NEW WORLDS
SCIENCE FICTION

No. 27 1/6

NEW WORLDS
PROFILES

Lan Wright

One of the few exceptions to the rule that all authors graduated from the Wells-Verne era, Lan Wright actually started his literary career at fifteen when he found a liking for poetry more to his taste. However, finding there was little money in this he later tried science fiction with slow but sure success, most of his stories being published in *New Worlds*.

Born in 1924, he is married and works in the clerical section of British Railways at Euston Station to which he travels each day from his home in Watford. He finds little time in the summer for writing as he is a keen cricket player, but the winter months finds him immersed in reading anything from Shakespeare to Nevil Shute taking science fiction somewhere about the middle.

His two main ambitions are (1) to write a really outstanding science fiction novel and (2) to know that the first man has stepped on to the Moon—so that he can say "I told you so" to all the people who say it is impossible.

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 9

No. 27

MONTHLY

SEPTEMBER 1954

CONTENTS

Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover : QUINN Interiors : QUINN and HUNTER

ONE SHILLING AND SIXPENCE

Subscription Rates

Great Britain and the Commonwealth, 12 issues 20/- post free

United States of America, 12 issues $3.50 post free

Published on the last Friday of each month by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD, 2 Arundel Street, Strand, London, W.C.2

Printed in England by The Rugby Advertiser, Albert Street, Rugby

Book Review Editorial

Once again the annual International Fantasy Award winner has been announced and, as you will read elsewhere in this issue in an article by our book reviewer Leslie Flood, Theodore Sturgeon will be presented with the 1954 trophy for his exceptional novel **More Than Human** which will be published in September by Victor Gollancz Ltd.

Type being made of metal and not elastic we are unable to have our usual Book Review column this issue but will be having a bumper review session next month. There are however, several books which deserve immediate mention.

Not long ago during an interesting discussion with a number of our authors at London's *Globe Tavern* in Hatton Garden, I broached the subject of the influence of comics and comic-strip cartoons upon the younger generation, especially those devoted to science fiction. In general it was thought that such an introduction could well form the foundation of regular readership once the youngster grew out of the comic stage. If that is to be so then magazine science fiction can expect the influx of several million new readers in the next ten years. Personally, I doubt whether such ephemera as the pseudo-scientific mumbo jumbo portrayed in most of the comics makes any impression at all upon young minds. Picture sequences are not conducive to *thinking* or *reasoning*, seldom lead to asking " Why?" Many readers will agree with me when I say that thirty years ago there was no such expressive form of literature upon which Youth's imagination could wing to the stars—there were the occasional fantasy adventures of Harry Wharton, Tom Merry and Nipper and their compatriots of Greyfriars, St. Jim's and St. Frank's, admitted, and such serials as " The Raiding Planet " and " Buccaneers of the Skies," temporarily stimulated the imagination in the *Boys' Magazine*. And for twenty weeks in 1934 there was a publication called *Scoops* which attempted to blaze the specialised trail only now being recognised.

Most of those early boys' papers contained good healthy adventure stories with an occasional science fiction setting. I think such an introduction caused a far more lasting impression then than to-day's regular comic features do. I well remember in 1923 suddenly finding the first bi-weekly instalment of a Hutchinson magazine entitled *Splendour Of The Heavens*, which in twenty parts set out to explain in pictures and text the wonders and mystery of astronomy. It materially helped lay the foundation for years of mental wanderings amongst the stars although it was another thirteen years before I looked through a two-inch telescope at the moons of Jupiter and listened to a young amateur astronomer named Arthur Clarke enthusiastically explaining the possibilities of space flight.

Instead of comics and comic strips let me recommend two outstanding books for the enquiring mind--for younger readers there is the beautifully produced **Adventure Of The World** by James Fisher (Rathbone Books, London, 10/6), produced in the 13" x 9½" size popularised by American publishers. In this magnificently designed colourful book with relief shaded pictures that are almost three-dimensional the youngster can follow the growth of plant animal and human-life from the beginning of the world's natural history through the ages to the ultimate possibility of the first Man setting foot on the Moon. Its 66 pages of cleverly arranged text and pictures will answer all the eternal " Why's " thrust upon adults by the expanding mind of Youth. For the age group at which it is aimed it is the equivalent of *The Sea Around Us.*

For older readers Giorgio Abetti's **The History Of Astronomy** (Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd., London, 25/-), will serve as a primer to popular astronomy. Its introduction by the Astronomer Royal, Sir Harold Spencer Jones, is a fitting beginning to a book which concisely and simply covers the growth of this fascinating science from the dawn of medieval investigation to the present day. The book is enriched with a profusion of photographs as well as many little-known anecdotes and stories about some of the well-known astronomers who have contributed to its history.

Mention should be made here of the two most outstanding fiction books of the month **Star Science Fiction Stories** and **Project Jupiter** (both 9/6 each, T. V. Boardman & Co., Ltd., London). The former, an anthology, is the answer to the reviewer's recurring nightmare that stories reprinted from the magazines appear in too many diverse collections—in this case they are all new stories written specially for the collection by some sixteen outstanding authors at editor Frederik Pohl's request. Published originally in New York by Ballantyne Books it is the most outstanding anthology of 1953, containing such authors as Clarke, Wyndham, Asimov, Leinster, Sheckley, Tenn, del Rey, Gold, Kornbluth and many others whose names are the backbone of contemporary magazine science fiction.

Frederik Brown's **Project Jupiter** (retitled from the cumbersome *Lights In The Sky Are Stars* when published in U.S.A. by Dutton last year) is, to quote Anthony Boucher reviewing in his *Magazine Of Fantasy and Science Fiction* " essentially a down-to-earth story of the people and politicians who will bring about the beginnings of space travel, sensitive and moving, with a fine understanding of the human motives behind the drive to the stars."

It is a book which will do much to enhance the name of science fiction to the general public.

John Carnell

This story will undoubtedly revive the old controversies about a man going into the Past and killing his grandfather—in this case the murderer doesn't know his victim at all nor just why he is going to kill him. Only that he must—if he can.

SUICIDE MISSION

By James White

Illustrated by QUINN

The heat of the early afternoon sun lay like a hot compress on the back of Maldon's neck, and he felt as though his hair was burning. A striped insect hung almost motionless above his head and buzzed loudly. Occasionally a gentle, almost imperceptible, breeze would stir the long grass which lay around him, and the rich, warm scents of growing things would for a moment replace the hot smell of mineral oil that came from the moving parts of his shot-gun. But neither the heat, nor the sounds, nor the smells were allowed to distract him. All of his mind was concentrated on just one thing—the thought of murder.

And, he knew, if he didn't keep thinking of murder, he would fail.

He lay very still in the long grass beside the path which was the short-cut from the Steenson house to the bus stop, and waited with great patience for Henry Steenson to appear.

Maldon knew that the other man would come. He had seen two old press cuttings which had borne this day's date, one which stated that Steenson had been reprimanded in court for a small infringement of the traffic laws, and another that he had presided at a meeting of his fellow veterinary surgeons. The court case had been in the nearby town at eleven in the morning, the meeting had been in Steenson's

own house sometime in the afternoon, so Steenson was now on his way from one to the other and was due to appear any time now.

He had been very lucky, Maldon knew, finding those cuttings. The Historical Section of the Institute was nothing if not comprehensive, but printed matter dealing with this particular section of space and time was scarce—practically all the records had been destroyed by the Bomb which was due to hit this area a couple of years from now. It had been finding those cuttings which had given him the means of escape—the only means of escape that the Institute people were incapable of guarding against. The conditioning he had undergone at the Institute was supposed to make certain actions impossible for him, and, because the conditioning worked, he was unable to do the one thing he wished with all his being that he could do. But those cuttings had shown a loophole in that unhumanly efficient conditioning. A way of doing one thing and pretending it was something else . . .

An uncontrollable tremor shook his whole body, and the stock of the gun he had stolen slipped in his suddenly sweating hands. The conditioning ! He fought desperately against an overwhelming urge to fling the gun away and flee from this spot, all the while cursing his own stupidity at allowing his mind to wander at a time like this. Furiously he renewed his concentration on the one subject that it was fairly safe to think about—murder. Gradually his quivering body grew still, and when the distant figure of his victim came into sight on the path, the gun was again rock steady in his hands.

As Steenson came slowly nearer, Maldon got a closer look at his features—and felt suddenly unsure of himself. This was Steenson, all right. He was sure of that. One of the clippings had included a photograph. The face in the picture had been a little vague, naturally, but it was recognisably the same person. And the clothes matched, so that clinched it. But somehow, Maldon hadn't expected the other to look like this. There was something wrong about Steenson's eyes, and the bone structure of his head. Maldon didn't know much about genetics, but surely . . . He brought his wandering mind sharply back to the job in hand. He had nearly messed things up again. *Concentrate*, he told himself desperately.

For him the whole world became the sights of a gun lined up on the third button of an open-necked, sweat-stained shirt. The shirt bobbed gently as its wearer walked, and expanded as he came nearer. When it was near enough to make a miss impossible, Maldon fired both barrels.

The way Steenson flopped to the ground told Maldon two things. He had missed, and the other had been under fire before—probably

in one of the current wars. Maldon didn't know how he could have missed, but obviously he had. He reloaded and stood up. Steenson hadn't moved—there was no cover for him to move to. Maldon took careful aim and fired again. And again.

He *couldn't* be missing him, Maldon knew. Not at this range. But Steenson lay shaking on the ground, white-faced and unhurt. That fact hit Maldon with almost the impact of a physical blow. He began to shake again, and this time it wasn't due to the Institute conditioning. He raised the gun for another shot. Then he saw it.

A thin black line of burnt grass lay midway between Steenson and himself. It extended, Maldon saw with a feeling of near despair, for more than ten yards on either side of him. The most serious danger threatening Steenson at the moment, he knew, was an attack of sunstroke.

Someone had thrown up a force-field between them. Someone who had followed Maldon from the future in order to stop him from doing what he'd come to do. And Maldon thought he knew who that someone was.

Henning.

It was time he got away from here. Or, more important, it was time he got away from *now*. He dropped the gun quickly and pulled out his ear-pads and snapped them into position. A large, calibrated dial control grew out of the flat grey box strapped to his chest. He altered the setting to ' Minus 20,' and looked round anxiously to see if his follower was in sight. There was no sign of Henning anywhere —probably the shot-gun was making him cautious. With a little sigh of relief Maldon covered both his eyes with his hands and began the first of the mental gymnastics that were designed to separate the reality that was himself from the reality that was the world around him, and so allow him to travel in time.

Three minutes later and twenty years into the past it was still summer. The grass was damp from a recent shower and the path had disappeared, otherwise nothing had changed. Maldon started walking quickly in the direction of the Steenson house, which was a quarter of a mile away behind some trees. He didn't try to plan ahead. He tried not to think at all. The Institute conditioning made thinking in certain directions dangerous. The right words and actions would occur to him when needed—he hoped.

Now that he knew Henning was hunting him, he would have to work fast. The power pack strapped to his chest contained a certain amount of radio-active material which could be detected easily by the other's instruments, Maldon knew, but the detector was accurate only

to the nearest fifteen minutes or so, which meant that Henning would arrive several minutes either before or after he had. Maldon hoped desperately that it would be after. By moving himself in space as well as time, he knew, the margin of error in Henning's detector would be greatly increased. But it would do Maldon no good at all if the other man had arrived first. Henning would have had an even longer time to prepare a trap for him.

Henning meant to stop him from killing Steenson.

Steenson's house was a two-storey affair, painted white, with a hedged-in garden all around it. Beyond it Maldon could see a group of barns and outhouses which were almost as neat and clean as was the house itself. He hurried towards it. Beside the tiled path that led to the front door a pair of garden shears lay half hidden in the grass. They were large, heavy, and very, very sharp. He picked them up as he passed and went to ring the door-bell.

But it wasn't Steenson who answered the door. Instead, a small, grey-haired woman with surprisingly youthful features stood in the doorway and looked at him in silent enquiry. Maldon's grip on the shears relaxed a little. He wet his lips.

" Could I speak with Henry Steenson, please?"

The woman shook her head. " No, I'm sorry," she said, " He's gone hiking for a couple of weeks before he starts school again. Are you from the school, too?"

Maldon nodded mutely.

" I thought so." She went on, " Henry said there were a lot of overseas students this year . . ." She smiled up at him, ". . . . But you've hardly any accent at all." Then she noticed the shears clenched in Maldon's right hand. " Oh, I'm always losing those things," she exclaimed and took them from him gently. " Where did I leave them this time?"

Even if he had wanted to, Maldon could not have offered resistance. She was too nice a person. Before he could answer her she was talking again.

" Won't you come in a minute? You look very tired," she said kindly, noticing the strain in Maldon's face. " Sit down for a while and I'll get you something." She stepped aside to let him in.

The room was neat, spotlessly clean, and refreshingly cool after the heat outside. But Maldon had no time to relax. He took a chair by the window and listened to the stream of good-natured chatter and the subdued clatter of cooking utensils that came from an adjoining room while his eyes searched the approach to the house for the first sign of Henning. The talk was very one-sided—as Maldon was supposed to

be a foreigner, that was to be expected—and most informative. He felt relieved, almost happy. He was being given all the information he needed, without having to ask a single question.

This woman was Steenson's mother. She had lived in this house all her life, she said. Her youngest son, Henry, had been much brighter than her other boys—he had always wanted to be a doctor. But he was a good worker, too. Most of his summer vacation had been spent doing jobs around the place. Why, he'd just finished putting up a whole new fence only last week . . .

In a clear patch of grass, three fields away, a tiny figure flickered suddenly into being. Henning ! Maldon got quickly to his feet and started for the door. Steenson had been at the farm a week ago—that was all Maldon needed to know. He would go back to then.

He was half-way across the room when Mrs. Steenson appeared carrying a loaded tray. He muttered an excuse about being late for something, but she would have none of it. He would have to stay, she insisted, and have something to eat now that it was all ready for him. It would only take a moment, she coaxed. Maldon felt like screaming with impatience. If he just took to his heels, she would probably start shouting after him, and that would attract Henning immediately. The logical thing to do was to render her unconscious. A blow on the head should do that. But Maldon didn't want to hurt her. In his present state he might strike too hard and maybe even kill her, so that solution was no good. Then suddenly he had the answer. He had allowed the appearance of Henning to panic him into trying to run away. Running wasn't necessary. He would simply travel back in time to the desired point from *inside* the house—that way he would have the added advantage of surprise when he arrived.

He sat down again and drew out his ear-pads. Mrs. Steenson paused in the laying of the table and directed a questioning glance at them, and at the power pack on his chest, but she was too mannerly to ask questions. Maldon muttered, " Hearing aid," to satisfy her curiosity, and adjusted the pads. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Henning less than a hundred yards away, walking rapidly nearer, and now and then glancing at a shiny grey instrument he was holding in his hand. Maldon took a deep breath and shut his eyes.

This disappearance was going to be rather frightening to Mrs. Steenson, Maldon knew. Briefly he felt sorry for that, and for the pain he was going to cause her by killing her son. Or rather, the pain he *had* caused a week ago. Time travel was funny sometimes. Then his mind had room only for the twisting logic of the Time Equations, and his sensory perception of the room around him began to fade.

His second arrival was a near catastrophe—for himself. A sharp, excruciating pain in his right leg made him gasp, and a chair clattered into the middle of the floor—its position had changed and he had tried to materialise with one leg inside it. As he went sprawling on his back he grabbed futilely at the table for support, but succeeded only in pulling the table-cloth and most of the dishes onto the floor beside him. Tears blurred his vision, but he could see that there were several people in the room—*and one of them was Henning.*

Maldon groped instinctively for something, *anything*, that would serve as a weapon. The probability of either of them arriving first, he knew, was exactly equal. This time Maldon had been unlucky. But he still had a chance, if he could take advantage of the utter confusion his sudden appearance had caused in the room.

And there certainly was confusion. Even in his present fix Maldon felt like laughing as he thought of what must have happened. The shock and terror of the occupants when Henning materialised among them, and their extreme bewilderment when he started telling them that another apparition would be along in a few minutes and that they had better take cover, because the second one intended to commit a murder . . .

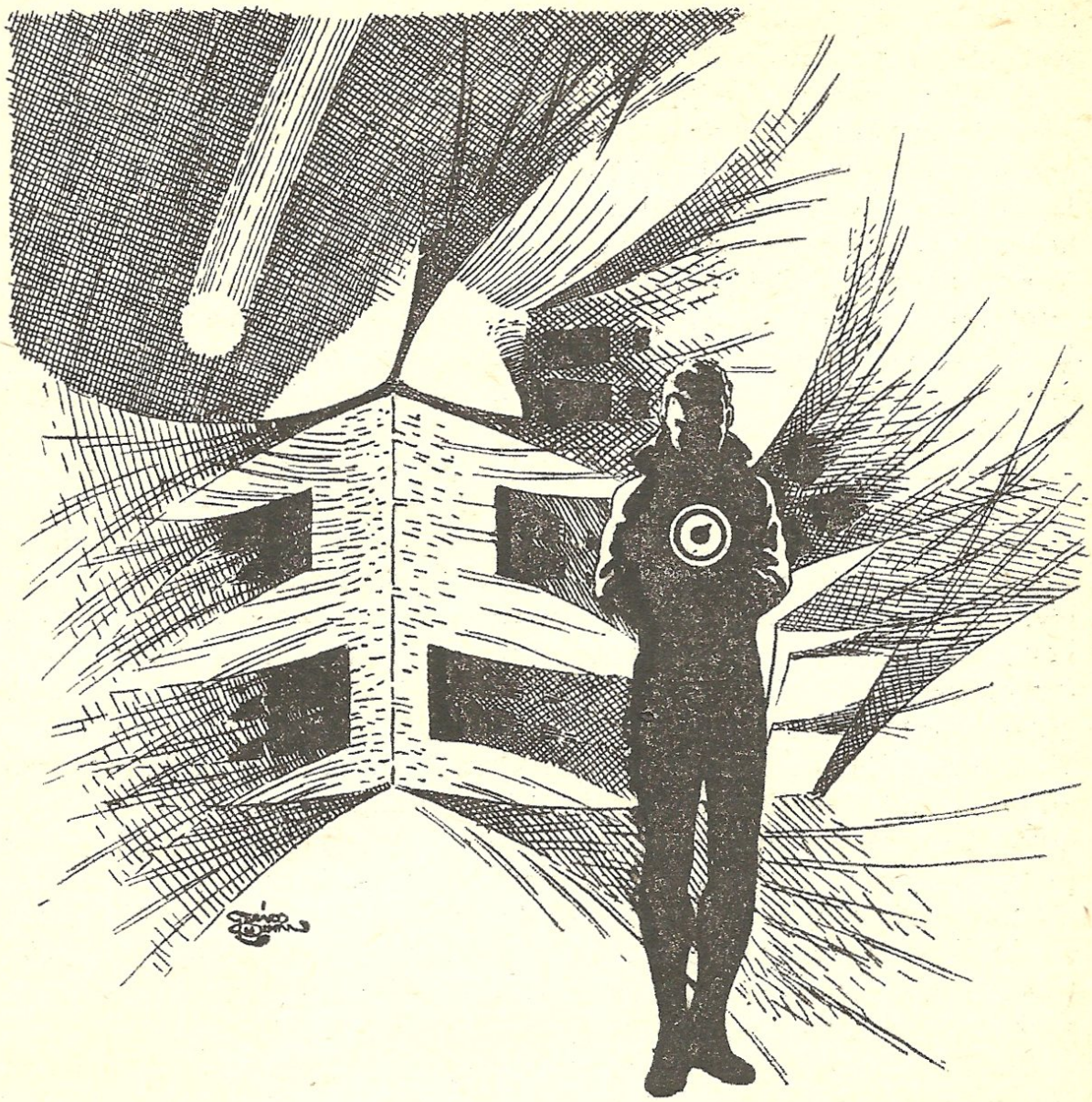
Maldon's fingers found the wooden handle of a knife which had fallen to the floor. It was almost a sword, he saw, with its long, heavy blade and rivet-studded handle. He gripped it tightly and struggled to his feet.

" Now do you believe me . . .?" Henning was shouting at the people in the room. He broke off when he saw the knife in Maldon's hand, and pointed urgently at a youth who was standing white-faced in the centre of the floor. He yelled, " Get him out of here, *quick* !"

Maldon looked in the indicated direction. It was Steenson. A Steenson twenty years younger than the last time he had seen him—he now looked about eighteen—but there could be no mistake about it being the same person. Nice of Henning to point out his target for him, Maldon thought sardonically as he drew back his arm for the throw. He let fly, hard.

The knife hit Steenson in the centre of the forehead—handle first. Lack of balance had made it swap ends in flight. Was *nothing* going to go right for him, Maldon thought furiously. Of all the filthy luck . . . As Steenson staggered backwards, half conscious, he swept the room with his eyes, looking for another weapon.

Mrs. Steenson was in one corner, screaming her head off. To the right of her two men were backed against the wall, rigid with shock and indecision. By the table, Henning, his face intent, was fiddling with the force-field attachment on his power pack. Beside him, a man



with iron-grey hair and large, work-roughened hands, who Maldon guessed was Steenson's father, reached for a heavy chair and raised it above his head. He came at Maldon with it. His intention was very plain.

Henning looked up. " Stop ! Don't hurt him," he cried in sudden alarm, " I want to take him back . . ." But he was wasting his breath.

Maldon side-stepped automatically as the chair came swinging at his head, and hit the elder Steenson behind the ear as he blundered past. His assailant fell to his knees and the chair crashed through the window. Maldon swung round and charged at the helpless younger Steenson—and ran into a solid, invisible wall. He reeled back, shaking

his head to try to make the room stop spinning, and grunted with the pain of his bruised face, knees and arms.

He knew what had happened, of course. Henning had thrown up a force-field around Steenson. He was blocked again. And now the two men by the wall had come to life and were advancing menacingly. It was time for Maldon to leave again. But he couldn't Time-jump in his present mental condition. He made for the door.

There was a shot-gun hanging above the door. It looked like the same one he had used—or was going to use—twenty years from now. He snatched it down. The sight of it in his hands stopped the two men dead in their tracks. Maldon flung open the door and dashed out.

