

The fifth switch said DOCTOR and it was not on but off.

An inexplicable terror welled up in Mariana. She did not even want to touch the fifth switch. She set the block of switches down on the rock and backed away from it.

But she dared not go far in the starless dark. She huddled down and waited for dawn. From time to time she looked at her watch dial and at the night-light glow of the switch-label a dozen yards away.

It seemed to be growing much colder.

She read her watch dial. It was two hours past sunrise. She remembered they had taught her in third grade that the sun was just one more star.

She went back and sat down beside the block of switches and picked it up with a shudder and flipped the fifth switch.

The rock grew soft and crisply fragrant under her and lapped up over her legs and then slowly turned white.

She was sitting in a hospital bed in a small blue room with a white pinstripe.

A sweet, mechanical voice came out of the wall, saying, "You have interrupted the wish-fulfillment therapy by your own decision. If you now recognize your sick depression and are willing to accept help, the doctor will come to you. If not, you are at liberty to return to the wish-fulfillment therapy and pursue it to its ultimate conclusion."

Mariana looked down. She still had the block of switches in her hands and the fifth switch still read DOCTOR.

The wall said, "I assume from your silence that you will accept treatment. The doctor will be with you immediately."

The inexplicable terror returned to Mariana with compulsive intensity.

She switched off the doctor.

She was back in the starless dark. The rocks had grown very much colder. She could feel icy feathers falling on her face—snow.

She lifted the block of switches and saw, to her unutterable relief, that the sixth and last switch now read, in tiny glowing letters: MARIANA.

THE END

FANTASTIC



According to you...

Dear Editor:

Since I am basically an s-f fan, when I saw the change in your title to *Fantastic Science Fiction Stories*, I started buying the magazine. In the December issue, "The Clone," by Theodore L. Thomas is one of the best monster stories I have ever read. The Dominic Flandry story by Anderson was also top drawer. Good stories like these plus excellent covers which accurately describe the stories behind them add up to an s-f magazine which I, for one, shall endeavor to buy each month.

I'd like to see an anthology of the best stories from *Amazing* and *Fantastic*.

Edward V. Moore
11 Entrance Road
Brooklyn Heights, N. Y.

• *What do you mean, "Endeavor"? If you like us that much, buy us!*

Dear Editor:

I like the name of *Fantastic Science Fiction* so much better. And for some reason the stories seem to have gotten better too, with such interesting writers as Jack Sharkey.

"A Message in Secret"; Poul Anderson has got a knack for starting stories, but somehow, he doesn't go on beyond that for me.

James W. Ayers
609 First Street
Attalla, Ala.

• *You haven't seen anything yet, Jim. Just take a look at some of the writers who will be represented in future issues of*

Fantastic: Henry Hasse, J. F. Bone, Gordon Dickson, John Jakes, Lloyd Biggle and J. T. McIntosh.

Dear Editor:

The phrase, "The Majority Rules," (which sounds so noble in elementary school text books) is certainly a fallacy as far as the stories in *Fantastic* are concerned. The editor wanted to know what type of story was preferred. It was put to a vote. The overwhelming majority voted for fantasy in all its ramifications; s-f also ran. So what do we get? Science-Fiction!

Don't misunderstand: I like s-f very much, but with a half-dozen other good s-f mags on the market, why bother with *Fantastic*, whose title, alas, has proved a misnomer.

M. J. Miller
1348 Lakeland Avenue
Lakewood 7, Ohio

• *Why should we be different from the national politicians? Ever compare what they say before—and then after—an election?*

Dear Editor:

I've only become interested in science fiction recently. The first s-f magazines I read, were the June issues of *Fantastic* and *Amazing*. I was attracted by them because I saw that there was a Bradbury story in each of them. I'd like to make a few comments on *Fantastic*. Recently, you had a letter stating that the writer of the letter hoped you wouldn't publish science fiction.

Now I'm not opposed to science fiction, far from it, but I think that *Amazing* and the other s-f magazines are publishing enough science fiction. How about sticking to pure fantasy in *Fantastic*, especially magic and demonology stories. I think those type are swell. I'd also like to see a few horror or Gothic stories. Maybe you could reprint one or two Lovecraft stories.

Jeffrey Newman
28 Stewart Avenue
Nutley 10, N. J.

• *As we've said many times, good fantasy is hard to come by.*

ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD

By J. HARVEY HAGGARD

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

*The boy was tall and
handsome and...red.
...This boy, whom he
had always thought
of as his son.*



STEPHAN Wentworth had not had such a good laugh for as long as he could remember. He had spent twenty arduous, triumphant years on

Nereid, fifteenth planet of the star Alpha Centauri. Some star-maps actually listed the little world as Wentworth's Planet because of huge land

grants given him by the natives. The people of Nereid, though extremely generous in their traits, were naturally slothful. Stephan Wentworth had driven them to their tasks. He had hounded the migrant earthmen, equally lazy. Men hated him for accumulating such wealth and prestige on another planet—but *this!* Doc Lezen was a card all right. It was the tallest tale he'd heard in many a Nereidan moon.

Coming naked from the germicidal mist-shower that ended the medical examination, Stephan Wentworth stood in a jet of warm drying air. He was a large man, big-boned and heavy, but even at fifty-two this red-haired giant did not display the usual flabbiness of that age. He reached in the locker for his clothing, consisting of the silvery metaline tunic, breeches of planetary white, soft gravity slippers with cushion soles. Then the humor of it overcame him. He staggered around laughing, one foot in the breeches, the other out. An incredulous look transformed the usual severity of his strong face, making him appear younger than he actually was. Exertion in this thin rarefied air sent pain stabbing into his

pleural regions, made him gasp. Remembering his oxy-tank, the one he usually wore at all times, he saw it on a table.

After a puzzled moment, Dr. Frank Lezen joined in the merriment. Old Frank was not huge like Stephan Wentworth. He was sixty-four. There would be a time, not long hence, when he would hang up his stethoscope forever and retire to one of the pleasure planets. Laughter racked and threatened to injure his frail body in its loose garb of sanitary white plasticloth. His thin face was crowned by tufts of white hair like quotation marks, underlined by a short but imposing beard. Now the face became a writhing morass of wrinkles as his mouth gaped open and his laughter emerged as a dry cackling.

"Sent a fleet of fifty ships to space yesterday!" Stephan Wentworth had bragged. "Every one loaded to the hilt with cargo. We loaded them in three days and two nights and four hours and five minutes. That's a record, let me tell you, even for Stephan Wentworth." No doubt of his physical fitness bothered him. He could hardly remember the day he'd been sick.

Dr. Lezen was a company

doctor, working for Wentworth Enterprises Of Space, Inc. In a way, Wentworth owned him, like everything else on the planet. The only trouble with old Dr. Lezen was his insistence, like other earthmen, for piddling around and taking his own good time. He loitered at everything he did, despite the fact that he was an excellent physician and surgeon and had attended to all of Wentworth's medical needs since first stepping foot on this world.

Few people had a passion for hard work like Stephan Wentworth. Since the atmosphere on Nereid was more tenuous than that of earth, he invariably wore the oxy-tank strapped to his left shoulder. Its weight was slight, its assistance enormous. With this extra source of air, Stephan Wentworth could do twice as much work as others and work twice as hard. He always worked rapidly, looking for short cuts, as though he sought to make the efforts of others seem puny by comparison. Or as though—Dr. Lezen had said it—the devil were on his tail.

Panting, he staggered across the floor. Dr. Lezen, seeing his dilemma, secured the oxy-tank and extended it.

Fastening it quickly to his shoulder harness, Wentworth adjusted the thin tubing to his nostrils and inhaled deeply. Dr. Lezen stepped back relievedly as the palor of Stephan's face was replaced by a normal ruddy hue. This was more like them.