It was only then that he discovered that it was night. Things had happened so quickly since he had arrived that he hadn't noticed it.

Minutes later, in the musty darkness of the Steenson barn, Maldon staggered into an unseen pile of hay and flopped down exhausted. He lay, with the throbbing ache of his maltreated limbs and face making havoc of his finely co-ordinated nervous system, and felt very sorry for himself.

He knew he was safe here—for a while, at least. It would take Henning about ten minutes to neutralize the force-field he had thrown around Steenson—those things were easier to put up than to take down. Then the other would have to get free of the house and the people in it—quite a job, even for a Master Psychologist. Only then would Henning come after him again. He had, Maldon calculated, about twenty minutes in which to think of some way of saving a situation that had gone from bad to nearly hopeless, and continued to deteriorate with every minute that passed.

But his mind refused to function properly. He wasn't used to all this pain. If he had known it was going to be like this . . . He gritted his teeth—as much from sheer bad temper as at the physical anguish he was suffering.

It was all Henning's fault, anyway. The way he ran the Institute would drive anybody into trying to escape. But escape, the complete and final escape that Maldon wanted, was impossible. The Institute was not surrounded by anything so crude as a high wall, or even a force-fence—there were no physical barriers at all. But there were plenty of mental ones. The hypnotic conditioning that each person underwent on arrival made it impossible to run away. Even thinking about running away was a highly uncomfortable experience, though it could be done. The trouble was, Maldon thought bitterly, the hypnotically impressed commands did not end at that—*he* had been conditioned against doing other things as well.

Escape was impossible—until he, Maldon, had discovered a way to evade that conditioning.

A vague feeling of panic began to well up from the back of his mind, and his hands began to tremble. He was thinking the wrong thoughts again, Maldon knew, and his conditioning was making itself felt. But so long as he was careful, and did not think directly at the subject, and just lay here without *acting* on any of the forbidden thoughts, he knew it would remain merely a nuisance. He clasped his shaking hands together and deliberately let his mind go back to the first time the Plan had occurred to him.

He had been working the computor in the Physics Section at the time. Henning had just been in for one of his maddeningly frequent 'talks' with him, and the others present were watching him and muttering together while pretending to work. Maldon felt the veiled hostility in their eyes—he could just imagine the plots they were hatching in their dirty little minds against him—and felt like screaming at them to go away and leave him alone. But instead he kept working on the problem assigned him and pretended to ignore them. The problem had not been difficult—he was surprised how easily the answer came to him. He was checking through it again—it was an exercise in non-Einsteinian Time Mathematics—when the answer hit him.

Time travel !

Of course ! It was the only possible means of escape from the Institute. And, the way Maldon would plan it, it would be complete and utterly final. He would Time-jump into the Past for the necessary number of years—some research would be required to find out exactly how many that would be—then, arrived in the Past, he would . . . But at that point, Maldon remembered with painful vividness, his conditioning had taken over. He had spent a bad two hours before he had been able to gain control of his thoughts again.

But after that first lapse, he had been very careful in his thinking, and had begun working on the Plan. First he had asked Henning for a transfer from Physics to History. The request had been granted with very little trouble. Henning, it seemed, took a rather special interest in Maldon, and wanted him to settle in and start work as soon as possible—but only if the work suited Maldon. Knowing Maldon's background as he did, Henning must have been surprised at this choice of subject. But he couldn't have been suspicious. Not then.

Ostensibly, Maldon was gathering data for a book. But in the privacy of the reading cubicles he had been able to work on the real plan. He had listened to record tapes and read microfilm projections until tinny voices gibbered through his every sleeping moment and his eyes felt like hot ball-bearings in his head. Occasionally a relevant piece

of information would appear and be committed to memory, to add to, or correct, his pitifully small knowledge regarding the background of the individual he was trying to trace. And all the time his mind had to work on two levels—he had to pretend to himself that he only wanted to kill a man, when in reality he was going to do something very much worse. Then, one day he had a stroke of luck. He found the two Steenson clippings.

Now he knew of one point in space and time at which Steenson would appear. All that remained was for Maldon to go back to that point and kill him.

But how had Henning found out about it?

Maldon stretched painfully on the hay and glared into the impenetrable darkness of the Steenson barn. Time-travel was well-known in Maldon's era, though the people actually able to do it were relatively few. Most Specialists in Psychology could do it, he knew, so also could a few Physicists, and the Mathematician-Philosophers. The Time Equations were common property, but it required a rare flexibility of mind as well as rigorous training to be able to use them. Maldon's Speciality had not been Physics, of course, nor Psychology, but . . .

Maldon sat up suddenly in the darkness and grunted in surprise. He had just made a discovery—he didn't know *what* his Speciality had been. He couldn't even remember his life before coming to the Institute. What had they done to him? And just what went on at the Institute, anyway?

He smiled ruefully. He would never find out now. And anyway, he consoled himself, it wasn't important anymore. Nothing was important anymore . . .

" Maldon ! Come out of there !"

He was shocked out of his deepening mood of self-pity by the clear, confident voice of Henning speaking from outside the barn. In spite of himself he jumped to his feet in sudden panic. The hay rustled and his gun hit a metal implement that was hanging against the wall. The noise sounded deafening. Maldon forced his trembling body to be calm, and with fingers that fumbled a little in the darkness he checked to see that the gun was ready for use.

Henning called, " I won't hurt you, Maldon. Come outside." The voice now sounded friendly, almost cajoling.

Why, Maldon thought with sudden anger, he's *coaxing* me ! Like a . . . a mad dog or something. He raised the gun.

He didn't particularly want to kill Henning—it was Steenson he wanted. Anyway, Maldon told himself, looking at it one way, he

wasn't even trying to kill Henning. He merely intended to fire a shotgun at the dimly-seen outline of a barn door, that was all. There was no harm in that. If somebody was standing on the other side of it, *he* wasn't to blame. Maldon smiled to himself. He was getting good at this double thinking. There was a knot-hole in the door about four feet from the floor. He fired at it.

Abruptly the knot-hole was a jagged-edged rent a foot wide. From outside came an excited babble of voices. Voices? Some of the people at the house must have followed Henning to the barn. Maybe Steenson—*the* Steenson—was among them. He fought to keep from coughing—the fumes from this antique he was using, in this confined space, made Maldon think of some of the old war gases he read about—and edged up to the hole he had blown in the door and looked out.

Four dark figures with white faces hugged the moonlit ground outside the door. The one nearest was Henning. Silently, but with great urgency, he was waving at the others to go back. The other three were grouped a few yards beyond Henning. They were talking in whispers, and they heeded Henning's frantic signalling not at all. One of the three, Maldon saw, was young Steenson.

There was one charge left in the gun. Maldon raised it, took careful aim through the hole in the door—and lowered it again.

He had very little data on the performance of these weapons. At this range, the charge might scatter and kill all three men. Maldon did not want that—he wasn't a butcher. But he *did* want to get Steenson.

Or did he—now?

Suddenly Maldon wasn't sure anymore. He was beginning to feel disgusted with the whole business. It should have been all so simple—just go back in Time and kill a man. Child's play. But it had not worked out that way at all. Henning had somehow got wind of his plan, and had blocked him at every turn. Now, with his body in such a sorry state that he could scarcely think, he was beginning to regret this mission. Far back in his mind, a tiny voice hinted cynically that maybe he didn't want to go through with it after all, and that maybe it was sheer mule-headedness that was driving him on. Maldon suppressed that thought savagely. If he kept thinking along those lines he would end by just walking out and giving himself up.

Abruptly the four men in the yard withdrew a short distance and became a single group. They argued in low voices, with Henning doing most of it. He was trying to make Steenson return to the house, and safety. But young Steenson wouldn't budge. This man talking to him was from the Future, he was protesting. So was the man in the barn. They had Time-machines, and Force-fields, and goodness

only knew what else. His curiosity was aroused. Even though the man in the barn had a shot-gun instead of a disintegrator pistol, he wanted to stay and watch.

Maldon remembered a proverb he had come across during his historical researches, about a feline with an enquiring mind. It fitted the circumstances here very well. He did not bear Steenson any personal animosity—Maldon was, in fact, really sorry for what he was going to do to him.

Henning began calling him again.

"Maldon! Come out now, please . . ." His voice sounded strained, apprehensive, ". . . Or these men will come in and kill you."

Maldon laughed. That was funny.

"Painfully," Henning emphasized.

Maldon stopped laughing.

Henning continued, "They say you have only one charge remaining in your weapon, and that—" His voice broke off abruptly. There were scuffling sounds, and loud, angry whispers. Somebody was asking with considerable heat just whose side Henning was supposed to be on, anyway? Then the voices lowered into inaudibility.

That was something Maldon already knew. He had one shot to take care of Steenson. But Steenson had at last taken Henning's advice—he was now crouching behind a large water-barrel. And the other men were separating, presumably to surround the barn and come at Maldon from several directions at once. He would have to do something, fast. Maldon thought desperately, if only he had more time.

More time! Suddenly he had the answer. In a flash of sheer inspiration a plan appeared fully-formed in his mind. And it was so simple, it couldn't fail. All it required was another short Time-jump, a small diversion to cover same, and some very accurate timing.

Quickly he unstrapped his wrist-watch and set it on the floor. He rubbed the controls and indicators on his power pack with a sleeve and they became luminous. He synchronised the chronometer in the pack with the time-piece lying on the floor, set the Travel control for twelve hours negative, then went over to the hole in the door to begin creating his diversion. For the first time since leaving the Institute he used the Force-field.

The Force-field was supposed to be used only in an emergency—as a protective device. It used the stored power in the packs at an appalling rate—the way Henning had been using his to save Steenson meant that he could have very little left. Time-travelling itself did not require much power. The nervous system did the actual travelling

—the function of the pack was merely to direct the journey into either the past or future, and to stop it at the chosen point in time. While a person could go into the past almost as far as he liked and return to the present, he couldn't travel into his own future. It had been tried several times—with fatal results.

Carefully Maldon set up a long, low force-wall, the end of which lay against the side of an adjoining barn. The timbers of the barn emitted sparks along the line of contact. He oscillated the field slightly, and the barn wall burst into flames.

It was quite a good diversion, he thought.

The farm men began running to and fro with buckets of water. Henning was running about, too, Maldon saw. Obviously the other suspected something, but while he was dashing around like that, he couldn't keep a close watch on his detector. Maldon laughed softly in the darkness, made a careful note of the time to the nearest second, and put on his ear-pads.

The last sound he heard was Henning shouting to young Steenson not to get outlined against the fire and make a target of himself.

For an awful moment Maldon thought he was going to fail. But somehow, he managed to put the aches of his body out of his mind for the necessary number of seconds required to use the Time Equations, and he arrived.

Twelve hours in the past it was not yet midday. The sun streamed through the open barn door, but the barn itself was deserted. Maldon felt very relieved at that. He began searching the place at once.

The barn was surprisingly roomy, and it contained several mechanisms which could have been modified to form efficient traps. But Maldon settled finally on the grab and tackle for lifting heavy bales of hay into the upper lofts. With it he raised three bales, which were already slung together with a net, up to as near the roof as they would go. Then he manoeuvred them until they hung just above the barn door. After checking to see that the quick-release mechanism on the tackle would work at the slightest touch, he picked out a nice, comfortable pile of hay and lay down to wait. All he had to do now was to make sure that nobody sprung his trap prematurely.

All during the afternoon the farmyard noises drifted in through the open door. Most of them were meaningless to him. Occasionally he heard voices, usually belonging to the Steenson farm hands. Just once he had to hide—when the elder Steenson came in and left again with a forkfull of hay. But generally, things were very peaceful. The catastrophic arrival of Henning and himself was not due to take place until sometime late this evening. He just lay and thought.

For a while he tried to resolve the puzzle in his mind about his work before coming to the Institute, but without success. He could remember his early life up to the age of twenty-eight or thereabouts fairly clearly, and the last few months at the Institute were particularly vivid. But the period in between—about twenty years—was a complete blank. *What had they done to him* ?

His resolve to carry through with this mission had been weakening. It was weak no longer. He was not going back to that place.

But mostly he thought about Time, and the Time Join theory that Henning, for some reason, was always discussing with him. The theory was generally accepted now, but it hadn't always been. Maldon remembered how his Primary Tutor used to explain it when he was still very young.

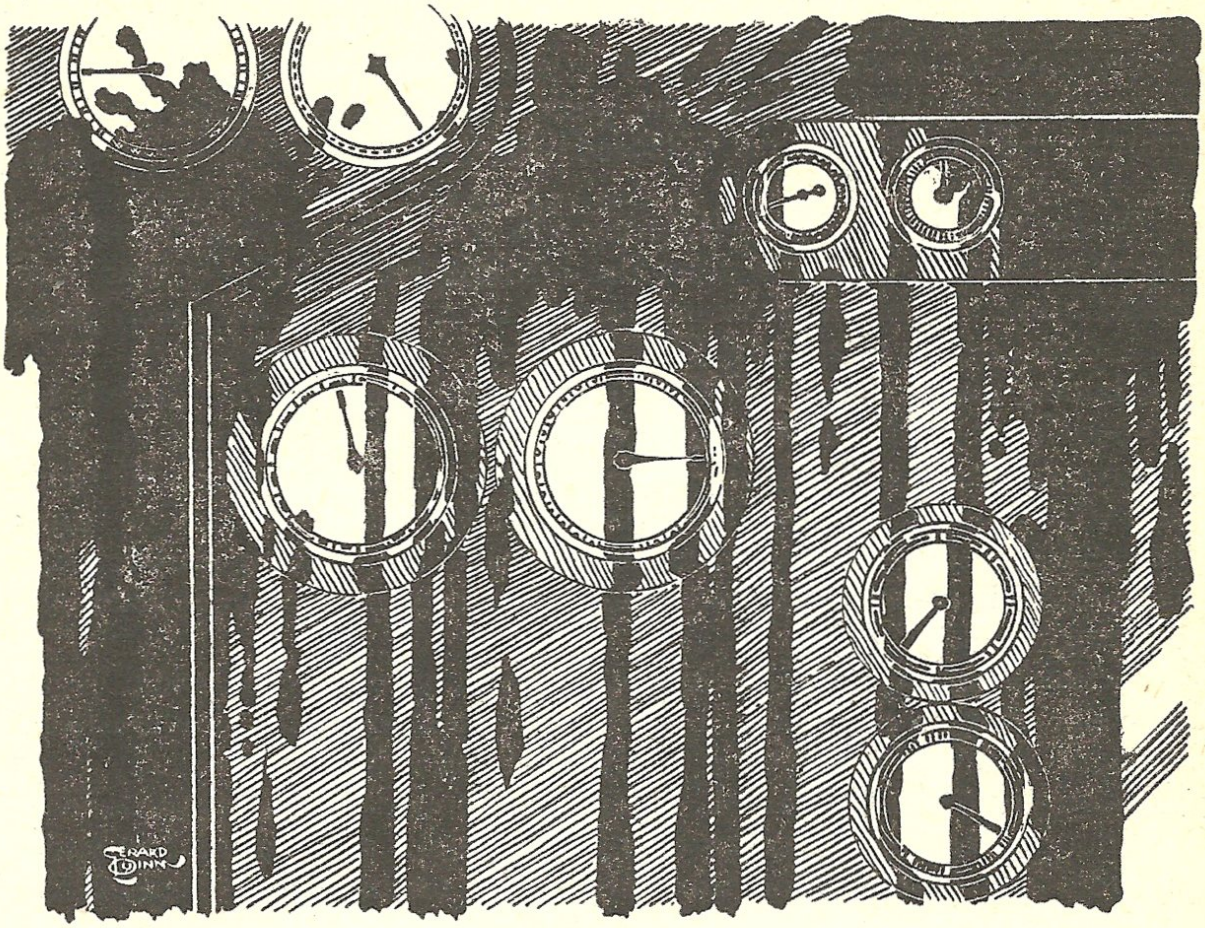
" Time isn't a river," he would say, " Or a railway with branching tracks. We don't know anything fundamental about its structure, but try to think of it like this.

" Let's suppose there is a man who wants to build a wire fence. First he erects fence-posts, then he begins to link them together with wire. But unfortunately, he finds he hasn't enough staples to do the job properly—he has exactly the same number of staples as he has fence-posts ! His only solution is to staple all the strands together at each post and pull and twist them apart to form a barrier between the posts."

Here, Maldon remembered, he would have to quell some enthusiastic pupil for suggesting that the man buy more staples. Then he would continue.

" Time—both Past and Future—is fixed. It is also infinitely variable. There have been, and will be, instants in the Past and Future where certain things *must* occur—those instants are your fence-posts. Now an infinite number of possible futures or pasts exists between those posts, but at widely separate intervals—just for an instant—all those Time-lines join together. All the strands, to use the ' fence ' analogy again, have been bunched together under one staple. However, there is nothing orderly about this ' fence.' One strand might be stretched tight between the posts, and take only a few hundred years to get from one to the other. Another strand could twist and loop all over the place for thousands of years before joining with the others. But it would get there, eventually. After the instant of the Time Join, the strands fan out again until they hit the next one.

" Most of the Time Joins which have occurred in the past are known to us from a careful study of history. They invariably happen just before a great turning point in human affairs. The first nuclear explosion, the landing on the Moon, and similar events. You know,



sometimes I wonder if we took the long or the short line between the Join in early Roman times, and the one during the Rennaissance . . ."

Maldon remembered wondering about that, too. It was a fascinating subject for speculation. And when Time Travel into the past became possible without changing the present—so long as the traveller did not do anything *too* drastic—Maldon had begun to wish that he could do it. He had even planned his studies with that end in view. But somehow he had become side-tracked. Something discovered while working with the basic Time Equations had made him so wildly excited that he had almost forgotten his ambition to be a Time-jumper . . . But he couldn't remember what it had been. Again he wondered bitterly, what the Institute had done to him, and why.

The sudden realisation that dusk had fallen brought Maldon's fruitless memory-searching to an end. He climbed stiffly to his feet, made a last check of the booby-trap he had prepared for Steenson,

and moved to stand on the same spot where he had arrived. He had been here exactly nine hours, three and a half minutes, according to the pack chronometer. Carefully he calculated the amount he would have to travel forward in order to arrive as soon as possible after his last departure, and adjusted the pack controls accordingly. Almost ritually, he put on the pads, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind for the Jump.

When Maldon got back, Henning was still warning young Steenson about outlining himself against the burning barn wall. It had been nice timing. Henning obviously didn't even know he had been gone. The plan couldn't fail now.

Maldon knew there was a lantern beside him on the floor. He groped for it in the darkness, lit it and turned it down until the light it gave was barely perceptible. Then he went to the hole in the door and waited for all the activity he had caused to die down. In his hands he held the shot-gun, with its double barrel protruding through the hole at such an angle that it would be sure to reflect light from the burning wall.

Henning saw it first. He shouted a warning to the others and began to walk, crouching slightly, towards Maldon's position. Obviously he thought Maldon was getting ready to shoot, which was exactly what Maldon wanted him to think. Henning stopped about ten yards from the door. He kept glancing over his shoulder and sidling from side to side. At first Maldon thought he was taking evasive action, but then he saw that Henning was merely trying to stay in the line of fire between Steenson and himself. Poor Henning, he must want him back very badly. Henning spoke.

" Maldon. Don't shoot yet. Listen to me."

In the doorway, Maldon grunted indifferently, jiggled the gun a little. He was almost enjoying this.

Henning edged nearer. He cleared his throat nervously, then said, " I know what you're trying to do here, you know. After you disappeared I spent three weeks studying your file—and incidently, doing some research myself—before I followed you. I made a serious mistake, I admit, in under-estimating your ingenuity, and in not realising how strongly you felt about your trouble. But this is a very bad thing you're doing. Bad and . . . and selfish. What has this boy ever done to you?" He paused, breathing heavily. while he had been talking, his voice had struggled to sound confident, self-assured. It hadn't succeeded. He ended almost pleadingly, " Leave your gun and come out. We can be gone before the others notice anything."

Maldon felt his anger mounting as the other talked. A great, padded hammer seemed to be pounding in his head. He burst out an explosive

" No !", but it didn't relieve the pent-up rage that was in him. Nearly incoherent with anger, he began to tell Henning exactly what he thought about returning to the place that had stolen twenty years out of his life. And about the people who spied on him there, and the other indignities. On a note of almost hysterical incredulity, he ended, ". . . Go back there ! Do you think I'm mad?"

Henning's head was an expressionless shadow outlined against the flames—his features were hidden. But the awful intensity, the sheer desperation in his voice as he answered made Maldon feel suddenly afraid.

" Yes," he said, " *Yes* !"

This wasn't going according to plan at all, Maldon thought uneasily. He had intended allowing Henning to talk him into giving up. As a sign of good faith he would have thrown out the gun. Then, by pretending to be injured, he would get everyone into the barn. But as soon as young Steenson came through the door . . . *Smack.* Half a ton of tightly-baled hay would hit him from forty feet up, and that would be the end—of everything.

But Henning's answer had shaken Maldon. He tried to control the growing chaos in his brain, for Henning was talking again.

" You're wrong about the Institute, you know. Completely wrong. It isn't like that at all. We were trying to *help* you. We didn't ' steal ' twenty years of your life. You did that on yourself. After the accident, you deliberately—*forgot* them."

Henning stopped, apparently waiting for his reaction.

Maldon didn't believe it, of course. Henning was so desperate that he couldn't even think up a decently plausible lie. Maldon decided to laugh out loud, as if it was a funny joke, but when he did, it sounded too high-pitched. There was a tiny, crawling worm of memory uncoiling deep in his brain—and it wasn't in the least bit funny. He was horribly afraid of that memory.

" You don't believe me," Henning said, keeping his voice low. The barn fire was well under control and the other men were casting enquiring glances in his direction, and Henning didn't want them to hear him. He went on, " That's understandable, of course. You have a complete amnesia covering that period. You also, though you don't know it, have a guilt complex a mile wide. There are other less important neuroses as well. And all this in a mind that is the greatest—" He broke off, swallowed, then said seriously, "You say that we stole twenty years of your life. Well, I'm going to try returning them to you—secondhand. Will you promise to do nothing for a few minutes while I do it?"

Without giving him time to reply, Henning moved a little nearer and began speaking rapidly. Maldon didn't want to listen—he wanted to get this business over with quickly, before he funked it—but he could not help it.

Henning said, " Twenty-three years ago you were working for your Specialist First in Mathematics. You were also trying, as was everybody at that time who thought they had the necessary qualifications, to become a Time-jumper. Unlike the others, however, you succeeded in making your first Jump with very little trouble—an unheard of feat until then. By the way you handled the Reality Matrix in the Time Equations, it was obvious that the world had another genius on its hands. But that wasn't all. You followed this by heading an expedition to Mars, and Time-jumping there in an attempt to contact the ancient Martians. The attempt failed—the amount of penetration into the Past, while great, is limited, and the Martian cities were merely more recent ruins then. But you did make one tremendous discovery. Among those ruins you found a clue to the nature of the next Time Join, its approximate distance in the future, and, a way by which you, personally, might be able to bring it about.

" The next great turning point in human history—the next Time join—was to be the first Interstellar flight."

While Henning talked, the two Steenson farmhands had been moving cautiously up behind him. One of them held a pitch-fork—at exactly the same angle that he had once been taught to hold a bayonet. Henning saw them out of the corner of his eye and gestured frantically for them to stay back, and without a pause in his narrative, went on, " World Council were convinced that your ideas were correct, they backed you up with everything they had. But it wasn't until two years ago that a ship with the new space-warp drive was built and taken out for its first test flight. The ship failed to perform. You brought it back and worked on it some more. The work was retarded greatly by the fact that you were the only person who fully understood the operating principles of the thing. Finally, six months ago it took off again, and this time it worked."

" Unfortunately, during the landing, there was an . . an . ." Henning stammered a little, as he tried to find a word to describe the indescribable, ". . . an accident. Everyone but you was killed. You brought the ship down yourself, however."

It was all lies, of course, Maldon told himself fiercely. It was one of Henning's tricks—a ruse to gain time. Something to put him off balance. But was it all lies? Little, isolated memories were beginning to make pictures in that twenty-year blank in his mind—and the

memories fitted into Henning's fantastic story. Suddenly Maldon thought that it was very important that he stop Henning talking before the other made him remember that accident. He felt like shooting Henning, just so he would not have to remember it. But if he did that he couldn't kill Steenson. And if Steenson didn't die . . .

Frozen in indecision, with his mind a whirling chaos of half-remembered facts and sheer nightmare, and with a horrible doubt as to which was which, Maldon stood in the barn doorway and listened helplessly.

Henning was saying, " If you hadn't already been on the verge of a nervous breakdown through over-working on the Interstellar Drive, you would have realised that the accident wasn't your fault. You couldn't possibly have foreseen that bringing the ship in so close to a planetary mass on the new drive would set up a space-strain fatal to living organisms . . ."

Maldon staggered suddenly against the door, and clenched his teeth desperately to keep from screaming. His memory had come back. *All of it.*

Henning's voice and image faded away, as did the shadowy figures of Steenson and the farmhands who were now grouped behind him. Maldon saw and heard instead the thirty top-flight scientists who had helped him test the Drive, and who were enthusiastically and good-naturedly belittling the whole affair now that it was successful. Vennar, a Specialist First Class in Wave Mechanics, was complaining that it would take all of twelve minutes to go to Alpha Centauri, when theoretically it could be done in seven point two three minutes. One of the Gravitics team was urging an immediate trip to Sirius while arguing with someone else who preferred a different star. Everybody had been talking loudly. Maldon had had to shout that he wasn't going to risk leaving the Solar System at all until he had checked the ship thoroughly. And that a hop from the orbit of Mars across the system to the orbit of Pluto in nothing flat did not mean they should take chances. They were all going home, he told them, *now.* While a general wail of protest had gone up, he had worked the few controls necessary, and the cloud-wrapped Earth had winked into existence five hundred miles below them.

And in that instant, it happened.

Somehow Maldon had kept the grisly things from fouling his controls —and kept the more important indicators wiped free of the bright red blood splashes—while he landed the ship. He was unharmed—cautious as ever, he had still been wearing a shielded and insulated space suit. But everybody else was very horribly dead. Materialising the ship so close to Earth had caused a momentary dimension-warp to be set up within it, and the unshielded members of the crew had—

quite literally—been turned inside out. The floor of the control-room had been like a . . .

" *Maldon* ! Get hold of yourself ! Listen to me !"

It was Henning again, shouting at him. With a shock Maldon realised that he himself had been shouting for the last few minutes. Desperately he tried to forget that nightmare on the ship, and force his mind to concentrate on his plan. He was almost succeeding when Henning began talking again.

" When you were brought to the Institute, you had a twenty-year blank in your memory. Everything in your mind relating to the Drive had been wiped out. So, because you were the only living person who knew how the Drive worked, it was our job to bring your memory back."

" We knew that, psychologically, you were in a mess. For one thing, you wanted to kill yourself. But we thought that the usual hypnotic conditioning would keep you from harming yourself. And when you became interested in a nice, quiet subject like History, we were sure that it would be only a matter of time before you cured yourself. We never suspected that all the time you were . . ." Henning stopped talking abruptly. When he went on there was a puzzled, almost incredulous note in his voice. He said, " That conditioning is supposed to be fool-proof—a solid barrier against self-destruction while our normal therapy is proceeding. But you have been thinking over and around that barrier so much recently that it must now have dissolved through sheer neglect.

" I want to make a test."

Henning took a deep breath. In a loud, clear voice he stated, "Your conditioning forbids suicide. By travelling back in time and killing Henry Steenson, who is your grandfather, you are committing suicide. I am reminding you of this fact." He stopped, waiting for Maldon's reaction.

For a moment Maldon felt panic as the one fact he had been so carefully thinking around was brought into the open, but the feeling died quickly. It was true. He had been through too much recently for a little thing like the conditioning to bother him, and the returned memory of that accident overshadowed everything. He didn't want to live with that in his mind. He would kill himself, now that the conditioning no longer bound him . . . But it was a pity, really, because Maldon thought he now knew how that ship could be shielded so that a repetition of that disaster would be impossible.

The sound of an animal-like growl coming from one of the farm-hands jerked Maldon's thoughts back to the present. Mention of his plan to kill Steenson had made him flaming mad. Maldon saw Henning

start in surprise. Apparently the other had forgotten the existence of the three men behind him. Henning turned and said something to them in an undertone, but the answer he got could not have been satisfactory, for he whirled and took three rapid paces towards Maldon, stopped, and made a last, desperate appeal.

" Maldon, don't do it," he begged, " Think of our future. If you kill Steenson or yourself, this Time Line we are at present moving along will be disrupted to such an extent that it may not reach the next Time-Join for thousands of years. But if you come back with me now, the first interstellar flight will be only years away at most. Maldon, you can't hold the race back like that."

Henning paused hopefully, but Maldon kept silent. When the other went on his voice was low, dispirited. Obviously he already knew without a doubt that he had failed, but he was going to keep on trying anyway. He said, " These men are going to rush you in a minute. They're thinking of killing you. Why not throw out your weapon and give yourself up—they won't kill you if you're unarmed."

While Henning had been talking, a bitter struggle had raged in Maldon's mind. Fighting his blind urge to self-destruction was a part of his mind that was saner and more objective about things. A part that looked dispassionately at this whole suicide mission of his—and pronounced it un-sane, un-moral, and downright silly. Normally, Maldon wasn't a murderer, and now that he knew the true reasons for his recent actions, he found himself totally incapable of killing Steenson. Now that a measure of sanity had returned to him, he was incapable of killing anyone.

And, he realised with a shock, his inability to kill anyone made him seriously doubt his ability to kill himself—no matter how heavily the accident weighed on his mind.

Strangely, Maldon felt relieved when he made that discovery. He was almost happy when he called to Henning, " You talked me into it, Doctor. Here's the gun."—He tossed it through the hole in the door, and saw one of the Steenson men run to pick it up—" But I don't want to go outside—I've damaged a leg. Will you come in here, instead? If you'll wait a second there'll be a light."

As he was turning up the wick of the lantern he remembered the booby-trap he'd laid for Steenson. He called urgently, " Henning ! Come in alone."

But Henning didn't come in alone. The two farmhands were close on his heels, and their expressions were ugly. But worst of all, Maldon saw that young Steenson had followed as well, and was standing just inside the barn doorway—*right under the booby-trap.* Maldon felt

the cold sweat break out on his forehead. Suppose something slipped. He didn't want to die anymore. He pointed at Steenson and tried to shout a warning, but his vocal cords wouldn't function—he could only mouth silently and make pushing motions with his hands. Maldon had the sudden awful conviction that Steenson was going to die, no matter what he did.

" *Get him* !"

It was the man who had picked up the shot-gun. He kept the weapon trained on Henning as his companion gripped the pitchfork he was carrying tightly and ran at Maldon. " You dirty murderer . . ." he panted, and brought the three long, wicked prongs up level with Maldon's chest. Henning was taken by surprise. He couldn't do a thing.

There was a bucket at Maldon's feet. He threw it at the charging man's head and ducked frantically. The prongs ruffled his hair as they passed and tore a piece of fabric out of his blouse, and the man blundered into his bent shoulder. Maldon straightened suddenly, and his attacker went flying backwards over his head—to land with a crash right on top of the lifting tackle which Maldon had rigged as a trap for Steenson.

Maldon heard the faint creaking sounds as the drum began to unwind, and knew without looking up that those heavy bales were already plummeting downward at young Steenson. He did the only thing possible—he took a running dive at the white-faced youth in the doorway. They both landed in a heap on the ground outside at the same instant that the load crashed down.

Steenson, who had just taken Maldon's head right in the stomach, was knocked out cold.

Maldon was still lying on top of the unconscious youth when the man with the shot-gun climbed over the fallen bales, took one look at the tableau on the ground, and pointed the gun at Maldon's head. He said thickly, " Kill young Henry, would you . . ." The range was approximately four feet.

Instinctively Maldon hit the emergency stud on his power pack, and a cylindrical force-field flashed into being around his body. As he bounced away from Steenson the gun barrel erupted flame and thunder. The charge, striking the frictionless surface of the force-field, ricocheted, and young Steenson's shirt front was suddenly a bright red sponge. The sponge rose and fell a few times, then stopped.

Maldon felt that he was living a mightmare. This *couldn't* be happening. Here was his grandfather lying dead. He laughed crazily. What was HE doing hanging about when he had never even been born? He lay looking at Steenson's body, waiting for his existence to stop.

After what seemed a long time he heard Henning's voice saying, " Neutralise your force-field, Maldon. We're going home." Dazedly, he did as he was told, noticing that the man with the shot-gun had gone.

As he climbed to his feet Henning said gently, " Your mission would have failed, anyway, Maldon. When we traced your family tree after you'd jumped, we found something which you had missed due to the limited resources available to you for the search. It was merely an indication then—that's why I was so anxious about Steenson—but now we know that it was a fact."

" Steenson's death will undoubtedly change the future—but not to any large extent. And it won't affect you at all. You see," he explained, " Henry Steenson was merely your father's foster father."

Maldon was still trying to assimilate this last piece of information when Henning brushed some loose straw off his blouse and said gruffly, " You're all right now. Let's go home. We've a starship to build . . ."

James White

Portsmouth Science Fiction Group

Fans and readers in the Portsmouth area who are interested in joining or occasionally attending the Group meetings already in existence in this area should write for further details to: The Secretary, Portsmouth Science Fiction Group, c/o 235 Lake Road, Portsmouth. Author Peter Cutler who is already an active member says " there are already quite a number of energetic young men determined to make this Group an outstanding success—with a population of over 300,000 I think we should find sufficient support."

There was only one survivor from the wrecked alien spaceship—a baby. But the subsequent search for the child was like looking for a needle in a haystack. The trouble is that children grow up . . . .

COME AWAY HOME

By Francis G. Rayer

In a long, sloping trajectory the vessel came, ringing still from its impact with the atmosphere. Too low, too fast, it howled eastward, hull vibrating with the shock of the braking jets that spat ahead. A mountain top loomed momentarily, and the vessel sounded like a gong at the glancing impact. Flame licked outwards through its torn side, and it fell, skimming wooded slopes. Its speed now barely that of an express train, it flashed at tree-top height over rough pasture.

Cliffs fell away ahead . . . flashed behind. The vessel struck deep water. Frothing spray shone dully under the grey dawn sky. Waves ran from the point of impact and the sea bubbled, tossed, and began to subside. High above and behind, the pursuing vessel curved gracefully heavenwards. Its quarry was gone.

Henry Cromer stood with his thumb in the crook of his stick, gazing out across towards the jutting headland of Tarbat Ness. Below lay the waters ot Dornoch Firth, running now with a strong tide. A lonely scene, he thought. He had walked three miles and met no one.

He turned, putting his back to the breeze coming in from the sea. Ahead, sheep stood on the rough pasture, watching a bundle that moved. Henry blinked, screwing up his faded blue eyes. But there *was* a bundle—and it *moved* . . .

He approached, slowly at first, then hastening, and sank to his knees upon the turf. Amazement came to his lined face, followed by an inner, radiant wonder.

Blue, baby eyes looked up into his. He touched the child's garment. A pale green, it was of a material he had never before seen, indescribably glossy and soft and edged with white. The child was beautiful, golden haired and fair skinned. He took it up, gazing round.

No one was visible anywhere as far as the eye could see. Dew sparkled on the infant's garment. Taking it in, Henry's face clouded. With an abrupt movement he cradled the child more comfortably in his arms and set off briskly across the slope.

Mary Cromer saw him coming and opened the door of their little stone house, the only building on the headland. Never given to talking, Henry found his words to be few indeed.

" A child—left up by the cliffs," he said.

His wife took it, opening the glossy folds from about its head. " There's wicked folk in this world," she said at last.

" Aye, lass."

He let her take it in, glad she seemed to know what to do. Five minutes later she came to the door.

" It's a tiny baby girl that we have, Henry," she said, " and that covered with bruises it's a miracle the wee mite is alive withall."

Henry bit a lip. " Is there anything——?"

" Nothing. Not a name nor mark upon any of her clothes. Only this there was, looped to one tiny wrist . . ."

Mary Cromer held aloft a silvery ball and Henry took it. Metallic, its surface was without marking except for a ring to which a loop of silken material was attached. He shook his head slowly. An odd plaything.

Agent M77 to Commander.

Report.

Starship subject of previous reports chased into region of planetary group and its destruction witnessed. In endeavouring to make a close escape orbit it went out of control and struck high ground on an island adjacent to the planet's largest land-mass. Thence it fell into the sea and sank. There were no survivors.

Respectfully awaiting my recall :

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.
Order.

Re starship subject of previous reports : Return at once to point of impact. Subsequent Headquarter's examination of radiophotos furnished by you show that some object fell from the chased vessel immediately prior to its destruction. Locate and take possession of this object.

NOTE. No details of galaxy into which chase took you exist here. Observe planet in question and report what forms of life exist there,if any.

Your recall will then be considered.

Commander.

Agent M77 to Commander.
Report.

Apologies to Your Excellency. Examination of originals of radiophotos, and subsequent observation, shows a child was accidentally or purposely thrown from the chased vessel. It is being cared for by two of the erect bipeds which are the predominant life-form of the planet. These bipeds are an intelligent, tool-making species unlike any yet encountered. A detailed report of them is appended.

Respectfully awaiting your instructions :

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.
Order.

Destroy the child and any of the bipeds who have had contact with it.

Commander.

Henry Cromer smiled at his wife, and at the bundle she nursed. During the last two months new life had come into her eyes. Fifty, and childless, he had that day found all she would have asked of heaven.

" Glad we're moving, lass?" he asked.

No one else was in the railway carriage. She nodded happily.

" London is a big place, Henry, but Judith will make us at home."

" Aye, lass." Henry could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times he had met Mary's sister, Judith. He remembered her as a big woman, wholly practical. " You'll be happy helping in her lodging-house, Mary?" he asked. " You won't regret?"

" Never, Henry !"

He nodded, satisfied. The move to London had often been considered. Every time Judith wrote, she asked them to go. And finding little Stella had seemed to settle matters. They had called her Stella —Stella Sutherland. *Stella* because she had seemed to drop from

Heaven, Mary said. *Sutherland* because that fitted, and because they would never pretend to be her real parents.

Henry thought of the long hours of travelling which still lay ahead, and of London. It was only a name, to him. But he would get a job, right enough, Judith wrote; if not, there was need of a strong man's help in her lodging-house . . .

He closed his eyes, lulled by the rhythm of the wheels. London would be huge, after the quietude of Dornoch and Tain. At last he slept, awaking only as Mary touched his shoulder.

" We're there, Henry——"

The train was slowing. He looked through the window, feeling lost. At Dornoch had been earth and sky; here, all was noise and hurrying people. Mary, Stella, and himself had shrunken to three insignificant dots amid many million others.

Agent M77 to Commander.
Report.

Your Excellency : During the interval preceding the arrival here of your last order there arose an unanticipated development. The two bipeds journeyed almost to the other end of their island, taking the child with them. Their species is gregarious and the two entered a thickly-populated area with many artifacts. Their continued observation was impossible.

I respectfully suggest the matter be regarded as closed, and myself withdrawn.

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.
Order.

The child cannot be permitted to live, since it could eventually endanger our security. Locate and destroy it. In no circumstances can your withdrawal from the affected galaxy otherwise be countenanced.

Commander.

Agent M77 to Commander.
Note and Query.

Your Excellency, the area mentioned is computed to contain upwards of five million individuals ! I therefore respectfully suggest that you reconsider your previous order.

Hoping that you will do so, I am, Your Excellency,

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.
Order.
My previous instructions stand—without time limit.
Commander.

Stella halted at the gateway, watching the two uniformed men at the corner twenty paces away. Behind her stretched the vast building of Intelligence Central, fifteen floors high, yet ten times as long as it was tall. A man passed her, going in.

" Evening, Miss Sutherland."

Again alone, she watched the guards from the corner of an eye, her breathing slightly hastened. The moment was coming, she thought. She must judge her time exactly. At 7:99 the electric train crossed the viaduct beyond the end of the high wall enclosing Intelligence Central. At 8:00 the perimeter lights would flash on all along that wall. There would be one minute of evening dimness and noise, and in that single minute she must act. The guards would probably watch the train, eyes following the flashing window-lights that sped above.

Fifteen paces down the wall, almost at the corner, was a doorway. The key concealed in her palm would fit the lock, unless Security had changed it during the previous week.

A tiny, wry smile momentarily crossed her face. She thought of the party which was to be held on the morrow—*her* party. She was twenty, and her friends seemed to think that warranted celebration. The woman she always called Mother would be there, but not Henry Cromer and Aunty Judith. The years had reaped their harvest. Stella dimly remembered the lodging house, always cold, always filled with the smell of cooking. It had been a long step from there to an important and trusted secretarial position in Intelligence Central, but she had made it.

A murmur grew from eastward behind the building. She eased the satchel strap on her right shoulder, the half-smile gone, her face white. If things went wrong, there would be no party on the morrow.

The train sped into view, a long, dim outline with rows of lighted windows. The guards raised their glance to it, just as they always did. This was it, Stella thought.

Silently, rapidly, she walked the fifteen paces to the door. A question, never, she hoped, to be asked, was ready on her lips, if the men turned . . . " What's the right time?" Her watch was set twenty minutes slow to substantiate the defence . . .

Level with the door, not looking at it, she inserted the key and twisted. The tail of the train streamed into view. Simultaneously, lights sprang on round the high wall, dazzlingly bright. One guard said something, moving.

The door opened under her hand. She passed through and closed it, ears expecting a warning shout . . .

Silence returned, broken only by the slow pacing of one set of feet past the door. The sound of the key could not be risked, now, and she left it on the inner side, her back to it.

Before her lay the core of Intelligence Central. She had never been there, but recognised its layout. Those who had provided the key had shown her plans. The outer, locked door, purposely unimposing, was the least of the defences which she must penetrate. Those who had provided the key had not pretended that her task would be easy.

De-ilth to Fay-ish.
From: Search Ship.

> Hail. Information on our companion vessel chased to destruction by the Gonom ship has at last been discovered. That there can have been survivors seems unlikely. Almost twenty planetary periods have elapsed since the vessel struck highlands and sank in adjacent water. I can hold out no hope that the revered child was saved. Have you further instructions? *De-ilth.*

Fay-ish to De-ilth.

> Hail. Now that you have located the site of the disaster, I am ordered to convey the following most-secret information to you : The revered child had in its possession a piezo sub-radio repeater, as identification. Its nurse knew of the grave importance of this object, disguised as a toy, but not of its purpose. It is assumed that if she was able to save the revered child, she would save also the identification repeater. Appended hereto are the sub-radio characteristics. Radiate these and scan for echoes. Gradually extend the area of search, if necessary, until the object is found. Take no action, but then inform me of related circumstances.
>
> *Fay-ish.*

Stella pressed her back to the wall, listening. In one hand was a hollow tube, taken from her satchel. Minutes passed in silence, and she inserted the tube into a hole in the door at her side. It had taken two years secret work by a man she had never seen to obtain possession of the resonant-cavity lock's key. The lock-smith who had made the copy she held had afterwards died in curious circumstances.

A sound like that of a fairy flute came from the lock; the door, massive beyond all her expectation, slid aside smoothly as an opening eyelid. She stepped through and the door closed.

Inside was a long corridor, presumably crossed at many points by seeing rays. Security were no fools. And in the core of Intelligence Central lay hidden things of vital import . . .

From her satchel she took an image-converter that might have been a lipstick, and looked through it. Before her, so near that a careless movement would have interrupted it, was a purple ray normally invisible to the human eye. It played upon an electric eye. That eye was undoubtedly triggered to warning bells throughout the building, she thought, bending low to pass under the beam.

Two further beams, both waist high, spanned the corridor, and were passed. After the last, she halted, thinking it all a little too easy. Only the knowledge that her sabotage was in the interests of world peace quelled a trembling that came to her limbs.

She listened, but could hear only her own rapid breathing. The portable transceiver in her satchel hung heavy, and she half wished she had not brought it. It was not intended to be used—was merely *bluff*, because she might be caught.

Agent M77 to Commander.
Most Urgent.