"Steve, you're a living wonder. Twenty years in high blast." Dr. Lezen spoke with wonder rather than admiration. "The old engine never breaks down. Strong heart. Pressure normal. Your pace would kill an elephant. But money isn't everything. Why don't you slow down for a while?"

Stephan Wentworth had sucked with greedy impatience on his oxygen inhalator. Feeling much better, he shuffled around, shadow boxing. A red-haired behemoth, he looked tough and destructive. And he could be just that. Dr. Lezen moved away, almost instinctively.

"Man, I was born in a hurry," Wentworth bantered, now fully recovered. "Someone has to be a pusher. Take a look at the ticker tape some time. You should see how high we're rating on Interspace Interchange."

The other's indirect criticism had penetrated a chink in his secret armor. Devotion

to his work was a deep unswerving passion with him.

"You can die in a hurry too. One opponent you can't beat is time. Let's see. Now that you own Nereid almost entirely there'll be a day for you to be stepping down. Who's to replace the king of this little planet? You do have a son?"

At times the physician's ideas were like probes, gouging into the inner conscience. But Wentworth let his impatience die and beamed proudly at the memory.

"Five kids. Four of them girls, of course—but Donelly's the oldest. Proud of him, Doc. Big, strapping, handsome. Takes more after his Nereidan mother than me though. He's half earthman, Doc. I'll account for that, and for him it's going to make a lot of difference."

It was then that Dr. Lezen offered him a cigarette, which he refused, and proceeded to tell him the prize winner. Matter-of-factly, without beating around the bush. No fancy trimmings. Just a short fantastic yarn with no superficial details. Straight from the shoulder. For a moment Stephan Wentworth believed it. He'd been about to dress when the full humor of it hit

him like a battering ram. He'd come near falling, tangled up in the metal mesh cloth of his breeches.

Now, oxy-tank back in place, he jabbed his elbow into Dr. Lezen's ribs. That set them off again. They continued laughing until exhausted.

"Well, that's the way it is," gasped Dr. Lezen finally.

"Yes. That's the way it is," said Stephan Wentworth, winking broadly. He was now sobered somewhat.

"If you want I'll run one more check," said Dr. Lezen. "Not that I doubt the indications. It's been on your chart all the time. Steve, if you can stay for a while, come over to the lanai. I've a bottle of sherry, brought all the way from earth. Priceless stuff. But what's a vintage without sharing between friends? There's no actual hurry—"

He was speaking to thin air. Stephan Wentworth had stalked swiftly away, lifting a hand to denote farewell. His gravity racer was perched on the second floor landing platform. Almost before his foot hit the accumulator the vehicle went soaring up over Wentworth City. His city. His planet. Dr. Lezen watched him go at a window, patting a handkerchief to his forehead to absorb the dampness.

"Whew!" he said. "And I thought the old goat was going to take it hard."

The "old goat" had his hands clutched tightly to the throttle control of the grav-car. Blue veins crawled and grew, knotting on his neck and forehead. His hand writhed snakelike toward a glove compartment, withdrew an object.

The object was an electron gat, slender, mounted on a blue-and-gold plasticene hilt, not much larger than a hypodermic needle. Yet deadly. His eyes mere slits, Stephan Wentworth stared down at the tiny instrument of annihilation. It was as though he had never seen it before, not actually. In his horror-struck eyes was reflected the untenable thought that had begun growing in the back of his mind. He was thinking of killing his own son!

The grav-car, propelled forward on a gravity warp, soared across Nereid like a dragonfly. Below, areas of cultivation marched to the rear, giving a neat, parklike appearance to the little world. The space intercom buzzed three times before he heard it. Reaching to the vido box, he flipped it. The worried, pudgy face of Pierre Bardot, his

Superintendent of North Polar Regions, filled the elliptical mirror. He'd been talking before contact was made.

"—torrential, unseasonal floods," Bardot was saying. "The siphon action caused by magnetic disturbances in space has resulted in an overflow of the main reservoir. Two cerrama dikes washed out, endangering field crops in sector nine, thirteen and twenty-five."