Your Excellency: Sub-radio signals have been heard in this galaxy, and are thought to emanate from a Highborn ship. If this is so, it seems that the Highborn are searching this area. Your Excellency will realise the implications of this. It immediately substantiates the old rumours of the disappearance of the Highborn's revered child. For nothing less would such a search be undertaken.

Respectfully, Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.
Most Urgent.

Your report substantiates expectation. The Highborn's revered child must be found, if possible, and brought back as hostage. If she cannot be captured, kill her. If she cannot be located, destroy the whole area within which she lies. If she returns to the Highborn they will undoubtedly unite and successfully resist our planned aggression. Her death was originally planned in order to disrupt Highborn unity.

You will be recalled immediately you have taken or destroyed her.

Commander.

Agent M77 to Commander.
Query.

Your Excellency, the area in question contains many millions of the intelligent bipeds. Shall this area be destroyed?

Respectfully thanking you in anticipation of my early recall:

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.
Destroy the area. *Commander.*

Stella turned the door-knob slowly. The collodion with which her fingers were covered slightly dulled her sense of touch, but there would be no prints. She quivered slightly from the hazards passed, and from knowing that she must seek that way again, in escape, when her task was done.

The door opened and she felt through the crack with a long wire, searching for booby traps. There were none. She insinuated a detector through the inch-wide slit. It gave no reaction. A periscope gadget that might have been a stenographer's pencil followed, and for a full minute she examined the room. Then she opened the door, watching the detector. No blip on its tiny screen showed that an electric circuit had somewhere been completed. Satisfied, she slipped through and closed the door at her back.

The broad desk in the centre of the room was the obvious place to search. She cut the locks away one by one, using a pocket blow-torch of a type that no industrial engineer would ever see. She searched methodically, quick, yet careful to miss nothing.

The documents were locked in a brown leather folder, as she had been told they would. A tiny tool sharper than steel slit the stout case from end to end. The crisp papers in one hand, she listened, eyes shining with a fever of triumph.

Moments passed and her well-learnt routine was remembered. If she could not escape, at least she need not fail. The documents were in themselves valueless—but the information they contained, or, rather, its *secrecy*, was all-important, she thought. It was for this reason that she had been provided with a transciever. She drew it round to the front and switched it to " Transmit."

Bluff, she thought. Escape must come first.

She opened the door and gained the passage. Four men in uniform were walking briskly along it towards her. The first raised a weapon. Gas stung her eyes; she stumbled, buffetting the wall, and felt the odour strong in her nostrils. As she strove to run she knew that her knees were failing. Her will-power carried her on so that she was unconscious before striking the floor.

The blue-jawed man sat with his hands flat on the desk before him. Fifty, he was square-headed, with hard eyes.

" We do not feel kindliness towards those who will not co-operate," he said.

Stella met his gaze, hoping that she had not flinched. The leather straps holding her upper arms to the chair were too tight.

He touched one of the objects arrayed on the desk before him, gaze turning upon the four men who stood at attention at one side.

" The transmitter was on when you caught her?"

One nodded. " Yes, sir."

Stella saw her interrogator draw in his lips. " The documents were open, in her hand?"

" Yes, sir."

Stella closed her eyes, feigning tiredness to hide the triumph. The man behind the desk had a masterful voice; now, it had a sharp snap to it.

" She had the opportunity of spending at least ten minutes alone ! The significant part of the documents could have been read in less than that !"

Came silence, and Stella opened her eyes. She had wanted them to reach this opinion on their own, and they had done so. It was more effective, that way.

A thick, strong-fingered hand moved the objects on the desk one by one. " A periscope. Could even be used through a key-hole. Most ingenious. And this, I assume, is a wide-waveform detector." He did not wait for her to answer. " Could be used to detect any form of radiation, including the static impulse caused by warning circuits. Very clever." He looked up. " I assume you have been trained for this part for some years?"

Stella did not allow herself to be tricked into any response. Let them guess. Guessing sometimes made five of two and two.

The big man shrugged. " We have ways to make our guests talk, eventually." His fingers closed over another object. " And this?"

None of the four replied. Stella remembered Henry and Mary Cromer, the dear old pair who had been as much as any true parents could have been, and who had never pretended she was their own. " We found you, lass," Henry had said. Wide-eyed, almost ten, she had listened. " Way up on the cliffs. Except for your baby clothes, there was only this . . . keep it always—some day it may prove who you are."

The object which he had placed before her was now replaced upon the desk by a thick hand. A silvery ball, with a loop to carry it, it was enigmatical.

" An odd thing for a spy to carry," the man said.

Stella tried to move. " I'm no spy. You're the spies, planning secretly in the very heart of Intelligence Central ! Intelligence Central is non-national. You are nationals, planning to achieve personal power, only half realising that your plans would end in war !" She let her lips curl. " And you thought you'd get away with it ! You

thought you'd keep your plans secret !" She let her glance flicker momentarily to the transceiver.

One of the four men stirred uneasily. " She could have blown the whole set-up by talking——"

The man behind the desk scowled, then put a hand on the silvery ball. " You may as well tell us what this is, Miss Sutherland," he murmured.

" Find out !"

" We shall. It's a nut our technicians could crack." He made a gesture and one of the four left. " It would be simpler if you told us. We like people who co-operate."

Stella let her gaze drop to the ball. She had never known what it was, and had always carried it half for luck, and half because of Henry Cromer's words.

" It's a toy—a child's toy," she said.

The big man laughed nastily. " That all?" His disbelief was clear.

She nodded. " That's all, I swear——"

He got up, scraping back the chair, his patience obviously gone. " We've talked too long. As for your—your *plaything*, our men will soon open it. As for yourself—its' time *you* talked. We want to listen. We like listening. And we're going to have plenty of it to do. We've ways. We'll give you your chance. If you don't co-operate, well, perhaps a little prefrontal lobotomy will relax your mulishness—it always does. I'm sure you'd rather prove co-operative *before* such measures——" He made an expressive gesture.

Stella bit the inner side of her lower lip. It wasn't so easy to be a heroine when the time came, she thought. If necessary, she could appear to break down, but not too soon. She could disclose several names—they wouldn't expect many. Those persons would already have flown upon her non-return. Only one lie must be maintained. Her captors must believe that she had broadcast to her confederates the text of the documents she had not had time to read . . .

She was taken into a second room and the objects from her satchel placed on a table. Men came, demanding, not satisfied until she spoke, then not satisfied with her answers. Needles pricked her arm and narcotics flowed through her veins. Men waved the objects from her satchel in front of her drooping eyes, shouting questions. Drugs dulled her into semi-consciousness, and stimulants awoke her to awareness of pain.

Soft voices promised freedom; hard voices threatened death. Lights seared her eyes until she cried, and darkness came until she thought she was blinded. She was shown an open doorway leading to sun-lit

streets, and told that only her own stubbornness kept her prisoner. Then she was bound again, and threatened with endless captivity. Men came and went, cajoling, promising, swearing. Hours seemed to grow into days. They held the promise of sleep before her, tantalising they said she would talk, in the end, inevitably.

Suddenly the wall of her prison opened and they were all stilled. A golden-skinned man clad in white edged with blue stood before her, speaking directly into her mind.

"Come away home," he said.

Agent M77 to Commander.
Report.

Your Excellency, a Highborn vessel was observed leaving the area which it was planned to destroy. We could not go out of orbit quickly enough to follow it. Detector equipment showed that the piezo-repeater was aboard. It is therefore beyond doubt that the vessel carried the revered child. In view of this I am immediately leaving this galaxy and will in person wait upon your Excellency for further instruction.

Most respectfully,

Agent M77.

De-ilth to Fay-ish.
From : Search Ship.

Our long quest has at last proved successful ! I personally extracted the revered child from captivity on the planet in question and am returning with her. She is well. A Gonom vessel was observed in orbit, but was unable to follow us. I have every hope of a safe journey.

De-ilth.

Mary Cromer sighed, took off her old-fashioned glasses, and laid the newspaper down. It had all seemed a dream when little Stella—as she always thought of her—had appeared, radiant, and said that she was going back to the stars. A simple woman, Mary Cromer felt that she knew all that she needed to know . . . Stella had come, had loved them and been loved, and had gone. There was no regret.

Mary Cromer smiled, remembering. Newspaper headlines lay half hidden under her wrinkled hands.

PANIC STRICKEN FLIGHT OF ENEMY AGENTS
FULL FAITH IN INTELLIGENCE CENTRAL RESTORED

Subsequent to disclosures made this morning, a long period of peace is anticipated and the integrity of Intelligence Central has been placed beyond doubt . . . .

Francis G. Rayer

This is a robot story—with a big difference. To understand that remark you will have to read to the end—and it is told in the inimitable style of Lester del Rey whose recent story "Idealist" was so well-liked in a previous issue.

A POUND OF CURE

By Lester del Rey

Maryl sat in the same spot as he'd left her in the morning, and the house was a mess, except for the big electrochord Henry had bought for Jimmy's first lessons. That was polished to a gleam of synthetic mahogany, and topped by the tri-di picture of the boy, taken a year ago. Now she sat with her hands in her lap, facing it. Wrapped around one finger was the yellow curl she'd saved from the boy's first haircut, and her thumb was caressing it softly.

But she got up as Henry came in, her face hardening. He flinched, dropping his eyes, and reaching for the slippers the robot house-boy should have brought. Then he remembered why the little robot was no longer around, and jerked his eyes up guiltily to meet hers.

" Henry !" Her voice had a touch of a quiver to it, but it carried determination. " Henry ! I've made up my mind, Jimmy's been with your mother two days now, and it isn't good for him to be away from me so long. I want you to drive out for him to-night !"

He'd been afraid of it, and his story was ready. But looking at her, he dropped it. " I had a hard day, honey. I'm dead. Besides, the heli's acting up. I don't think it would take three hundred miles there and back."

Her lips grew thin. " I work, too, Henry. I spent all day cleaning Jimmy's room." Her face lightened, and a fond smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. " He's such a messy boy. But he is a sweet child, too. I've been thinking we should let him grow his curls again, Henry. He looked so nice that way."

Henry forced the anger out of his voice, trying to remember that it had been harder on her. They hadn't meant to let her know about the hysterectomy and the fact that she couldn't have other children; she'd always been sensitive, and her whole life had been centred on having the maximum five children the law allowed. But somehow she'd learned the truth. And since then she'd changed. Like letting the house go to pot, not even ordering the robot maid to make the beds, or letting it do more than a token cleaning; like cleaning Jimmy's room daily by herself.

He nodded. " I've been thinking so too, Maryl. In fact, Mother told me I should. Said we were trying to make Jimmy into a man too fast. Told me she was taking him out to buy a blue velvet suit to-night."

He watched the reaction, and some relief came as Maryl softened. " That's nice. Though she might talk to me about it. Still—umm, maybe you can get Jimmy tomorrow. I guess she's lonely, too. But you've got to bring him back tomorrow, Henry. Tomorrow !"

" Tomorrow," he promised, and clumped out to the kitchen to see what Zenia, the maid, had prepared for his supper. Maryl had unquestionably eaten at five, since she'd started sharing her dinner with Jimmy, instead of waiting for him. Sometimes now it seemed to him that he was more married to the robot than to his wife. She'd been named for a real maid they'd had seven years before, and her body had been fixed to look like the girl's, even to the tiny sweat glands that left beads of moisture on her forehead when she worked over the stove.

He told her the new one he'd heard at the office, about the heli salesgirl who'd married the lion tamer. It couldn't have meant anything to her, but she laughed at the right place, and countered with the story of a widower in France looking for mourning clothes. He went up to bed feeling considerably better.

Sometime during the night he awakened to realize Maryl wasn't in her bed. He tiptoed down the hall, to find her curled up on Jimmy's

bed, sound asleep. But the light must have disturbed her. She turned part-way over, and muttered something. He bent down. " My own little Jimmy boy," she was saying. Henry closed the door and went back to bed, frowning. If she'd only have consented to adopt other children, instead of flying off the handle at the idea of wasting her time on other women's children !

Dr. Broderick had better make good on his promise, Henry thought. If Maryl ever suspected that her son was staying with his grandmother because he'd broken both legs falling out of a tree in the park . . . Well, she couldn't find that out. Nor could she be held off any longer. Each day without Jimmy seemed to make things worse.

But Dr. Broderick was smiling the next morning. He should have been smiling, Henry thought, with what they were paying for his personal advice and special services. Still, Maryl's father had left enough to his son-in-law, and anything was better than seeing her again without bringing her son back to her.

" It's ready," he said. He was a big man, with an annoying keenness that seemed to cut through into a man's personal thoughts, and a reputation as the best family adjustment expert in America.

He stopped to unwrap two cigars and pass one to Henry. " I was out to see Jimmy last night, Henry," he said. " A fine boy—with the right upbringing, the kind of future citizen we need desperately after the load of neurotics our ancestors wished off on us. And you're good for him, even if you do have your own twists. But even with my advice, you can't handle him alone. I caught a trace of a petulant whine in his voice twice last night. Now, did you talk to Maryl about adopting a sister for him? He's six, you know—time to begin."

Henry avoided his glance. " I talked to her, day before yesterday. But she thinks . . ."

" Yes. I was afraid so. Resents the idea of anyone coming between her and the boy. I'm afraid I made a mistake in passing her for marriage, though she was all right until we had to remove that tumor. Good blood, but her mother . . . And as the daughter of a man who won the Personal Privilege rating, we can't send her to a home for memory removal without her consent. Unless you were to request it, of course . . ."

Henry shrugged. They'd been through that before.

Broderick got up, shaking his head. " Laws, laws, laws. How can we save the kids when we have to work with the laws their psychotic grandfathers passed?"

" You might worry more about your other patients—they're still paying you, even if they have grown up," Henry pointed out.

" True. I do worry about them. But what difference does it make if they're happy in a dream world? It's too late to give them the right help. But it's not too late to save the kids. And once we can get one generation where a sound adjustment is the norm, we won't have to worry after that." He stood up abruptly, and moved to a side door. " Okay, forget it. Here's what you came for."

The door opened and a boy came walking in, smiling quickly as he saw Henry. " Father !" he cried out, and broke into a run. Henry reacted automatically for a second, before he remembered that it was all a fake. Under the curly yellow hair and eager young face, there was still the mind of the robot houseboy.

Broderick's voice cut into the scene before it could become too awkward. " All right, Jimmy, you'd better wait outside. Your father will be out in a minute." He watched the boylike figure leave, and turned to Henry. " We were lucky in having one of the small robots working where he could remember so much about Jimmy. It made the substitution easy, and I hope it will prevent any slip-ups. Now, though, it's up to you. Still think you can treat him like the real Jimmy?"

" I think so," Henry said.

" You'd better. After all, it was your idea. We've considered things like this before, but we've been uncertain about the results. If Maryl guesses . . . well, then she'll really crack. If it works, though, you may have started something that will save a lot of misery in the world." The psychiatrist picked up his type-pen, nodded, and dismissed Henry. " Let me know the minute anything goes wrong. And good luck."

Jimmy was waiting outside, and they filed up toward the heli ramp together. The boy was quiet at first, as he might have been after any strange experience. Then he gradually began to chatter about his grandmother, and Henry found himself making the proper responses. It wasn't going to be so hard, after all—if Maryl would accept the substitution. He glanced at the boy. Outwardly he seemed perfect. No, not quite. He seemed a bit younger than he was, and his hair was longer. But maybe that was what Broderick had decided was closest to Maryl's memory.

They stopped on the way to get the blue-velvet suit. It took six stores before one was able to fabricate the right kind of cloth, but there was time to kill, since he was supposedly bringing the boy back from a longish trip. Henry still had time to make the office when he led the facsimile boy up the steps.

Maryl came down the stairs at a run, and the boy flew into her arms. There was a small feast of goodies spread out on the dining-room

table, Henry saw—and Maryl began shouting to Zenia to bring more. Her face was glowing, and she didn't even look at her husband.

He squirmed uncomfortably, while the boy began repeating his chatter about his grandfather. Maryl glanced up finally and saw her husband for the first time. " Jimmy's home !" she said. " Isn't it wonderful? And you'll be late to work, Henry." She kissed him quickly on the cheek and dashed back as Jimmy began opening presents.

Henry went back to the heli, frowning. It wouldn't matter with the robot. But still . . . maybe Broderick was right. Maybe he'd better insist on registering the boy for school, so things would be on a sounder footing when the real Jimmy returned. Still, that would require having a tutor for Jimmy while he recovered. He'd wait and see.

By the time he returned, however, things were back to something approaching normal. He got part of the day's events out of Zenia, before Maryl came out to the kitchen. She twitted him about having an affair with their maid, almost as if the old days were back. But she stayed only a minute before going up to the nursery. That was in keeping with her present pattern, however. And it probably wouldn't hurt since the robot-boy would be feigning sleep.

Curiously, Maryl seemed happier than before as the days passed. She began going out into the garden, according to Zenia, to play with Jimmy. And she even permitted the boy to stay on the swing and get dirty in the sandpile. Henry tried to tell himself that the shock of her lost ability to have other children was wearing off.

He took one day off to fly up and see the real Jimmy, but there were no worries on that score. The legs were healing, and the boy was happy enough to see him. He called Maryl with the old excuse of a business trip, and stayed over for the night. Damn it, Jimmy was a fine boy, as Broderick admitted, and a man had some rights with his own son.

Maryl met him when he came back, and he knew at once that something had gone wrong. The sparkle was gone, and she was too warm in her greeting. Also, supper for the two of them was laid out on the dining-room table. She sat down, but made no effort to touch the food.

" Where's Jimmy?" she asked. " And what happened to our houseboy?"

He'd been prepared for deviousness of some kind, but this caught him off guard. For a second, he fumbled in his mind, trying to hold his facial muscles firmly.

" Don't lie to me !" she snapped. " You lied to me once, when I went to the hospital. I haven't forgotten that. And I didn't think you'd dare try it again. Henry Needham, what have you done with my boy?"

He let his muscles sag then. " You mean—you mean Jimmy's run away? Maryl, you're nuts. I sold the houseboy two weeks ago when he began to mistake orders. Jimmy couldn't have run off with him."

" Jimmy's upstairs," she said slowly. She frowned, then shook her head. " I thought . . . maybe I'm just worried about school, and everything . . ."

" We could skip another year of school," he suggested quickly. She nodded, and turned quickly toward the stairs, smiling again. But there was still an odd expression on her race.

The suspicious looks continued for the next two days. But on the third, she was as radiant as she had ever been. Henry could get nothing out of Zenia. He suspected that somehow the maid had let something slip, but if so, the results had worn off.

The crisis seemed to have passed, in any event, without the need of Broderick's advice. Another week slipped by, and twice Maryl ate with him. The house was better regulated. She still slept part of the time with Jimmy, but some mornings he woke to find her in the opposite bed. Time, he thought—time, and no new worries. In spite of Broderick's fine theories, Maryl was sound material. She'd be herself again, yet.

It was just a week before the real Jimmy was to return that he awoke to find her sitting up, studying him. He roused himself, trying to reach a stage of alertness, but she smiled and pushed him back.

" I'm just being fond of you, Henry," she said, and there was new warmth in her laugh. " You're the clever Henry I always knew you were. Who else would have thought of getting me a robot Jimmy to substitute for my boy while he was sick? Oh, don't deny it—I called up one of the women friends of your mother—one I met two years ago. And I'm not mad, not at all. I think it was very sweet of you to bring me the new Jimmy. Without him, I couldn't have stood it."

" Maryl !" He caught her suddenly, studying her face. But there were no secrets in it. She'd found out, somehow—but she'd taken it. Broderick be damned ! Maryl was all right again. She was too smart to be fooled, but it didn't matter now. "Maryl, to hell with my work. Let's pack up and go out to Mother's until the boy's ready to come back. Let's make it a celebration. Let's . . ."

She smiled, but shook her head. " And you with the new fusion jet about to be put through its trials? Don't be silly, Henry. I can wait, now."

She proved that she could, too. Henry watched her while the week dragged along. The success of the jet meant nothing compared to the new—or rather, old—Maryl. Then he got the final returns on it, and knocked off. He put through a couple of calls, chuckling to himself. Psychiatrists ! A good husband was worth a dozen of them. If a man couldn't figure what was good for his own wife, who could? And this would be the best thing of all.

A surprise party was just the thing. She was expecting Jimmy back in two more days, but the boy was well. And happiness never hurt anyone. He wound up his affairs, climbed into his heli, and took off for his mother's place, chuckling at the picture of Maryl's face when he walked through the door with Jimmy that night.

It came off on schedule—at least through the door. He'd warned the boy about the substitute, and about the surprise. And that part went off well, too. Jimmy considered his robot twin a fine joke as they stood there, watching Maryl and the robot coming down the stairs to the door.

Then she stopped. Her eyes darted from one to the other. She hesitated a second longer. Then she swung about, picking the robot up hastily and heading him back up the stairs, with a quick word in his ear.

" It's all right, Maryl," Henry began. " Jimmy knows . . ."

" Jimmy doesn't. He's too young for that—too innocent." She came across the hall now, her back straight and her lips drawn straighter. She went past Henry, and up to her son.

One hand came back and forward, and her palm caught the boy behind the ear, sending him staggering. " You!" Her voice rose to a scream of rage. " You—trying to come in here ! Get out. Get out, do you hear. You filthy little monster. Do you think I don't know what you'll do? Do you think you can come here and steal the place of my own little Jimmy?"

Her arm came up again, but Henry got between them somehow. " Maryl—this *is* Jimmy. See how he's grown ! A whole inch. And Mother's been teaching him to read. Look, let him show you."

She was across the room, shouting for Zenia. " Throw them out ! Zenia, throw them out ! They can't do it."

Henry stood rooted to the floor as the maid came forward, keyed to obey Maryl before anyone else. He shot one uncomprehending look at his wife and another at the stricken face of the real Jimmy. Then the sickness in him was swallowed up by the younger misery beside him.

" It's all right, Jim," he said quietly. " It's all right. Your mother's sick—I didn't want to tell you, because I thought she'd be better.

We'll go and see Dr. Broderick, and then everything will be all right."

He retreated through the door, leading the boy. "She's delirious, Jim—you know what that means—like the time your friend Phil had the fever. But she'll be all right, later. Come on, I'll let you fly the heli while we find a phone and get Dr. Broderick."

This time, Broderick made no comments. His eyes slitted once on the visiphone, and then he nodded. "Leave the boy in the heli, Henry," he ordered. "And for God's sake, don't forget to take the key out with you. I'll meet you in front of your house."

Reaction had set in by the time Broderick arrived. Henry had only a vague idea of what went on as they were let into the house by Zenia. Broderick headed up the stairs toward the nursery, motioning Henry to wait. He dropped onto a chair, sitting on the edge, and took the drink that Zenia brought. As the door to the nursry opened, there was the sound of sobbing, and then it closed, leaving only silence.

The third drink was finished when Broderick came back, and his face was taut and worn. Henry stumbled toward him. "Is it . . .?"

"The worst that could happen—or the best. I don't know. I should have you confined to a cage in the zoo with the other apes, Henry. Damn it, I told you to let me know at the first sign. Oh, drat it, I know it's my own fault. I should know better than to trust a man who'd marry a neurotic woman and then stick with her. Go up and see her, but don't say anything. Just look in the door and come out again."

Henry crept up silently. There were no sounds of sobbing now, only a crooning blur of words. He opened the door a crack, forgetting Broderick's advice as he tried to phrase something comforting. But she didn't look around. Her face was close to that of the robot Jimmy, and she was crooning to it.

"No they're not. Not to my little robot. My own little baby boy. I won't let them. Dr. Broderick understands. He won't let that old man do anything. And you'll never be mean to me. No other woman will ever have you, 'cause you won't grow up and go away from me. You'll be just the way you are. My own little boy, my sweet little robot boy who's all mine. Won't you, Jimmy boy?"

"All yours, Mama," the robot answered, and a small hand came out to rest on her hair caressingly. "Just like I am."

She gurgled happily. "All right. And what's a robot, angel?"

"A robot's the nicest kind of special boy, Mama," the creature answered, gurgling back. "And it's me, 'cause I love you."

"And what's a Mama?" she asked.

Henry shut the door softly, cutting off the words, while the voices went on and on until Broderick came up to lead him down and into

the kitchen for another drink. " There's still Jimmy," the psychiatrist reminded him. " Suicide won't solve that, Henry."

He hadn't realized he was thinking it, though the man was right. " Jimmy." He rolled it off his tongue. " You can erase the memory of this from him, can't you?"

Broderick nodded. " We'll do that, of course. We'll do everything we can to make sure our future citizens don't inherit the sins of their fathers. But can you forget, Henry? If there's one chance in a hundred of returning Maryl, can you take it and forget what has happened? Can you build a whole new life for yourself?"

Henry's eyes rested on Broderick. Therapy, he thought. Therapy —stall the patient with any promises until he can be given full treatment.

Broderick shook his head this time, again seeming to read Henry's mind. " It'll cost every cent you have, Henry. You'll have to move to a new town where nobody knows you, get yourself a new apartment and a new job—a job, not a position until you can earn one. And no robots. Absolutely nothing from this life. There are new techniques, but they're risky and imperfect. All psychiatry is imperfect. You may find differences."

" For Maryl—" Henry began slowly.

Broderick cut him off. " No, for Jimmy. Because all I can promise is that we won't permit anything which will ruin his future. We want you and Maryl to be happy, but we don't demand it. And if anything goes wrong, you'll be the one to suffer for it. Well?"

" When?" he asked.

" Whenever you're ready, Henry. We'll have finished what we can do before you can find your job and set yourself up with reasonable conveniences."

He thought it over, looking for the trick. Maybe, if they made it hard enough for him, they could force him to take some job which would prove a blind alley, where he could never earn enough to support a wife and son. They could put Maryl away with her robot and bring Jimmy up with their cold and logical scientific ideas. Once they got him away, he could never fall back on Personal Privilege laws. And his therapy would be the slow adjustment of a man in a routine job, looking forward with dimming hopes to a future that always was one step away.

He'd been muttering to himself, but Broderick must have heard some of it. The psychiatrist grimaced. " No, Henry. You'll have some money left—enough to set yourself up. And you're too good an accountant to pigeonhole in any small job, even if you are rusty. There's an opening for you, wherever you go."

There had to be some catch, or they'd have tried it long ago. And yet it sounded like more than humouring him. He considered it, but he already knew his decision. "There's a plane leaving in an hour for Seattle," he remembered aloud.

Broderick lifted the receiver and began dialing for a heli-cab. "Sooner than you think, Henry," he promised.

He kept his promise. It was less than two weeks later that Henry stood at the airport in Seattle, watching a boy of six and a hesitatingly smiling Maryl get off the plane and head toward him.

But it was four years before he found the catch, and then only by accident, or one of the lapses of memory only psychiatrists could explain. He was finishing up a late evening at the office, winding up an involved new contract with a New York firm. He was impatient to get home, and trying to make up his mind whether to take flowers to his wife or a new gadget to his son. And his fingers dialed the New York number automatically, before he realised it was the number of his former home.

For a second, he started to hang up. Then curiosity got the better of him, and he hesitated while an image sprang onto the screen.

There was a face in the foreground, but his attention snapped to the couch behind—first in recognition, then in shocked disbelief. There, a six-year old boy who looked exactly like his memory of Jimmy was playing cat's-cradle with a Maryl whose face was radiant with pleasure. An older Maryl, a faintly time-eroded copy of the wife who waited for him at home . . .

"Good evening. Mrs. Needham's residence," the voice of the robot maid insisted again.

Henry wordlessly studied the face on the screen. It was not the face of Zenia—definitely not Zenia.

"Sorry," he said haltingly. "Wrong number."

He sat for long minutes after he'd hung up, staring at the blank screen. The phone buzzed once. It was probably the New York lawyers calling him. But he let it ring, without answering.

And finally he nodded. He'd get both the gadgets and the flowers.

When a man had such a fine future citizen for a son—and the only completely loyal and understanding wife in the world—he could afford to splurge a little.

Lester del Rey

It was a pleasant, peaceful type of invasion from outer space—the Aliens were most polite and helpful, appearing rather as ambassadors of goodwill rather than possible conquerors. Appearances can, however, be very deceptive.

STRANGERS IN THE TOWN

By Lan Wright

He came down out of the hills on a bright morning early in June, two days after the aliens had come to the small, country town of Alandale.

He was a big man, tanned by the sun and the wind, his hair black over a broad forehead, with eyes that were blue and bright. His whole face was tranquil, rather like a carving in some polished oriental wood; his shoulders were wide and his hips narrow. His name was Martin Olsen, and he had come to look at the Aliens.

The aliens !

Everyone called them that for want of a better expression, and more especially to indicate the fact that they came from a planet which circled the star Arcturus, forty light years from Earth. There were six of them, male and female, and each one was like a god or goddess from ancient Greek mythology. Each was tall and blonde and beautiful—even the men, and the only things that set them apart from human kind were the odd, pointed ears and the short, hornlike tentacles which projected from the forehead, one above each eye.

They arrived in Winter, bringing with them a glorious promise of the Galaxy into which Man had made the first halting step, and for three months they had toured the Earth, visiting the great cities and smiling politely at the most famous people in the world. They had seen, they had studied, and they had learned, they had nodded politely and smiled condescendingly at the greatest works of Man; and they had made it very clear that they considered the human race in much the same light as a white man from the city considers a black man from the bush. They made it clear, too, that they were in a position to advance the progress of the human race by several centuries—if they so desired.

Having seen the great cities and large centres of industry they asked to see the smaller, rural communities where human life and civilisation was not quite so ' advanced,' and what could have been more natural than that the President of the World Council, Charles Norman, should have brought them to Alandale, his own birthplace.

So the aliens came to see Alandale, and Martin Olsen came to see the aliens.

Olsen stood with hundreds of others on the dusty road just outside Alandale and watched them from a distance as they inspected Herbie Whittle's famous field of grain, and he pushed and jostled with the same crowds further out in the country while they examined Jim Elder's prize herd of Jersey cattle. The official party, headed by President Norman, straggled after them all through the hot, dusty day, ignored for the most part, and condescendingly recognised only when they had seen enough and wished to return to the Mayor's residence which had been taken over for their accommodation.

Charles Norman was a big man, middle aged, and of the build which is just past being able to cope with hot, dusty walks in the country. He had enjoyed the day inasmuch as it had been his first visit ' home ' in eight years, but there the pleasure ended. He relaxed now in his private suite and kicked his shoes under a chair in silent and thankful dismissal. He got rid of his valet as speedily as he could, and sat back in the soft armchair to make the most of the few hours of peace and privacy that the evening allowed him. In the past three months there had been little time for either peace or privacy, as he had roamed the world with the seemingly tireless aliens, until cities and towns became boring repetitions with nothing left of any interest. He had felt, he thought, rather like a small boy following a circus.

He sat quiet for a long time while the shadows lengthened outside and the sun drifted away over the hills beyond the town. The peace and contentment of relaxation made him drowsy and he was only half awake when a knock at the door jerked him back to reality, so that he

found darkness full over the land. He sighed and rose unwillingly from the chair to answer the knock, switching on the light as he did so.

He opened the door.

"Oh, hello Colonel." He looked at his wrist watch. "You're prompt, I hadn't realised it was so late."

Colonel Marek was tall, slim, brown faced and efficient. In fact efficiency was as much as a part of him as his brown uniform and his two rows of medal ribbons. Here, one felt instinctively, was a man on whom you could rely.

Norman closed the door and motioned him to a chair. He sat down again in his own with a sigh of contentment and stretched his legs before him across the thick Persian carpet.

"I can't remember when I was last able to do this, Marek," he grinned. "In fact, I sometimes wonder if I shall ever do it again."

Marek smiled but said nothing, and a momentary silence fell upon the room while Norman leaned forward and allowed the pleasure on his face to give way to a seriousness befitting the meeting.

"How are things?" he asked.

"Everything's arranged, sir," Marek told him. "All I need is the final details—what time?"

Norman nodded slowly. "I hope I'm wrong. Dear God, I hope I'm wrong."

"If you are, sir, there'll be no harm done. If not—" Marek shrugged. "How will you know?"

Norman shook his head and smiled bleakly. "I'm telling no one." He rubbed his hands together between his knees. "I'm making it about ten thirty in the morning. The rest you've got straight?"

Marek nodded.

"Good. If you have any questions you'd better get them off your chest. This will be our last chance for a meeting."

"No, sir. The time was all I needed. Everything else is taken care of."

Norman rose and stretched himself. "When you go to bed tonight, Colonel," he said, "you'd better pray harder than you've ever done in your life before. Pray that I'm going to think right, and that you're going to act right. Goodnight."

Olsen was up at dawn the next day. He had slept in a pile of hay in a deserted barn on Whittle's farm, and the early cries of chickens and the lowing of cattle were as effective as any man-made alarm clock. He washed in a stream below the long meadow, and made his breakfast from some thick, stale sandwiches he carried wrapped in a large red handkerchief in his jacket pocket.

He reached town before most people were up, and reinforced the sandwiches with a thick, black cup of tea from a workman's restaurant just off the main street. He took his time over the drink, sitting at a rough, uncovered table under a dirt-encrusted window, watching the street outside grow busier and busier as the sun rose higher in the heavens.

At eight o'clock he left the café and made his way unhurriedly towards the Mayor's residence on the outskirts of the town where the aliens were staying. There, he joined the gathering crowds to watch them begin their last day in Alandale, their last but three on Earth. He stood patiently while the sun grew hotter and the crowds grew thicker, but because he had got there early he was well to the front of the slowly packing hordes, and the congestion was not so great as it was farther back. A line of policemen kept the roadway clear.

At half past nine there were signs of movement around the ornate colonnades of the front door to the large, officious looking house, and a rustle of expectation swept through the waiting throng.

"They'll be coming soon."

An officer in brown army uniform and carrying a swagger stick came down the drive and spoke to the police inspector at the gate. Together they walked across the road towards the crowded pavement on the far side and began to walk slowly and purposefully along the front of the crowd looking at the people with curious intentness. Olsen watched them patiently and without curiosity as they drew near to him, and his blue eyes met those of the major as the officer stopped abruptly opposite him. The Major looked at Olsen carefully and keenly and Olsen returned the stare with equal equanimity.

"He'll do," said the major, pointing, and the inspector stepped forward and pushed two people out of the way directly in front of Olsen.

"Would you mind coming with us?" he asked. "The aliens would like to meet you."

Olsen grinned slowly, his eyes crinkling with genuine humour. "Why me? Guess you could get someone more fitting than me."

"Will you come?"

"Sure, if it'll please them." He stepped off the curb and moved gently between the people directly in front of him.

There was a subdued, curious murmur from the crowd as they watched the rough-dressed giant of a man in the country tweeds of a dirt farmer, walk across the road between the major and the inspector.

"What they wan' him for?"

"Maybe he's a spy."

"Maybe he wants to shoot one of 'em and start a war."

" Heck, what they wan' a hobo like that to look at? What's wrong with me?"

There was laughter to drown the curiosity. " You really wanna know?"

The inside of the mansion was cool and dark after the heat of the sun outside, and Olsen glanced around with interest at the panelled walls and soft carpets. They had left the inspector outside, and now he was alone with the major. They went along a wide corridor towards a great oak door, heavy with metal studs, for all the world like a dungeon door in some ancient castle. The major knocked, pushed open the door and ushered Olsen inside.

The room was large and wide and high. The walls were covered from floor to ceiling with row upon row of leather covered books which made a brilliant mosaic in the sunlight streaming through the open french windows.

" What's your name?" asked the major abruptly.

Olsen blinked at a group of figures in the shadow by the fire place, striving to make out details of the dim shapes.

" Your name?" demanded the major.

" Oh — er — Olsen, Martin Olsen."

A big, heavily built man detached himself from the group and crossed towards Olsen.

" Good morning, Mister Olsen." His voice was warm and friendly, as if to give confidence to the stranger. " My name is Norman, Charles Norman. You may have heard of me."

Olsen nodded slowly, his eyes appraisingly on the other. " Why, sure. You're the President." There was no surprise in his voice as he spoke, only mute acceptance of an inescapable fact.

" You have heard of our visitors from beyond the stars?"

" Sure. Came to town just to get a look at them."

Norman smiled. " Exactly. By the same token they want to see you. They asked to see a man who makes his living from the earth, and you looked to be a typical farmer. That is why the major brought you here."

Norman turned to the others at the back of him.

" This is such a man as you wished to see."

The aliens stepped out of the shadows so that Olsen could see them more clearly. They were tall and golden and smiling, and they looked at him much as a child would look at an animal in a zoo, with exactly the same degree of interested distaste.

" Barbaric," said one in lilting accented English.

"You grow things in the soil and eat them?" asked another, a female.

Olsen flushed and nodded. " Sure, I grow a bit up in the hills."

The woman shivered deliciously. " Fascinating." She turned and said something to the others in a cascading alien tongue and they laughed with her, tinkling, private laughter at some alien joke that was far above the understanding of mere Earthmen.

Another of them walked close to Olsen and touched the rough tweed on his jacket, then he twitched his nose gently and delicately. " It has a peculiar odour," he announced, and retreated hastily.

Olsen's flush grew deeper. " It's hot outside," he said. " A man gets to sweatin' in the sun."

Norman moved forward between him and the aliens. " And what do you think of our friends from across the Universe?"

Olsen considered for a minute, his blue eyes moving coldly and deliberately, from one to another of the golden figures at the back of the President.

" Can't say I like 'em," he responded at last, and was greeted with a lilt of alien humour. " Nope, can't say I like 'em at all."

" Come now," Norman frowned. " You mustn't be discourteous to our guests. They can probably do a great deal for us."

Olsen shook his head slowly, his eyes still searchingly on the group. " They can't do anything for me," he said. " I'll be getting back outside, if it's all the same to you." He turned and walked slowly from the room.

Norman watched him speculatively until the closing door hid the broad shoulders from sight, and then he turned, smiling to the aliens. " There you have a man who lives from the soil. All that he eats he grows himself, and all that he wears he gets by barter. And now," he moved across to the open french windows, " perhaps you would care to see some of the flowers and vegetables which he grows so that he may live."

He stood aside politely and motioned them to walk through ahead of him into the garden. Outside, the brilliance of deep summer lay on the wide, green lawn, and flower beds beckoned with appealing beauty while roses and marigolds held forth the scents and colours of a million years development to the aliens from across the darkness of space. Norman didn't follow them; instead, he took out his handkerchief and placed it to his nose with a wide, white flourish, and then he stepped back behind the shelter of the thick library walls.

From a patch of shrubbery, glinting many shades of green in the sunlight, three hidden automatics mowed down the aliens before they knew what had happened, and alien blood stained the green of the Terran grass.

Norman sat huddled in a chair, his face white and sunken, and his eyes etched deep with the horror he had witnessed only a bare hour before.

Outside a large, white, grotesquely lumpy sheet covered the tragedy on the lawn, and brown army uniforms mingled with the greys and blues of civilians, as hushed voices murmured the bewildered concern of those who had rushed to the sounds of gunfire.

The sunlight, gleaming on the carpet, shimmered and was broken as Colonel Marek came through the french doors, and Norman raised his eyes to look at him.

" Well, Colonel?"

Marek laid his cap on the table and wiped away the perspiration that gleamed on his forehead.

" Panic at the moment, sir," he answered. " Some of them say you were mad. They're talking about arresting us both for murder."

A thin ghost of a smile creased Norman's face. " Me, perhaps. You, never. You acted on my orders, remember that."

" But—"

Norman waved him to silence. " Don't worry about me, Marek. I shall be covered by article twenty-seven of the Presidential Mandate. They may talk a lot—probably I won't get re-elected—but that's all."

Marek was silent for a long minute.

" No questions, Colonel?" asked Norman.

Marek chuckled grimly. " Of course I have, sir. Dozens. Most important of all, you were right. But did you know for certain?"

Norman. " Yes, I was right; God forgive me for my suspicions. The aliens were that advance party for a complete invasion force which would have arrived within the next ten years if the report of this group had been favourable." He rubbed a hand tiredly over his forehead. " The report would have been favourable, I know that now, and I can't be sure that, by destroying this group, I have dismissed the fact of possible invasion. All I have done is to delay it, possibly for another ten years, possibly for a century, but at least we shall have that much more time—if people listen to me, and believe me.

" I suspected the aliens intentions for a long time, but I couldn't prove anything. They were too nice, too interested in everything about us, too polite and too promising in their ways. They were always hinting at what they could do for us, but when it came right down to it, they never said exactly what they were capable of, or just what they could offer us that would be beneficial. They learned, but they taught nothing in return."

" When did you find out about them for certain?"

" About half an hour ago."

" What?" Marek's face mirrored his astonishment. " But it—"

" Yes, I know," broke in Norman. " It was all over then. Let me finish the story. I had to find out about them somehow, and I had to be certain that I got the right answer, and that's why I brought them here. That's why I brought that man, Olsen, to meet them. He was the one who confirmed my suspicions beyond any shadow of doubt. If they had left Earth in three days time as they intended, then our fate was sealed, and the only way in which I could prove to myself that what I planned to do was right was to get them. Olsen told me what I wanted to know the first time Major Wilson brought him into this room. He filled in the gaps a little while ago, after it was all over, and now he's gone back to his farm up in the hills."

" Olsen?" Marek's voice was incredulous. " Olsen? But he's only a dirt farmer !"

" Only a dirt farmer?" Norman laughed. " Yes, I know, but he's something else as well. He is the first complete telepath that the human race has developed. He reads the minds of men as clearly as he can hear people speak—and not only the minds of men—anyone's mind, whether it is alien or Terran, and he read our fate in the thoughts of the aliens."

" But that's ridiculous."

" Nevertheless, it is so." Norman looked at Marek with eyes that glowed with terrible sincerity. " Do you really imagine that I would have ordered you to do what you did unless I had some overwhelming justification backed by irrefutable fact ?"

Marek pursed his lips and shook his head in bewilderment. " No, sir, of course not. But I presumed that you had some concrete evidence of their bad faith." He gestured weakly. " This—I'd hardly call it concrete."

" On the contrary it is the most concrete evidence we could have, because the aliens themselves have provided a complete record which cannot be dismissed."

" But how can you possibly know that Olsen is—is what you say he is ?"

Norman smiled wanly. " This is my home town. Remember? And Olsen is my half brother. Martin Olsen Norman. He dropped the last name, and he keeps quiet about the relationship because he's rather ashamed of it. He doesn't trust politicians because he sees too plainly what their real aims and ambitions are. It rather puts him off."

There was a long silence while Marek digested the information slowly and uncomfortably. He stirred at last. " But a man like that

—he could be of inestimable value to the world." His back straightened and his eyes brightened as the implications of Olsen's gift began to be felt in his mind. " Why, he could——"

" He could do nothing," broke in Norman soberly, " because he is the loneliest man alive. He cannot bear to live with other men because of what he sees in their hearts and minds. To him a walk down a busy street is sheer torture because he hears everything that he is not supposed to hear. You and I, through our ears, know only what people want us to know, but he knows the real truths behind the facade of a man's face. It must have been sheer torture for him to come into Alandale and spend a day among all the lusts and jealousies and hates of his fellow men.

" Can you imagine what it must be like to see your friends and your loved ones as they really are, and not as they would have you believe they are? It must be as bad for him as it would be for you or I to spend a night in the Tower of Babel. Yet, when I sent and asked him to come down out of the hills and help us, he did it without question.

" He saved the world."

Lan Wright

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

After too long an interval popular author E. C. Tubb returns to our pages next month with another poignant story entitled " Homecoming." It deals with Tubb's favourite subject—the returned space pilot. There's a new C. M. Kornbluth story to follow up his recent popular serial " Takeoff," several more short stories and Wilson Tucker's great climax to his serial " Wild Talent." It *still* makes me want to look over my shoulder—just in case !

Story ratings for No. 25 were :

1.	Starvation Orbit - - - - -	James White.
2.	The Odour Of Thought - - -	Robert Sheckley.
3.	Ship From The Stars - - - -	Peter Hawkins.
4.	Pipe Away Stranger - - - -	Francis G. Rayer.
5.	Staying Guests - - - - -	David Gardner.
6.	Man On The Ceiling - - - -	E. R. James.
7.	The Ethical Question - - - -	Lan Wright.