Wentworth was too preoccupied at the moment to be deeply disturbed by the news. Plainly, this wasn't what Bardot expected.

"Any ideas?" he wanted to know.

"Why, yes sir," returned Bardot, flattered. "Blast out a dike in the first sector. Flood thirteen. Nine may suffer, but it will save the other regions from premature exposure."

The idea wasn't bad. Despite this, Bardot was an idiot, little more than a shiftless worldcomber. Stephan had thought more than once of requiring all his personnel to wear auxiliary oxy-units to bring up the efficiency level. The only thing that stopped him cold was an obsolete interplanetary law that should have been repealed decades ago.

"You have the necessary

equipment at hand? Blastors, trunion ejectors?" When Bar-dot nodded he said, "Get on with it then."

"Thank you. There's a tape recording of your directive. Mind authenticating it?"

"Blast first sector dike, flood thirteen. This is Stephan Wentworth directing."

The superintendent had scarcely vanished from the visor when he was replaced by another. This time it was pompous Gilden Georges, mayor of Wentworth City.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," said Georges, smiling unctuously. "But it's time for the native ceremonials of the *La-halla*. You know—the time of the glowing. Could you attend any of the tourist functions at the main auditorium? There'll be a carnival following the rites."

"They'll have to do without me this year." Wentworth's refusal was so curt the mayor looked surprised, bubbling out an apology that was all but incoherent. His face melted away, grinning obsequiously.

Below, the surface of the planet was already beginning to glow with violet emanance. A shooting star arched a long finger from outer space, followed by another, and another. With the coming of the

meteorites it was time for the "glowing." There was danger of being struck by a stray bit of space shrapnel, of course. Stephan Wentworth ignored it. Below the grav-car the planet was undergoing a strange metamorphosis.

Every fourth year—by earth reckoning—the phenomenon recurred. The fields and canals, ridges and buttes, took on a weird luminescence, like radioactive mineral under black light. The natives had waited impatiently for this to happen. It was peak time for admonishing their favorite deities. Intricate ceremonials and symbol-dancing were finished. The Feast of the Seven Nights was yet to come. They would don their heathen regalia, kneel in the omnipresent glowing. Now they could worship Ghachna, the invisible force of universal creation, life, love, wrath, fertility, conception, death. Ghachna was the religion to which all Nereidans would secretly be true, regardless of the influx of terrestrial teachings.

Wentworth didn't worship. He scowled down at the planet from his space racer, hoping to see one of his giant tobacco trees, limned in opaline fire. That would be a truly inspiring spectacle. Unfortunately, the lush tobacco fields were all

in the polar sectors. Wentworth was not stirred emotionally by the phosphorescence. He knew the true nature of the glowing.

He'd seen the same shimmer in space in the wake of a comet, in the long glittering tail sweeping back into space. That was what it was, a meteorite or comet, caught up in the Nereidan gravity field in some distant past, disintegrated under gravitational stresses. Crushed to meteoritic particles, the clouds of ionic radiation continued to trace a ghostly orbit in space. When Nereid intersected its orbit there was a rain of particles and radiation. That was all there was to it.

Wentworth's huge lips were trembling. He wasn't seeing the planet, the strange glowing, or interplanetary space around him. His massive shoulders shook convulsively. He felt helpless as a child before this torrent of emotions. Wentworth didn't want to kill his son. He would have given anything to see another way out.

Wentworth's mansion overlooked a precipitous equatorial canyon. One of the few picturesque spots on Nereid, it was searched for often by tourists. Colonial in design, it

stood away from the broken surface on giant white columns of beryllium. The grav-scooter braked automatically. Its relays clicked and it was cushioned on a repulsion wave, then lowered gently to a platform that extended to meet it. Wentworth could never remember the entering, the going through the upper hallway, or the emergence into the combination sundeck and library. He was conscious only that the monstrous house echoed his hollow footsteps, that it was haunted by a feeling of abandonment.

Through the broad oval window at one end of the sun-deck he looked down upon a compelling scene. All of the Nereidan servants were outside, participating in the revelry.