On a neutral planet representatives of two Galactic Powers used the joint medium of robot secretaries for their calculations —and came up with the same answer. After that it was a case of indoctrination to avert war.

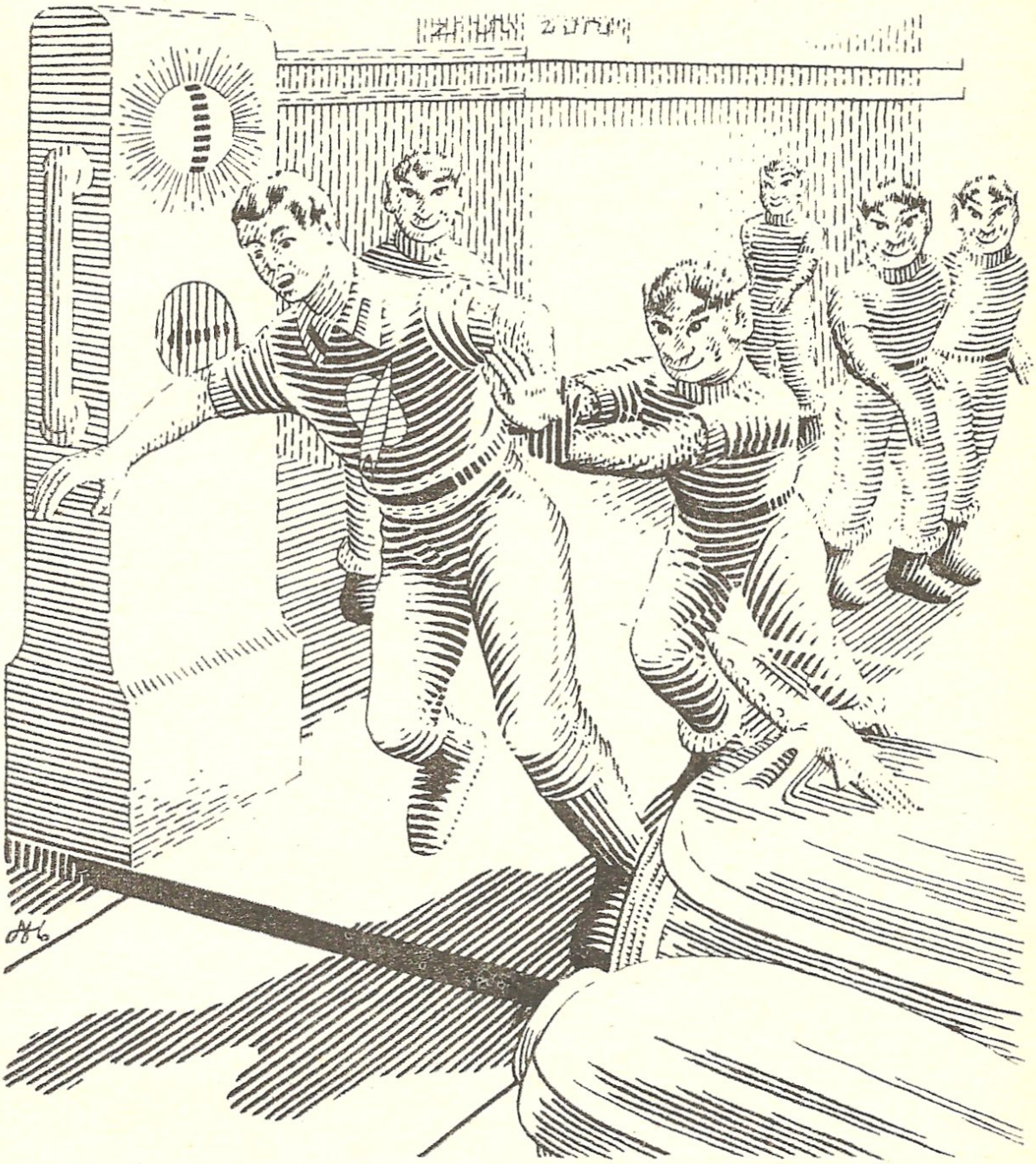
THE PERFECT SECRETARY

By Jonathan Burke

Illustrated by HUNTER

The hotel was a great stack of lights against the deep mauve sky of Ariadne. Beyond it, the sky was laced with the fine fiery trails of private flight cars, and in the farthest background one could still see the chalky, fading stain of the night mail rocket from Medea.

Clint Enfield stood for a moment on the pavement, looking up at the glittering facade of the hotel. Before him there was the faint swish of fast-moving traffic. He had just missed the automatic crossing,



and there would be a wait of thirty seconds. He whistled quietly, and rocked to and fro on his heels.

Then he was staggering, falling into the gutter and thrusting himself backwards just in time to avoid the silent, speeding car that had been hugging the kerb.

" Who do you think——"

" I am sorry," said a deep voice behind him. And a Medean walked away, grinning back in a way that you could hardly call apologetic.

Clint took two steps after him, then stopped. A fine way to behave —shoving you under a car and then wandering off with only the most casual remark ! But it was no good making trouble. There might have been an accident, but fortunately there hadn't been; and the Tellurian ambassador had been most insistent that he was to be careful. Go easy: that had been the warning. You couldn't call this enemy territory, but it was unfriendly, and you were only here on sufferance. Save the trouble until later—there was every sign that there would be some. And it was his job to get his information recorded, the details worked out, before he indulged in any private fights.

The traffic was suddenly stopped, and the lights of the automatic crossing winked. Enfield stepped out on to the runway and was carried smoothly and swiftly across the road. He walked into the hotel. Two Medeans, thickset and furry, swaggered past him with a twitch of their oblique eyes. Every glance, every gesture seemed to be designed as an insult. They stamped about the place like conquerors.

Which is just about what they are, thought Enfield grimly.

He approached the secretarial service desk, and nodded to the young man behind it—a native of the planet, a typical Ariadne young man with pale eyes and strangely mobile mouth that articulated Tellurian dialects with difficulty.

Enfield said: " Can you send a secretary up to my room right away, please?"

" Sorry, sir. It can not be done for a short while. They are all engaged at present."

" All three? There must be some hard workers in this hotel."

" They are all in use by gentlemen from Medea "—the voice was suave yet half-resentful—" but I will send one to you at the earliest opportunity."

" The Medeans are busy, aren't they?"

" The Medeans are always busy."

Beneath the apparent impartiality was a note of ruefulness, almost of accusation, that told Enfield that here was a potential ally: here was yet another man of this planet who wanted to shake off the domineering influences of the arrogant Medeans and who looked to Earth and to the Galactic Council to implement its promises about freedom and self-government and all the rest of it. And what were the G.C. doing about these people?

As he was whisked up in the lift to the fortieth floor, Enfield could almost hear his own ambassador once more telling him to go easy, to

do his job quietly and make no trouble. But there was nobody to tell the Medeans to make no trouble: the Medeans all too clearly relished the very idea of brewing up trouble.

He sat by the window and waited for a robot secretary to become available and be sent up to him. Outside, the night hummed with invigorating activity. A clear fresh breeze blew across from the far hills. A sign winking into the sky two blocks away advertised the splendours of the Pleasure Palace. Enfield stared at it. If that robot didn't soon come, he wasn't sure that he wouldn't start straying away in that direction.

But that wasn't true. He knew darned well he'd sit here until his job was done. This was important. This was big. This would shake the Medeans when it really got going.

The Medeans . . .

Living out on the rim of the galaxy, these stocky, aggressive people had never taken kindly to the enlightened ideals and methods of the Galactic Council. At times stealthily, and at times quite brazenly, they had extended their far from beneficent influence over several small systems in a way that was often provocative but never actually warlike. Appeals to the Galactic Council from these engulfed systems had a way of sounding feeble by the time they reached the central authority. It was hard to get at the Medeans: to send a fleet out that far was difficult, and there were many elements in the Council that were in favour of sitting tight and not doing too much. As long as the Medeans did not threaten the main partners in the alliance, the influential planets and systems who held all the strings in the Council, very little would be done about them. Enfield had heard the excuses so often —" In the event of any major aggression, sanctions would be applied . . . decisive defensive measures taken . . . but it must be borne in mind that no ship can reach the Medean system in less than three weeks, and that, carrying fuel to enable it to make such a journey, it will not be a truly effective fighting vessel when it gets there . . . a policy of live and let live advisable . . . no appeasement, but firm reasoning . . ." Back, always, when fresh proof was given of the Medean lust for conquest, to the excuse: " We can't *get* there."

But there wouldn't, thought Enfield exultantly, be that excuse any longer. If the figures in his head and the calculations he had scribbled on paper during these last three days meant anything at all, they meant that the time for the journey was going to be cut drastically.

He was peering out into the night when the doorbell sang a musical note. A moment later, at the flick of his finger, the door opened and one of the secretaries came in.

These robots looked neither human nor other-worldly. They were most fairly and considerately designed, their whole appearance calculated to offer the least offence to all the different races and creatures that might need to use them. No hotel today was complete without its staff of efficient, impersonal, unfailingly accurate secretaries. All you had to do was adjust the dial to make the robot respond to the nuances of your own particular language, and start talking. All the hard work would be done inside that square metallic body.

Enfield looked out into the corridor to make sure nobody was hanging about. He went and closed the window, shutting out the sociable noises of the evening and, he hoped, shutting in the sound of his own voice. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and began to talk.

" Proposed new route, Galactic centre 24 to Medea via Antares. Utilising force path polarised on 815. Allowing for a primary station power output . . ." He went on without needing to look at his notes. In his wanderings about this planet, innocently discussing new ways of improving freight traffic between the various systems, he had made innumerable calculations that he had not dared to put on paper. Observing, checking and even risking some direct spying in one or two control towers, he had acquired a lot of information that had been kept nowhere else but in his head—and that was now being fed into the smoothly ticking interior of the secretary before him.

" Calculation check, please," he said at the end of a string of figures that he thought he had got right but had to be sure about.

The robot clicked a polite acknowledgment and then was silent for a moment. It was like a silent clock: you stared at it, wondering if it was going. Did it need a tap, a gentle jog to set it in motion again?

Abruptly it said: " Correct."

" Good," said Enfield. " Now, here's the important bit."

It was funny how you couldn't treat the machines impersonally. You found yourself making odd comments to them, as though they would understand; instead of sticking to the purely functional, mathematical statements that they were so magnificently equipped to deal with, you tried to encourage them and show that you weren't a bad guy at all.

" I suppose," Enfield ridiculously said, " you've been fed the latest Colawski continuum figures—and the new Statistics Bureau reports?"

The secretary disdained to answer.

Enfield stared at it for a moment, and the flat grey surface seemed to stare out contemptuously back at him.

It was terrifying to think of how much of the knowledge of the universe was stored away in that mechanical brain. Every new discovery

was dictated to the robots; each new mathematical speculation was fed in and dealt with; two or three times a week, qualified mechanics overhauled them and made sure that the most up-to-date technical advances were made known to those receptive organisms—or mechanisms, rather. Here were minds that did not grow tired : here were minds capable of relating every new discovery and every new question to each most infinitesimal detail in the known universe. All you had to do was talk to it, giving it figures as though numerals were appetising chocolates, and all its knowledge would be brought to bear on your problem.

That was what Enfield was doing now. Clearing his throat and assuring himself that the robot's contemptuous expression was something that he himself merely imagined, he proceeded. He tossed it co-ordinates the way you would toss biscuits to a dog. They were gulped up soundlessly. In his mind's eye, as he spoke, he saw the incredible things that were going to happen if these calculations were right: he saw space ships that did not have to plod wearily across the vast deserts of the void to reach those far destinations, but that were twisted neatly through another dimension, a strange dimension that was still only a mathematical theory—a theory that this squat creation in unfeeling metal could confirm or refute. Instead of weeks, ships would pivot on that inexplicable zero in space and be, in a matter of hours, in the outer reaches of space. Time was to be annihilated . . . if these postulates were true.

" Wait," said the robot suddenly, unexpectedly.

Enfield's voice tailed away. He felt a sinking feeling, a lurching inside that was like space sickness only worse. These figures couldn't be wrong. They *couldn't* be !

He said: " What is it?"

The robot did not reply at once. It began to hum like someone monotonously trying out a tune while brooding over a chess problem.

At last there was a decisive click. From inside the box-like body came the sound of relays tripping gently. The darned thing was, thought Enfield, clearing its throat.

It spoke. It said in its level, unnatural tone :

" Calculations check, but new factor cancels out."

" What new factor? If there's anything in some new bulletin or—"

" Pivot is included," the voice went on, unheeding, " in Medean calculations. Impossible to utilise energy for two coincident routes." It did not stop. It went on to vomit a great welter of figures that meant nothing to Enfield in his present dazed state of mind. Calmly it told him that he was too late. It agreed to his calculations and as good as told him that somebody else had already made them—from the other end.

He said, trying to talk down the emotionless voice: " What you mean is that . . . that . . ."

What it meant was that the Medean scientists and space surveyors had already worked out that new express route into the heart of the civilised galaxy.

And it wasn't pleasant to imagine what use they might want to put it to.

The secretary stopped talking and there was a hush in the hotel room.

" Hell," said Enfield weakly.

He got up, then sat down again. Then he reached for the telephone, and after a second's hesitation put it down. This was Medean territory—a planet under Medean ' protection.' That meant that you didn't risk telephoning vital information to the Tellurian ambassador.

One hand still on the smooth receiver above the gauze of the loudspeaker, he stared unbelievingly at the secretary. The robot now looked smug, as though it had pulled off a really smart trick this time.

Enfield said aloud: " How did you come to trot out that information, anyway? I didn't know . . . that is, I wouldn't have thought confidential stuff like that would have been inserted in the routine way."

The robot purred gently.

Enfield lifted his hand again, and when the hotel desk answered he said: " My secretary isn't giving satisfactory service. I'd like to see you about him."

" I'll telephone for a mechanic at once, sir."

" I'd sooner you came up yourself—it won't take a minute," said Enfield, recognising the slurred voice of the young man of Ariadne to whom he had spoken earlier. He had hoped he would be still there: he was going to gamble on his intuition about that youngster.

There was a brief delay, then the Ariadnean appeared in the doorway.

" Sir?"

" Close the door and sit down a minute, will you. I'd like to ask you one or two questions about this — er— machine."

" I'm afraid my technical knowledge is limited, sir."

" I don't know just how technical this is. And I certainly don't want a mechanic fumbling about inside the thing and perhaps upsetting the balance."

He studied the pale green face of this alien being who was somehow not alien at all: at least, thought Enfield, he was flesh (of a sort) and blood (if green), and not a weird collection of bits and pieces like this robot. Was he to be trusted? Enfield had to trust to his instinct, as he had done before. He had to take a chance here. He said :

" Tell me . . . these secretaries are fed with all the latest technological stuff as it comes out: right?"

" Quite right, sir."

" The stuff is fed in specially, I suppose? They don't just have newspapers or technical bulletins read to them in the same way that I read things out to one of them when I want to have some calculations made?"

The Ariadnean shook his head—a movement that creased his neck in a scaly, disturbing way. " They do not, sir. All their basic knowledge has to be inserted by skilled mechanics.: it is with these fundamentals that their brains set to work on specific problems that are put to them by those who engage them."

" So that a secretary is really trustworthy—the things you tell it when you use it don't get repeated to later users?"

The young man looked shocked. " These robots are confidential secretaries in the most exact sense of the word," he said. " No hotel manager would run the risk of having a faulty machine that acted merely as a dictaphone, playing back previous records."

" This one," said Enfield, " has done something far more involved than that. It has just thrown out one of my calculations not for inaccuracy but because previous calculations made by a Medean conflicted with them."

" You mean——"

" I mean that either one of the mechanics has had access to the robot and has fed in secret information that he has somehow got hold of about Medean plans——"

" No !" said the Ariadnean positively. " I know the mechanics. They are devoted craftsmen, all four of them. I will vouch for them."

" None of them could have been bribed, say, to introduce false facts into the secretary, in order to give me a shock?"

" No."

Enfield had realised as he spoke that the idea was absurd. Why should the Medeans wish to let him know that they were already perfecting plans for bridging space in just the same way that the Galactic Council wished to do? Even if they had known that he was on the same track as themselves, they would hardly have boasted to him about it in this roundabout way.

He said bluntly: " I can tell you this much—it's a question now of whether the Medeans get within an hour's striking distance of the Galactic Council powers, or whether we get within striking distance of them first. Which would *you* prefer? You'd better tell me quickly."

The Ariadnean looked nervously over his shoulder, as thoug

accustomed to checking up on his surroundings before he committed himself. Then he said: "The Council should prevail."

"Well, the way things are going, it doesn't stand much chance."

They both regarded the mute, unfathomable secretary.

"I don't understand this at all," mused Enfield. "I can only think that something is going on inside this thing that wasn't planned for at all. It was being used by a Medean just before I got it?"

"It has been used several times today by Medean spacefield technicians who are staying here."

"Hm. And it's been very indiscreet, that's all I can say: it's been telling me all about what they've been up to. It's not only been using its fundamental knowledge, but also working on material acquired in the course of its duties. You're sure this isn't some special model, recently perfected?"

The Ariadnean was quite certain about that. But there were things he wasn't so certain about: there was a flicker of unease in his eyes. He said reluctantly:

"I have never been sure . . . I have wondered . . ."

"About what?"

"These robots—they have developed skills far beyond human capacity. Human beings have built them, designed them for a special, highly technical purpose: but who is to say that the machine will not one day think for itself? It may not develop passions and emotions—not yet—but perhaps this is the first step. Perhaps it is no longer a thing of wires and relays, of controlled tissue and automatic reactions. Perhaps it is, quite literally, thinking. Not just responding to certain stimuli or functioning as a glorified adding machine, but beginning to think—impartially, of course, but with a freedom that it did not have before."

"A freedom," Enfield went on excitedly, "that was not given to it. Something it is going to create for itself."

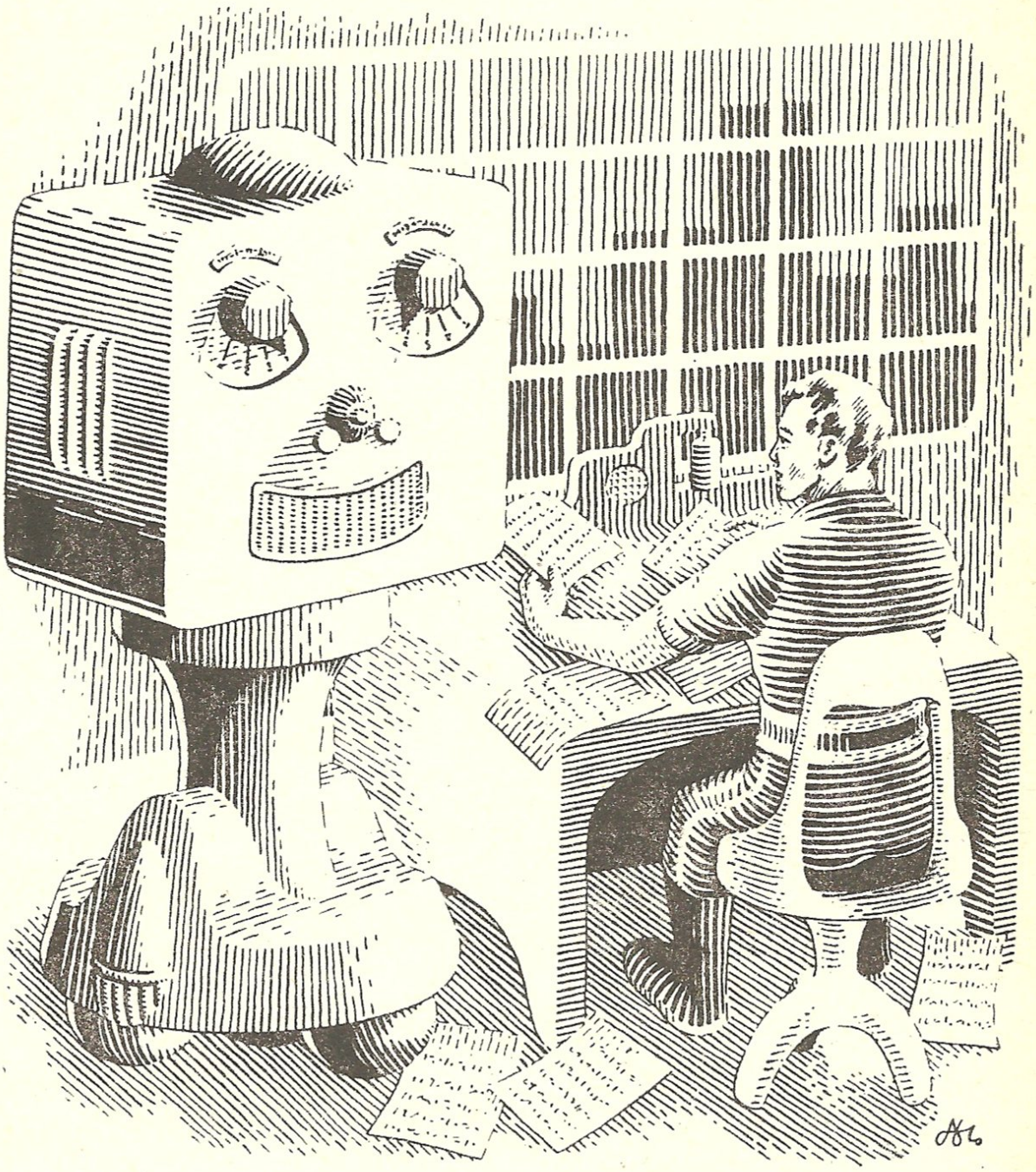
For a moment, fantastically, he half expected the robot to make some approving remark, or produce an arm from inside that square box and shake him by the hand.

The Ariadnean said: "What are you going to do?"

Enfield got up, forcing himself out of the daze of bewildered contemplation into which he had fallen.

"Do?" he echoed. "I'm going to see our ambassador. What's important is not that this tin can has started to heave itself up by its bootstraps, but the information it's given me. We've got to do something about it. That's the thing that counts now."

At the door he stopped. "Can you make sure the Medeans don't



get a chance to use that thing again tonight?"