The plains stretched away brokenly, a deep valley unfolding beyond, gashed harshly by steep fissures and abyssmal pits. Here and there a roadway bridged the pits, then stretched gracefully to the horizon, a gossamer web attesting the fact that intelligent life had spanned this majestic desolation. Eerie light danced across the terrain. Here and there he distinguished crumpled, writhing figures, flat to the ground. The natives were prostrated

before this final manifestation of inexplicable power.

Wentworth's gaze climbed one sharp shale to another, followed a high broken escarpment to where it fell into glittering shards along the orifice of the pits. Somewhere there, unrecognizable in the distance, would be his pretty, superstitious native wife, humbling herself with the rest. Nereidans aged slowly. Lyr Zhene retained the lovely figure of youth. But there would be a difference. There would be a look of exultation on her pretty face, more intense than when she was with him, even in ardent embrace.

Not that he envied Ghachna. The Nereid god was merely a concept, an outgrowth of superstition. Not an actual entity. But now, with Dr. Lezen's taunting words hot in his memory, Wentworth wondered. He began to consider the fanatical religion of Ghachna as something very material and alive, something that could deny him everything.

It was Donelly he must find.

The worshippers were unaware of this giant earthman stalking in their midst, calling the name of his son again and again.

Stephan Wentworth was

no fool. Coming from a poverty-stricken city of earth in the Depression of 8979, he had become one of the richest men of interplanetary space by this year of 9021. While others sought precious space minerals, he had instead brought seeds from earth to other worlds, experimented with their culture. Tobacco, he found, grew to treelike heights on Nereid, requiring little cultivation. After he managed to exploit its uses across the astral worlds, the rest was easier. He had achieved the legendary stature of an industrial tycoon.

"Lucky. That's all," Dr. Lezen had once commented. It was irritating how the thoughts of the little doctor kept creeping up again and again. "I came here for health's sake, naturally couldn't expect any bonanza. Just prolonged life. But you, Stephan. Everything you touched made money."

Stephan had chuckled.

"It happened like that on Earth a long time ago," he told the wizened physician. "Captain Cook found the South Sea Islands. The natives thought the intruders were gods. Lyr Zhene thought I was some representative from Ghachna, I'm sure. When our spaceship landed,

the planet was glowing. Under radiant bombardment of the dead comet, of course. She saw me walking through the glowing and knelt before me, kissing my hand. I was no fool. I took her, that was all. Of course, I observed the usual formalities. Even yet, after all that's happened, she must think I'm some sort of underling of Ghachna. But I don't mind."

"Donelly. Donelly." Here were the carved gods of the forest, the nightmarish descendants of Nereidan folklore. The one he sought was here, somewhere among these mesmerized creatures. Their chanting was incoherent, an uncanny, babbling sound. His own voice was amplified by distortion, echoed back from the peaks. Hearing his own voice reminded him of little Donelly, only nine months old, just learning to navigate on rubber legs. He'd held out his arms. Come, Donny, he'd said. Walk to daddy. You hear me, Baby?

"Donelly!" Come get it, son. Got to kill you. No other way out. Everything I've slaved for, these long twenty years, is at stake. If I don't kill you, son, I myself die. Don't you see how it is, boy? Basic law of self-preserva-

tion. That's all it is. Self-preservation.

The glowing was lessened now. Natives were regaining their feet, laughing hysterically, shrieking out the last throes of delirium. A few took notice of him, this giant more wrapped in emotional frenzy than any of them. Those who saw murder lust in his eyes shrank away.

Finally, near exhaustion, Wentworth retraced his steps to the veranda of his house. How long he'd spent in useless search he couldn't know. Perhaps hours. The potted vegetation in the foyer gave way to the large reception hall.

"Hi, dad! What's with you!"

Donelly at last. Huge, handsome, red. Not red like an earthman. Red like a Nereidan, like his mother. Red like a native, and like a native still dressed in loincloth, painted garishly in swathes of blue and green clay. He looked exhausted, barbaric. Only the boyish grin was civilized.