"It will be difficult."

"If you can keep it up here, keep it. I don't want it gossiping to them about what I've told it. Heaven knows what sort of a tell-tale it will become now that it's started. If you mean what you said about

being on our side, do what you can. And if you're on the Medean side after all—well "—he grinned dourly—" I guess I'll be rayed down before I get as far as our ambassador, anyway."

The ambassador shook his head dubiously.

" It's an incredible story," he said. " If it's true——"

" Do you think I'd waste my time cooking up a yarn like that?" protested Enfield. " Of course it's true. You've got to act."

The older man sighed and rubbed a weary hand across his smooth, noble forehead. " Act? What am I supposed to do?"

" As the Tellurian representative here——"

" Earth is a long way away."

" What's that got to do with it? As one of the major powers on the Galactic Council——"..

" We are in territory that is under Medean influence," said the ambassador quietly. " And that's the same thing as saying that the Medeans have a stranglehold on everything. Our messages are tapped, interfered with. Radio is out of the question. Direct mail is one fairly safe way, though even the diplomatic bag isn't as sacrosanct as it's supposed to be; and in any case that takes three weeks. The other possibility is for a Tellurian ship to pass radio messages once it's outside the area of Medean jamming. That means about a week. Of course those of us who are in the confidence of the secretariat know that when the proposed new system comes into force there may well be revolutionary changes."

" If it ever does come in !" retorted Enfield. " If the Medeans get started first . . ." It was impossible to complete the sentence.

" All that I can do," said the ambassador regretfully, " is to take the captain of the next Tellurian ship due here into my confidence. It will be five days before the next one arrives."

" Five days !"

" Either he must take a message back to Earth, or we must give him a radio message that can be sent out—and thereby run the risk of letting any listening Medeans know that we have discovered their plans."

" Either way," said Enfield, " it may be too late. If the Medeans are going to launch an attack on our system——"

" We don't know that they are," said the ambassador reprovingly.

" We can make a pretty good guess. It may not be done at once, but the moment they can get through by this new route they won't waste time. The Galactic Council has shown itself weak and irresolute in the past. If the Medeans go all out for a quick conquest, it'll all be over in no time at all. Present the G.C. with a *fait accompli*, and you know what sort of resistance they're likely to put up."

The ambassador persisted in trying to look on the bright side. He pointed out that the Medeans would need to instal new equipment in all their ships before they could use the new route through space. That would take time. Enfield agreed, but said that that breathing-space must be taken advantage of—and quickly. The ambassador muttered again about messages to Earth.

And while messages were on their way? What was going to go on in that great planet that hung in the late night sky: what would the Medeans be doing with their time?

Enfield said: " We can't just sit back and hope that there'll be time for us to take steps of our own. There may be no time at all. We've got to do something."

The ambassador said: " Do what?"

Enfield went back angrily to the hotel. Wildly he considered asking the robot to provide an answer to this. But it was unlikely that the secretary's original thought powers would stretch that far. Probably the works would get tangled up.

The Ariadnean was at the desk as he crossed the foyer. Casually Enfield went across, and stood near him for a moment.

" Anything happened?"

" There have been two demands for the secretary. I will have to let them use him——"

" Can't risk it," said Enfield. " It might come out with all the stuff I fed into it."

" But I cannot say no."

" Say it's damaged."

" Our mechanics would have to repair it at once."

" But if they realise I'm on the same track as they are . . ."

And then he got his bright idea. It was simple. Simple, if it worked. He nodded, again casual, to the Ariadnean, and began to walk away. Then he said over his shoulder: " I only want the secretary for another ten minutes or so. Routine stuff. I'll send it down when I've finished."

" Thank you, sir." The young man was baffled. He looked worried.

Enfield left him. There was no time to waste. He had to get on with things.

First of all he got out a large sheet of squared paper and began to make rapid calculations. The need for speed and for first-shot accuracy made him talk aloud, until the impassive voice of the robot startled him by saying: " Calculation confirmed. Total accurate." Then he bit his lip and went on silently, furiously.

At last he was finished. He could only hope his figures were right —that is to say, that they were consistent within the framework he

had devised. Because the whole point about them was they they were not right.

He picked up the paper and began to read aloud.

At the end of five minutes he stopped. He was sweating. His heart seemed to be banging as though he had gone through a period of great exertion or intense emotional excitement.

The secretary ticked thoughtfully. It purred. There was a noise like coins falling through a slot into a container.

"Come on, come on," said Enfield impatiently.

The secretary cleared its throat. It said:

"Calculation confirmed. To three places only."

"Three places will do," said Enfield with a great sigh.

He went over and opened the door. He flicked the dismissal switch on the back of the metal body, and the robot rolled smoothly out of the room.

Ten minutes later the Ariadnean arrived—greener than ever in feature, thought Enfield: or may be it was his own queasiness that made the visitor look that way.

"The Medean in Room X92 has insisted on using the secretary. I could not prevent——"

"Don't worry about it," said Enfield soothingly. "Everything's going to be all right. Or maybe it isn't. But if this doesn't work, nothing will."

"What have you been doing?"

"I've been feeding our fine tinplated friend with lies."

The other stared. "Lies?"

"Lies," repeated Enfield with relish. "I don't know whether that repetition of what the Medeans had fed in was just a fluke, but I'm banking on the robot being able to do it again. I made a calculation—a darned quick and experimental one, let me tell you—that could, on the face of it, have fitted in with my original calculations and those that the Medeans made. But if it is incorporated in their scheme, it will throw everything out. If the secretary does what it did before, and uses this material as though it were basic material, it will automatically adjust any further calculations the Medeans make, so that although those calculations will be mathematically sound, they won't help those boys to get where they want to go."

The Ariadnean sat down. He made the little musical noise that passed for laughter among his race. He said:

"You may be too late."

"Maybe. Maybe all their details are finalised. Maybe the Medean who is using John Willie right at this moment is only doing his income

tax return. But if he's not, and if we get just the slightest shift in their final totals we should be all right. I don't know where the Medean ships will land up, but it won't be where they expected."

" If the robot does not repeat its performance—if that was a mechanical defect that functions only that once . . . ?"

" In that case, there's no telling what will happen. It's all a matter of wait and see."

They parted with a handshake. There was a deep sincerity in the Ariadnean that appealed to Enfield: he felt that it was not only his duty as a Tellurian to establish the possibility of that swift passage through space, but his duty as a citizen of the universe to release people like these Ariadneans from the humiliating yoke of the sly, oppressive Medeans.

Early next morning he was awoken by the soundless penetrating oscillation of the telephone resonator.

" Yes?" he muttered drowsily.

" I thought you would like to know," said a cultured voice that he did not at first recognise, " that a ship has arrived unexpectedly which may be able to take you home."

" Huh?"

" In view of your wife's dangerous illness, arrangements can be made for you to travel at once, although this is not a normal passenger-carrying vessel."

Enfield dragged himself up out of sleep far enough to recognise the voice of the Tellurian ambassador. Quickly assuming the part he was being prompted to play, he said:

" That's really splendid of you. I'm deeply grateful. I didn't think it would be possible."

" A patrol survey ship that we did not expect is on its way in. It will get back to Earth in about a fortnight. In a week "—the voice was still mild and deceptive—" you will be well on your way."

In a week he was, as promised, well on his way: he was far out in space, beyond the reach of Medean jamming, and his urgent code message was going on ahead of him to Earth, where the technicians and bureaucrats and military men and all the rest of them could get busy—if they had the energy.

And before they had even entered their own solar system, something else had happened. A Medean ship appeared above a planet on the far side of the glaxy—appeared abruptly, crazily, spinning wildly round, and flew into fragments. The fragments, large enough to be identifiable, fell upon the planet. What was a Medean ship doing there? Fast patrols investigated and then went streaking across the

void. The Galactic Council realised that this was no time for hesitation and discussion. Its cruisers and battleships fuelled and went off, along the old slow route . . . perhaps for the last time. A great blast of radio jamming went forth to confuse the Medeans.

There was an outburst of sudden viciousness on Ariande. The Medeans came out openly as conquerors, perhaps hoping to establish a firm footing here before the Galactic Council fleet arrived. But there was a corresponding surge of resistance. The Ariadneans could not have held out for long if Medea had thrown all its weight into the struggle—but the Medean space fleet was grounded, all its major vessels undergoing alterations so that they could utilise the new pathway through the stars. By the time word of the failure of the trial ship had come through—by the time they heard, incredulously, of its crazy appearance in the wrong part of the heavens—the Galactic Council fleet was already surging within range.

There was no great battle. No war. There was a new treaty which brought Medea more firmly within the sphere of influence of the Galactic Council; and along with the treaty went the knowledge that there was, after all, a gateway between the galaxy and this to which the G.C. powers held the key.

And on a bright afternoon, beneath the two brilliant suns of Ariadne, Clint Enfield came back for a brief visit. He had one or two routine matters to attend to, and an old friend to see.

He and the Ariadnean and the secretary stood and stared at one another. The Ariadnean grinned widely, Enfield grinned, and the secretary purred.

" This bloke deserves a medal," said Enfield. " I wonder if there's any special treat that a robot would appreciate?"

" They usually like a bit of sixth-dimensional calculus," said the Ariadnean. " It seems to have a good effect on them—gets them keyed-up, in some way."

" Like going on a good binge?"

The secretary waited. Enfield fed it one or two formal problems, and laughed out loud as he heard the excited, exultant clicking begin inside the body.

The Ariadnean said tentatively: " Do you think we ought to let the mechanics strip this one down and see if they can decide what caused it to function as it did? There may be innumerable untold possibilities —it may be necessary to make certain new devices as safety precautions."

Enfield reached out to pat the robot affectionately on the back, but took his hand away quickly. The secretary was certainly getting ex-

cited over its innocuous calculations. It was hot with excitement—very hot.

" If I were you," said Enfield, " I'd go carefully. This robot may get very haughty about being prodded by mere mechanics. It's going to be quite a problem child."

The Ariadnean nodded. He looked ill at ease as he glanced at the robot. There was no telling what it might do next.

Enfield went towards the door. Suddenly he grinned again.

" If you take my advice, you'll forget about mechanics from now on. What that secretary wants isn't one of its ordinary doctors. It's moved into a higher grade. It wants . . ." He stopped tantalisingly.

" Well?" demanded the Ariadnean. " What is it? What do you think? What shall we get for it?"

" A psychiatrist," said Enfield.

Jonathan Burke

Once again we have pleasure in devoting space to the announcement of this year's International Fantasy Awards, which Leslie Flood as Secretary of the I.F.A. Committee discusses in this article instead of his usual book review column.

INTERNATIONAL FANTASY AWARD 1954

By Leslie Flood

Although somewhat late this year science-fiction's own literary award is still the outstanding annual event, and the bestowal of the I.F.A. Fiction Trophy is viewed with great interest by authors, publishers and readers of science-fiction.

The Adjudication Panel for the Award has now been reconstituted and comprises thirteen well-known science-fiction experts. The people who have been invited to choose the most outstanding literary work of science-fiction published for the first time in book form during 1953 represent a very reasonable cross-section of expert opinion in the fantasy field. Mainly from the professional side, their very activities speak for their eminent qualifications for knowing what is good science-fiction; and their choices of books for the Award are subjected to a very fair points system of voting, so that the winning book is certain to be an excellent and literary piece of science-fiction. Since each individual reader has his own personal choice of the year, a universal poll of science-fictiondom would be no more convincing, and the Committee feels that if the object of the Award—to raise the literary standard of science-fiction—is assisted in the slightest degree by the presentation of a trophy to the author of a worthy book, then the present method of selection is considered adequate.

The purpose of the International Fantasy Award is quite benevolent, has no axe to grind, and is scrupulously neutral regarding authors and publishers. If some measure of accord is provided for the science-fiction reader by knowing that a favourite author has received some other recognition than a royalty cheque, then the I.F.A. is content.

It is a non-profit-making scheme, and indeed its main expense, that of the trophy itself, is very rarely met by the few contributions from interested patrons.

The panel of judges includes many famous names in science-fiction. **Hugo Gernsback** has had a long and practical experience of ' Scientifiction ' (as he first termed it), since he launched *Amazing Stories* and later *Wonder Stories* in the '20's and literarily began the modern field of science-fiction as we know it to-day. **P. Schuyler Miller** started to make his name as an author in those early days and now reviews books for *Astounding Science Fiction.* **Forrest J. Ackerman** became well-known for his many fan activities, and later as an author and successful literary agent. **Donald A. Wollheim** is another old-time author and editor with considerable knowledge of science-fiction, whilst **Groff Conklin** has put his name to many fine science-fiction anthologies and still manages to review books for *Galaxy Science Fiction.* Co-editors of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction*, **Anthony Boucher** and **J. Francis McComas** (voting as one judge), have also lent their erudition to writing, reviewing and anthologising science-fiction. Other American members are **Robert Frazier,** book critic for *Fantastic Universe* and instructor at the C.C.N.Y. Science Fiction Workshop; **August Derleth,** author, editor, anthologiser and connoisseur of fine science-fiction; and finally **Basil Davenport,** who critically reads science fiction in his spare time as editor of the ' Book-of-the-Month Club Inc.'

From France there is **Georges H. Gallet,** genial editor of *Le Rayon Fantastique* and a lively propagator of English and American science-fiction in France; and **Igor B. Maslowski,** book critic for *Fiction.* Representing England for the moment are **John Carnell,** leading personality in English science-fiction, anthologist and editor of *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy*; and **Fred C. Brown,** a science-fiction bibliophile of long repute.

A brief statistical survey of the 1953 science-fiction books shows that approximately eighty new titles were published, excluding anthologies (not eligible for the Award), and books produced specifically for the juvenile market. Of this total fifty appeared in the U.S.A. first, with twenty-one of these being reprinted later in England or announced for early publication. Most of the English originals were inferior, being mainly hard-cover editions of paper-backs, but two notable exceptions were John Wyndham's **The Kraken Wakes** (retitled *Out of the Deeps* when published in America), and Arthur C. Clarke's **Prelude to Space.** In fact, on the whole, quantity, rather than quality, was the keynote.

However the selections of the judges(who have to submit five titles in order of preference), covered a total of twenty-two books. The winner, chosen by the Committee to receive the 1954 International Fantasy Award Fiction Trophy, appeared in no less than ten of the selections, including five first places. This book was

MORE THAN HUMAN

by Theodore Sturgeon, the brilliant American author whose previous books **Without Sorcery, The Dreaming Jewels,** and **E Pluribus Unicorn,** and many fine magazine stories have established him as one of the leading exponents of science-fantasy in this decade. Published in America by Farrar, Strauss and Young, in collaboration with Ballantine Books, Inc., this superlative novel is to be published in England by Victor Gollancz.

The middle part of **More Than Human** originally appeared as a novella ' Baby Is Three ' in *Galaxy Science Fiction.* Complete in itself—as it seemed then—and polished to perfection in Sturgeon's inimitable style, the author accomplished the apparently impossible by creating an even more impressive introduction to the setting, and although the last part of the book tends to fade (the only criticism I can agree with personally), the whole is a tour-de-force on a fascinating super-being theme, and a literary achievement of great importance.

Mr. Sturgeon will be presented in due course with the customary Award trophy, retained outright each year, comprising a model space-ship in classic style, executed in heavy, chromium-plated metal, and mounted with a cigarette lighter on an oak plinth, suitably inscribed.

A close second choice was Alfred Bester's **The Demolished Man,** published in America by Shasta Publishers, and in England by Sidgwick and Jackson. This appeared in eight of the final selections and gained four first places. A remarkable action story in which science-fiction and murder combined successfully with a novel treatment of the ESP theme, it caused a small sensation when it first appeared serially in *Galaxy Science Fiction.* My condolences to Mr. Bester for narrowly missing the Trophy, but with his exceptional talent I am sure we can look forward soon to another potential winner.

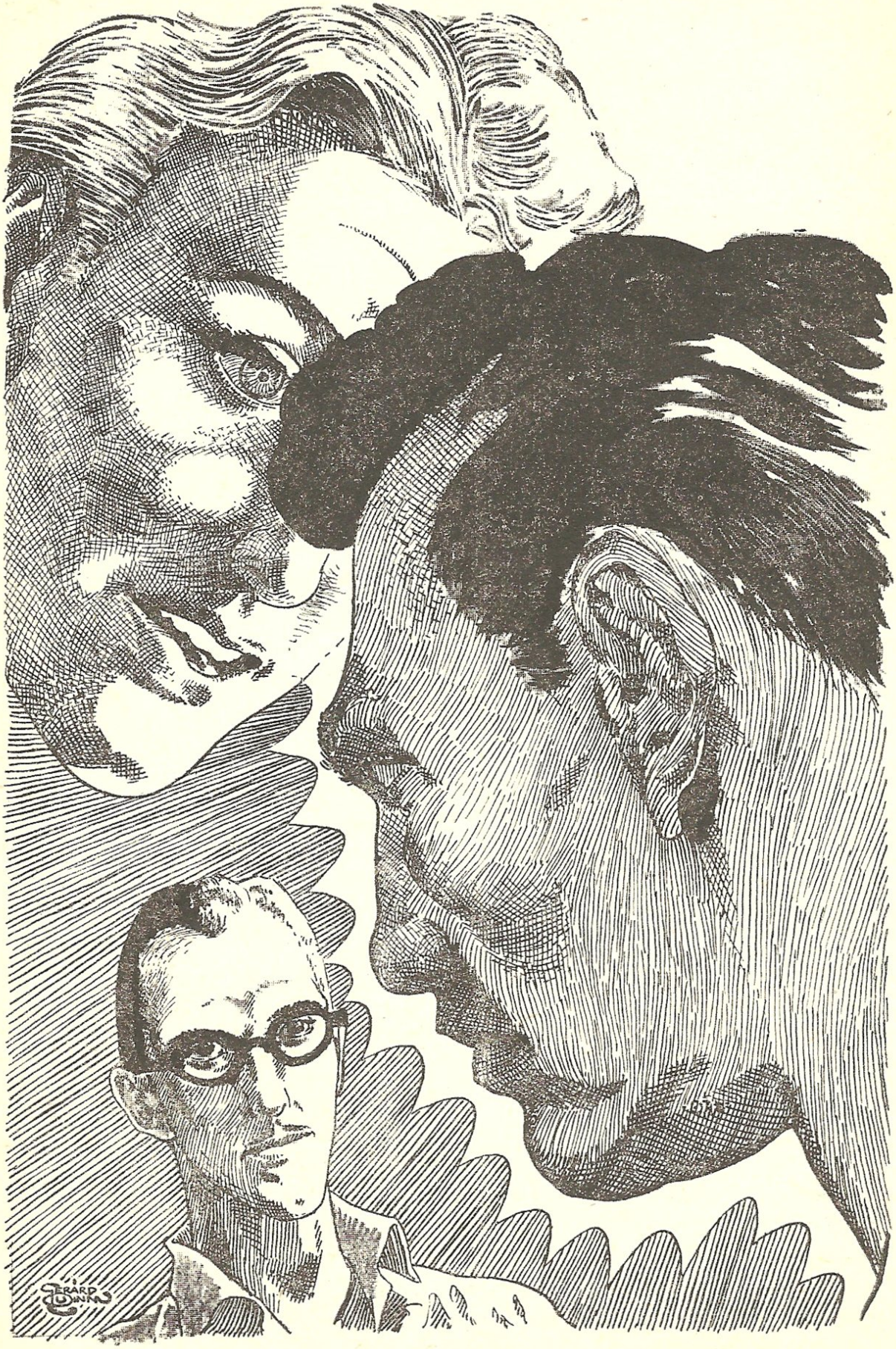
Galaxy has also serialised the third place book **The Space Merchants** by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth (original title was ' Gravy Planet '), which was published in book form by Ballantine Books Inc. This was a scintillating satire of a world of the future in which advertising agencies are all-powerful with the industrial combines. This clever author combination has already produced another two novels so far this year, **Search the Sky** and **Gladiator At Law,** which will be hot contenders for honour next year.

Among the well-mentioned also-rans in the finalists were Arthur C. Clarke's two other novels of the year, **Childhood's End** and **Against the Fall of Night,** and Ray Bradbury's two contributions **Fahrenheit 451** and **Golden Apples of the Sun.** Three off-trail fantasy novels were highly voted—Ward Moore's **Bring the Jubilee** and two which have also been published both in England and America—David Karp's **One** and **You Shall Know Them** by Vercors (Jean Bruller).

In previous years a subsidiary Award, the I.F.A. Non-Fiction Trophy was also presented annually for the winning book dealing with non-fictional subjects allied closely to science-fiction. For example such titles as **The Exploration of Space** by Arthur C. Clarke, **The Conquest of Space** by Willy Ley, and last year's **Lands Beyond** by L. S. de Camp and Willy Ley, have been Award winners. However, the Committee have decided to discontinue the Non-Fiction Award owing to the many difficulties which have become apparent. Whereas the primary object of the Award is the advancement of literary standards in science-fiction, the association of a non-fiction category has always been considered incongruous. Furthermore the impracticability of defining qualifications of entry, and the inability of the majority of the judges to include such non-fictional works in their survey by the standard of criticism applicable to fiction, has confirmed the decision. In place of this the Committee has decided to give the author of the runner-up in the Fiction Award a Certificate of Merit as a token of recognition and consolation.

So to the Roll of Honour of the I.F.A. is added Theodore Sturgeon's **More Than Human** which, with **City, Fancies and Goodnights** and **Earth Abides,** is typical of the well-written, non-stereotyped science-fantasy books which are helping to bridge the narrowing gap between what is called "mainstream" literature and the not yet widely accepted or successful tributary science-fiction.

Leslie Flood


GERARD QUINN

Caught in the inexhorable march of events centering round his telepathic talent, Paul Breen discovers that a whole new system of espionage is being built about him. Yet, despite the secrecy, someone has marked him down for elimination—it is Breen against the world.

WILD TALENT

By Wilson Tucker

Illustrated by QUINN

Part Two of Three Parts

FOREWORD

The year is 1953. *Secure in a fortress-like mansion in the heart of Maryland, Paul Breen faces the gun of his executioner. The long trail is about to end. No hidden microphones will relay the sound of the shot—no-one will interrupt the final scene.*

" There is nothing I can say ?" he asks quietly.