Lyr Zhene was here too. She rose from where she had reclined on a sofa. She had an air of regality in her priestess regalia, the feathered headdress, the bands of sparkling jewels strapped flat

across her shapely body. When she saw the electron gat her green eyes filled with alarm.

"No. Stephan, no," she screamed in quick panic.

"Dad. What's with the blastor?" Donelly had not comprehended.

"Stand back," ordered Wentworth. Donelly hesitated, obviously puzzled. Then he appeared to come to a decision, and stepped forward.

"Stay back, I tell you. Don't come any closer."

But his son would not hear. He was coming, each step so slow it measured an eternity. Lyr Zhene gave out a piercing scream as she flung herself at him. He caught her bodily, hurled her aside to the floor.

Donelly, seeing an advantage, lunged for the gun.

Wentworth ducked and evaded him. Donelly whirled and came in again, snatching for the weapon, but Wentworth regained his balance and danced away. Donelly shrugged, looking first to his father, then to his mother, for explanation. When none was forthcoming, he faced Wentworth determinedly.

"All right, dad. I've had all I want of this silly joke. I'm coming in to take the gun."

He walked slowly forward.

He was so close it would be impossible to avoid killing him when the trigger was pressed. So close, so unafraid. Such a huge giant of a man. Wentworth's son?

He raised the gun, aimed it straight at the crimson chest where it would blast away the heart.

"No, no, no." His wife was on her feet again, crying, sobbing, flinging her arms to envelope him, trying somehow to thwart his intention.

There was that single instant. That one forlorn instant that widened across time. The moment when a twitch of his finger would reach out and obliterate this threat that had risen to challenge his supremacy.

In that instant Wentworth remembered Dr. Lezen's thin, academic face.

"Happens to lots of earthmen," Dr. Lezen had explained, selecting his words carefully. "Exposure to space radiation when he voyages between planets. Even the most delicate shielding fails to turn aside all the cosmic rays. Before earthmen reach other planets—ninety out of a hundred are sterile."

Wentworth had sneered disbelievingly.

"You see for yourself. In

my twenty years on Nereid I've begat five children. They will stay to take the place I've carved for them in this universe. When I go, I leave a son to carry on."

Dr. Lezen had shook his head in solemn negation.

"Five children. Four years apart. Each . . . exactly four years apart."

"I can't see where that—"

"There is an instinct for perpetuation of species. We struggle and die for it, just as the natives do, here on Nereid. For them, it is a foregone victory. For us, a lost cause. Listen. There is a strangeness here. Statistics prove it. After the comet passes, every fourth year, there's a tremendous increase in population."

"Are you suggesting infidelity in my wife?" Stephan had exploded.

"No, Wentworth. Back on Earth it was thought that life originally came from outer space. Arrhenius, an ancient earthman, was the first to perceive that life must have come from outer space in the form of lifespores. If life could be carried in spores, why not something more basic? Why not primitive radiation? If this truth came from the beginning, why is it impossible that the seeds of

life could be carried from the depths of space, sheer radiation on the tail of a comet, or that once it has fallen to the fertile ovum, could cause conception?"

That was when Wentworth started to laugh. Not at the humor of it. Deep down inside he was so hysterical, so frightened. Bewildered as he'd never been before. The only answer had seemed to be in killing Donnelly. Right away before he weakened.

Look at it that way and his son was a stranger. Look at it that way and no earthman could conquer Nereid. Oh, a conqueror might step in seize controls, live out his own life, but after death, what would remain? There would be nothing to carry him forward. Wentworth hated to think that all he had fought and sacrificed for would come to nothing when it was tossed back into the hands of a native.

Donnelly walked toward him. Slowly, the electron gun lowered.

"Gosh, Dad," Donnelly was saying. "Some nightmare you're having."

He let it go at that. Some nightmare. But then, maybe it was.

Some time later Wentworth

called Dr. Lezen by radio-
phone.

"Well, Stephan," began Dr.
Lezen.

"About that—er—"

"Speak up, man."

"About that sherry. Does
the invitation still go."

"It certainly does."

"Something else. When I
came from Earth, we used to
play a game on shipboard.
Little discs, and a checkered
board."

"I've a checkerboard here
some place, if that's what
you're hinting at."

"Think maybe I could take
you."

Pleased understanding was
on Dr. Lezen's face.

"At checkers? There's a
guy I've been playing with on
Galaxy Four. By space radio,
of course. He considers me an
ace."

"Then I challenge you."

"I accept," returned Dr.
Lezen, rubbing his hands in
anticipation. "Shall I come
over there or will you come
here?"

"I'll be there," said Ste-
phan Wentworth, "tomorrow.
Or the next day."

He cut off the spacephone.
He was sitting with Lyr
Zhene, his wife. Her hands
rumpled his hair.

"Can't you understand,
darling?" she said. "I love

you. Nobody else, just you.
I'd give everything in this
world, my heart, body and
soul, to pamper your every
wish. Don't you think it has
hurt me too, Stephan? We
Nereidans know. We've all
known for a long time. But
I've been so afraid, all these
years, wondering what you'd
do when you found out."

Wentworth drew her close.
"I love you too, honey," he
said. "I guess it took a long
time to realize just how much.
And—I love Donnelly and al-
ways will, no matter . . ."

"He's your son. No matter
what. He's your son, Ste-
phan."

"Then I believe."

Lyr Zhene nestled snugly
to him. She traced the outline
of his face with her finger-
tips, so softly the touch was
like that of falling flower pet-
als. He'd been missing a lot
of things, zooming along at
that thunderbolt pace he'd
set for himself.

"When you say that," Lyr
Zhene told him, closing her
eyes contentedly, "your gods
and mine have answered all
my prayers."

He held her closely. Not
with the frenzied desire to be
through with it, but slowly,
luxuriating in each passing
moment. Perhaps something
had really died within him,

there in that instant when he had realized he could not slay his son. It didn't seem important now. His wife, his family were all he cared for. In these old familiar surroundings he had suddenly become aware of a better life.

Wentworth unfastened the oxy-tank. It clattered as it struck the floor. Now—inhale deeply, slowly. And move—move the same way. The taste of the air was so sweet and clean he was astonished and pleased.

Breathing deeply, leisurely, he soon became accustomed to the thin atmosphere and found that it was a real pleasure. A peaceful relaxation suffused him. It was surprising how good he was beginning to feel.

Lyr Zhene raised her face and their lips met in a long slow kiss. Their need for each other had always been genuine and they made no sham of it now. From the distance came the last muted sounds of native chanting. Somewhere in the house a space-phone buzzed insistently, then stopped when there was no answer.

No need for hurry now, Stephan Wentworth thought. No rush . . . not ever again. From now on he had all the time in the world. **THE END**

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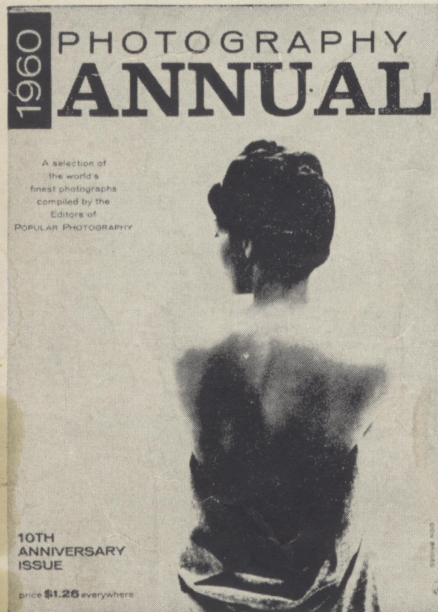
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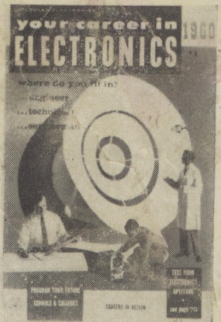
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