" Nothing. It is decided." The finger tightened on the trigger. The barrel of the gun flipped in a quick arc and exploded into flame.

Paul Breen first became aware of his peculiar talent in 1934 *when, as a boy of thirteen, he saved enough money to take him to the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago. Wandering the streets, lost in admiration at the polyglot city life, he witnesses a man shot down. Automatically he knows the man is a Government agent from Washington. He runs away from the scene of the crime, but later that night pieces together facts he* knows *are true—two men concealed in a second-floor window had shot Mr. Bixby. Although he had not seen them,* he knew they were there. *The G-man hadn't told him his name,* but he knew it was Bixby, *and the name of the man who had actually fired the shot was Tony Bloch.*

Using notepaper from the Exposition Paul writes a letter to the President and tells him the killer's name, signing himself with Bixby's secret code number.

From 1934 *to* 1941 *Paul's latent telepathic talent slowly grows. He realises what it is and that he is different to other people, so conceals his ability to read minds, thus keeping out of unnecessary trouble. At this time he realises that as a boy in Chicago he had sent the letter concerning Bixby to the wrong address, and naively writes the Federal Bureau of Investigation pointing out his error of seven years previous. This reaches a Bureau official named Palmer who has been assigned the task of finding the letter writer of* 1934 *who caused in apprehension of Bixby's killers, but Palmer fails to uncover Breen.*

Paul is eventually inducted into the Army in 1945 *and later that year the one thing Palmer had been waiting for happened—Breen's induction papers showed that his fingerprints matched those of the two mysterious letters. Palmer and a CIC operator named Peter Conklin interrogate him at Camp where he admits to being a telepath, telling them intimate details about their private lives. They decide to take him to Washington, where Conklin envisages Breen being able to pick out spies and traitors and Breen himself feels he will be able to help the Government in a super undercover manner.*

On the train Conklin likens Breen to a Cro-Magnon man in the midst of the Neanderthal ape men and warns him that he will eventually be thoroughly hated by the rest of Mankind. During the discussion Paul suddenly realises that a passenger is taking more than passing interest in them. Scanning his mind Paul discovers the man is an ex-Army sergeant—that he is thinking about something called an atomic bomb.

VI.

1945

Conklin had understated the facts when he said that Washington, in July, was insufferable. Paul Breen surveyed Washington—as much of it as could be seen from the high office window—with all the delight of the first-time visitor. He compared the restricted view to those newsreel shots he had often seen in which the camera stared straight ahead, recording some politician mouthing meaningless words while all around and behind him Washington lived and breathed. By putting his cheek to the glass and straining his eyes, he could make out the nearer surroundings, but for the moment he had to be content with what could be seen before the window. He had not given much heed to the heat on the street. Two rooms away from the office where he waited, the temperature was much higher.

A stranger waited in the office with him, casually smoking a cigarette and saying nothing at all while he stood at the window. The stranger knew nothing about him; Paul found in one swift sweep that the man had only been sent in to keep him company while Conklin reported to his superiors. The report was in progress two rooms away, and the heat there was intense.

" Where's the Mall?" Paul asked the newcomer, " and the Needle?"

" Around on the other side; this window faces the wrong way." The man talked around his cigarette and looked at Paul curiously, wondering what the score might be.

" Is there an elevator or do you have to walk?"

" The Needle? An elevator."

" Does it really sway in the wind?"

" I've heard that it does."

Paul turned. " Haven't you been up in it?"

" No—why?"

" Well, people come thousand of miles to see that—you live here."

" I was born and raised in New York," the stranger told him. " I haven't seen the Statue of Liberty, either."

" Why not?"

" Why not?" He finally removed the cigarette from his mouth. " I don't have time."

Paul went back to the scene outside the window.

Two rooms away, Conklin was having a difficult time. Paul gave a part of his attention to that room and to Conklin as he inspected the small slice of Washington. With some amusement he listened to Conklin making his report, listened to the highly vocal, highly doubtful reception the report was getting, amid hints that perhaps Conklin was in need of a psychiatrist. The agent stood by his story and, disre-

garding the veiled suggestions concerning his mental stability, told how he had been contacted in Saint Louis by Ray Palmer, of the F.B.I., and had been acquainted with the Breen case which had sorely puzzled that other Bureau for almost twelve years. Inasmuch as Breen had been located on an army post and was therefore within C.I.C. jurisdiction, the two of them had gone out to the post to interview Breen. The result was astonishing. Conklin sketched in the background and general details of the case, carefully repeating the conversations that had taken place in Captain Evans's office—and including the three men's reactions.

Paul remained at the window. There was no sound in the office other than the minute noises made by the man waiting behind him, obviously bored. Nothing of the heated conversation in that other room was audible, but Paul still listened to it, wondering how Conklin would convince the two men who were his superiors—how he could convince them short of parading them in and asking Paul for a stage performance.

Conklin unknowingly found a way.

He launched next into a recital of events on the train coming from Saint Louis, ending his report by stating that Breen in the dining car had discovered a former army sergeant thinking about something called an atomic bomb.

The temperature in that other room dropped alarmingly.

" An atomic bomb?" one man questioned.

" Yes, sir."

" What about an atomic bomb?"

" I don't know, sir. Breen only reported to me that another man in the dining car recognized Palmer and myself as plain-clothes policemen. This man was somehow familiar with what we represented and supposed that we had Breen under arrest. Upon further questioning, it developed that the man was a former army sergeant and had recently been in contact with something called an atomic bomb."

One of the men sitting in that far room turned to his companion with, " What the hell?"

The companion demanded, " Get Breen in here !"

Paul did not move away from the window or turn to face the door as Conklin left his superiors and approached the smaller office where he waited. Instead, he let Conklin find him still inspecting the Washington scenery. An empty, nothing-to-report shrug passed between the agents behind him, and Paul turned as Conklin called to him. Back again in that other room down the hall, Conklin attempted to put Paul at ease by introductions. " Mr. Breen," he said quietly, " this is Mr. Slater and Mr. Carnell."

Neither of the two left their chairs or made any sign of acknowledgement. Instead, Slater favoured Conklin with a probing stare, and in his mind there was the question, *What the hell? Mr. Breen?* Both of them studied Paul, and he waited patiently for someone to speak. Slater was the older of the two and the greater authority; he was heavier in body and his white shirt, turned up at the sleeves, showed the distress of the heat. Carnell was thin, wore a small moustache and horn-rimmed glasses. He seemed to be the deeper, more introspective man, given to fast but sure judgments. Paul liked him on sight, liked what he saw of the man's mind; Slater was the type he would never know or care to.

Slater said, " Well, Breen, this is quite a story."

Paul waited, not answering. They did not invite him to sit down.

" So Captain Evans was diverting coal for private use, eh? Are you expecting a reward for telling that?"

" No, sir."

" Everybody on the post knew it, I suppose?"

" I don't believe so. I never heard it mentioned."

" No? How did you find out?"

" Captain Evans asked for proof of what was in his mind, sir." Paul glanced at Carnell and then back to Slater. " I told him."

" Yes, so it seems. And you told Palmer what was in his mind. Did you also tell Conklin?"

" No, sir. He asked me not to."

" But you knew, nevertheless?"

" Yes, sir."

" And I suppose you're standing there reading mine?"

Paul nodded, knowing what was to be next.

" Well, well—tell me."

Paul started, " Your wife——"

" *No*!" Conklin burst out.

Slater jerked his eyes around, glaring at Conklin. " You have an objection, *Mister* Conklin?" He eyed the agent with reprimand.

" No, sir. I only thought to warn you that it is a shocking experience, the first time."

" I can stand it," Slater retorted. " Very well, Breen, what about my wife?"

Paul had caught the warning. " Your wife phoned you about an hour ago," he substituted lamely. " She wanted to know if you would be late again tonight."

Slater turned to Conklin. " That's shocking?"

" Ask more."

" All right, Breen. Let's hear more."

Paul considered for a moment. " You sent eighty men to Potsdam with the president, including several from the Baltimore office although they could hardly be spared there. The Baltimore office is having trouble with the theft of large amounts of military goods on the docks; several supply ships have sailed with useless cargo because tools or parts were missing. You have made arrangements for other shipments to replace the stolen material and hope that the original shipments and the replacement parts reach France at about the same time. You know that dock workers have been organized by criminals to loot the supplies, but still you are unable to stop it. You are considering the abandoning of those docks, as was done some years ago when a similar situation arose in Brooklyn." He paused. " Enough?"

Slater's eyes bored into his. " Let's hear more."

Paul regarded him curiously for a moment longer wondering why he kept trying to hide a man's name, wondering why Slater continually fought not to think about someone named Willis. The name itself was easily grasped, but the reason for hiding it was not. " You already knew about Captain Evans," he said. " You knew that the fifteen tons of coal was only a small part of an over-all picture of thievery, and you've drawn up a report on it all." Then Paul went on to list in exact detail the names, places, dates and materials on the report as he visualized it in Slater's mind. He repeated the list of missing articles and the amounts: coal, gasoline, oil, lumber, clothing, foodstuffs, PX supplies, miscellaneous items; he told the geographical location where each had been stolen and the date when each had or had not been reported; he named the men in charge of those locations and the names of the men suspected of the thefts. As he talked, he found Slater interpolating false entries into the list. In an effort to trap him, Slater would casually insert a name or a place not on the list and then wait to see if Paul repeated that deception. Paul ignored the traps, somewhat surprised at the man. If Slater admitted that he was actually reading his thoughts, he should also realize Paul had the sense and the ability to determine the false from the true—to know his *whole* mind and not just those parts Slater chose to feed him. He formed a strong dislike for Slater.

When he ceased talking, Carnell spoke. " Tell us about the man in the dining car, the former sergeant."

Paul turned his attention to Carnell and smiled. He was almost the exact opposite of Slater, was more like Conklin in his manner and patterns of thought. He could be a friend if the matter were handled carefully. Paul said, " Yes, sir," and repeated the incident at the breakfast table.

"No more than that?" Carnell asked. "Didn't you get a more detailed picture of the man or his background? Did he get on the train at Saint Louis? Where was he from?

"I don't know, sir." Paul closed his eyes, dwelling on the scene in the diner and what he remembered of the man at the far table. "It seems to me there was something about a desert—I'm not sure. He thought about the bomb and the desert, but I'm not sure the two were connected."

"Did this man see the bomb?"

"On the ground, do you mean? Or in an ammunition dump? No, sir, I don't think so. But he saw a bright flash that hurt his eyes; the bomb was exploded, I guess."

"Did you get any clear picture of his separation from the army? Why he was no longer in uniform?"

"No, sir, only an impression when he looked at me. He was glad he wasn't wearing his any longer."

"Do you know where he got off the train?"

"He didn't. He was going to New York."

"New York! How do you know that?"

Paul hesitated and then shrugged. "I just do."

Carnell said to Conklin, "Go into the next office and phone New York; use my authority. Give them the description of the sergeant and tell them to take him off the train at all costs. Bring him back here."

After Conklin had left, Carnell and Slater held their silence, again studying Paul. Paul waited, still standing for lack of an invitation to sit, and found that he could follow Conklin's telephone conversation with ease. That was a recent accomplishment; once he had met and talked to a person, once he had become aware of a person's mental habits and patterns, he could if he chose follow that man forever afterward regardless of the distance between them. It was like a familiar voice being heard over a long-distance wire, a wire that could not be broken no matter how far or how fast the voice moved. The trick would not work with those who were still strangers to him, with those whom he had not yet met. He was conscious of several people working in the many adjoining offices, but he knew nothing of them and would not until he had seen them face to face and glimpsed what was in their minds. After that meeting, however brief, he would always know them and where they were and what they were doing or thinking. Paul believed that he knew Conklin so well,he could keep in constant mental contact with the man if he were sent to the other side of the world. At this moment, for instance, Captain Evans was wondering about the outcome of the interview in his office, was wondering when an official

reprimand would come for the theft of the coal. He was cursing Breen, wishing his tongue were cut out.

Paul absently licked his lips, tasting his tongue. His especial gift was a strange and perplexing one, and he often wished there was someone he could talk to about it, someone who might have some knowledge of the endowment and who could advise him, teach him the many uses of it. Those few books he had managed to locate were enchanting introductions to a wonder world; they had guided him and actively helped him to understand a part of his problem, but still they were no more than introductions written by men who theorized and experimented with a force they thought to exist. What he desperately needed was an experienced teacher.

He had blindly groped his way thus far, discovering and learning to use the mental tools by trial and error, by accident. Beginning with those faintly understood wishes of his aunt, he had grown up finding new worlds on every side and making mistakes in some of them because there was no one—parent, mentor, or skilled friend to serve as counselor. Teaching yourself the proper use of a new tool or technique was difficult in the extreme. He realized he was lucky to come off with as few errors as he did.

Carnell broke the silence. " Well, Breen, what are we going to do with you?"

" I suppose I can go back to the post, sir."

Carnell permitted himself a fleeting smile. " No, I'm afraid you can't. For a number of reasons. We would be very foolish to send you back there."

" Mr. Conklin thought I might help out here, sir."

" Help out? In what way?"

" In finding people you want found."

Carnell nodded. " Yes, I daresay you'd be quite useful. And invaluable in that respect." He favoured Paul with a frank stare. "Tell me, how do you feel about all this? What is your reaction?"

Paul weighed his answer carefully, searching first to determine if the question were an honest one and if Carnell expected an honest reply. He did. There was no guile in the man's mind, nothing but genuine curiosity.

" Well, sir, I don't like some parts of it. I didn't like being drafted and I didn't like the army, but I was determined to go through with it and get it over with. And I told Mr. Conklin I was willing to help, if he wanted it." Paul faltered, glancing at the hostile Slater. " But I don't like being regarded as a freak. I'm not a freak to myself and I resent being treated as one." Paul hesitated again to look down at the uniform he still wore. " Can I speak my mind?"

Carnell said, " Certainly."

" I don't like being pushed around. I expected it in the army because it is part of the army. I don't expect it if I stay here."

Carnell pursed his lips and said nothing. The trace of a cruel smile appeared on Slater's face.

" You're still in that uniform, Breen," he said.

" Yes, sir."

" And still subject to orders from proper authority."

Paul said, " Yes," and deliberately omitted the *sir*.

" So . . . ?" Slater held the vague threat in his mind.

" I know the extent of army regulations. I know what's expected of me physically and morally, but the army is notorious for discouraging thinking." Paul waited a long moment to drive the hint home and then leaned forward to frown at the officer. " Do you have a headache, Mr. Slater?"

Slater gaped at him with pained surprise and then abruptly rose up and stalked out of the room. The door had no sooner slammed behind him than it was opened again, and Conklin re-entered with a puzzled expression on his face.

" What's the matter with him?" he queried.

Paul said, " Mr. Slater has a splitting headache."

" Yes . . ." Carnell nodded quickly, peering up at Paul with bright and speculative eyes. " I think he has just that."

Dressed in new clothing paid for by Conklin, Paul toured Washington like any other summer visitor. He chose a thin and cool appearing summer suit of blue-checked pattern, a sport shirt and white shoes; he had felt an unquiet moment when he learned the amount of the bill, but Conklin brushed that aside as nothing. Both the clothes and the trip about the city had been early requests and were quickly granted. Neither of them mentioned the addition of two bodyguards who now accompanied them wherever they went.

The party of four rode the slow and creaking elevator to the top of the Washington Monument where Paul spent a long and delightful hour gazing out across the Mall, asking Conklin to identify the various government buildings and city landmarks. And afterwards the party of four visited the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials—where at least two of their number displayed unmistakable signs of becoming tired of it all; they spent nearly half a day wandering through the vast halls of the Smithsonian Institution and later the Botanical Gardens. It was during the course of this last that the attitudes of the bodyguards shifted to boredom. Conklin inwardly laughed and kept going. Because it was midsummer and Congress was not in session, Conklin

found someone in the office of the Senate's sergeant-at-arms who took them down onto the floor of the Senate chamber and later into the private waiting rooms behind it. Paul stood beside the desks, looking up and around the room he had seen so often in the newsreels and in that picture Jimmy Stewart had made, looking now at the empty room and easily imagining it packed with men giving their undivided attention to another man standing on the rostrum. Still later they visited the Bureau of Engraving and Printing where Paul had hoped to see money being printed, but there was no activity that day. As they drove past the imposing structure housing the Library of Congress, he was struck by an idea and resolved to make further requests very soon. He was already discovering that Conklin's official connections—or more properly, Conklin's and Slater's and Carnell's official connections—could get him almost anything he wanted within reason. After a moment's reflection he added, and some things not within reason. He was beginning to understand the fantastic value they were placing on him.

They were strolling through Potomac Park with the two bodyguards a short distance behind, weary and hoping that the rubberneck tour would end soon.

"Mr. Conklin, do you remember the subject we talked about on the train? The one I didn't mention in the diner?"

Conklin said, "What? Oh, yes, the——"

"Yes, that new thing." Paul hesitated. "Well, I know what it is now."

"Do you?"

"Yes, sir. Do you want me to tell you?"

They walked a short distance in silence, Conklin thinking furiously of the weapon called an atomic bomb. Did he want to know of it or not? He had known several sleepless hours worrying about that term, worrying about what it could mean. He had not had scientific training, but he was reasonably well versed in scientific matters; the knowledge was sometimes necessary to the job, and the spectre conjured up by those two words was frightening.

"No," he told Paul slowly, "I don't think I want you to tell me."

"All right. I don't know for certain, but I think you'll read about it in the papers in a month or so."

Conklin closed his eyes with pain. "The practical way; I was afraid of that."

"Yes, sir." They continued walking, each involved with his thoughts. "That sergeant who was going to New York," Paul said suddenly as though they had been discussing the man, "he didn't. Your New York office didn't find him."

" *That* will certainly make things more difficult."

Paul nodded and then glanced away as a pair of attractive girls approached. He watched them as they came abreast and then cast a quick glance over his shoulder as they passed. Conklin noticed it.

" Interested?" he asked.

Paul stared at him, knowing his mind. " Mr. Conklin, I appreciate everything you've done for me—I honestly do. But I'll get my own girl when I want one."

" I'm sorry. Forgive me."

" Yes, sir."

" And please stop using *sir* with me. It isn't at all necessary."

" Habit," Paul smiled. " I'll try not to."

" I should imagine you will find great variety," the agent said, harking back to the previous subject. " Washington is overcrowded with women of all ages." He locked eyes with Paul and grinned. " I do very well."

Paul returned the grin. " I've got my eyes open. I hope you don't spoil things."

Conklin sighed and the grin faded. " I hope not. As usual I will have to inquire, but I certainly hope I won't be standing in your way." They reached the waiting car and climbed into the rear seat, while behind them the two shadows stepped briskly forward to sink contentedly onto the seat cushions.

" Back to the hotel?" the agent inquired. One of his two superior officers had made a quick phone call and a suite at the Mayflower Hotel magically appeared for Paul and his retinue of three. It was only a temporary stopping place while another and more tightly shielded retreat was being prepared for them.

Paul nodded. " All that walking tired me out."

Concerted sighs of relief came from the front seat and the car moved out into traffic.

" There's a girl in your building," Paul suggested almost bashfully. " Working the switchboard. Do you know her?"

" Which shift?"

" She was there this morning when we left."

" Oh, yes. Martha Merrill."

" Martha . . ." Paul seemed satisfied with the name. " Is she married?"

" You don't know?" Conklin asked with mild surprise.

" Of course not. I didn't——"

" I must ask you to forgive me once again. I leap to conclusions. No, she isn't married."

" Going steady with anybody?"

" I don't know." Conklin considered that a moment and leaned forward to tap the shoulder of one of the men in the front seat. "Is she?"

" No," the bodyguard replied. " She dates first one guy and then another." He looked around at Paul and then at Conklin. " I couldn't get to first base with her."

" No personality appeal," Conklin laughed.

" No something," the other man agreed. " I wish you luck."

" I have a suggestion," Conklin continued. " When we return to the hotel I will make a phone call. The usual inquiry, you know. If the answer is in the affimative, I rather think something can be arranged for this evening if you like. Surely there is someone in Washington who will drink with us !"

" Swell," Paul agreed. " I'm willing."

Paul unpacked the remainder of the clothes that had arrived while they were out and hung them away. He bathed, shaved again although it really wasn't necessary, and put on still another suit that had been paid for with Conklin's never-ending supply of money. Conklin had made one thing quite clear to Paul when the clothing was being selected, when the bills silently began climbing. He guessed what was in Paul's mind and sought to alleviate it.

" An expense account has been placed at your disposal," he explained. " You need only to name it and you can probably have it. I feel quite certain in my own mind that you will not make fantastic demands, but "—and he faced Paul squarely—" *should* you make them, I believe they would be met. Now, stop worrying about the clothing bills."

And so Paul had picked out three suits and a dozen shirts; a few minutes later and a few blocks down the street he discovered a bookstore and asked for five or six titles which appealed to him on sight and inspection, having everything sent to the hotel. He bought a jar of pipe tobacco of Conklin's brand and gave it to him and then cigarettes for the two bodyguards when he found them eying the tobacco. Gently then he inquired into Conklin's mind and found that the extent of his purchases were far below the figure that had been expected. Satisfied, he stopped buying and they had continued their tour of Washington.

Conklin returned as he was standing before a mirror, tying his tie.

" Well, Paul, good news and bad. The answer is yes, we may have visitors within reason. But as for Miss Merrill, no. She flew home on emergency leave this afternoon. Someone ill, I understand."

Paul's disappointment was on his face.

" Shall we go on with it anyway?" Conklin asked. " I can find two charming young ladies who are willing to drink our liquor. And by the way—what do you drink?"

" Bourbon and beer," Paul told him, feeling regret at the missed opportunity of meeting the girl. " Sure, go ahead. See if you can get me a blonde."

" Bourbon and beer !" Conklin repeated. " Together?"

" Yes—why?"

" Nothing at all, nothing at all," the agent assured him. " But you have just risen a notch in my estimation. Very well, a blonde it will be." He made as if to leave.

Paul stopped him, not turning but watching him in the mirror. " Mr. Conklin, do you know anyone named Willis?"

" Willis?" A studious pause. " No, I don't believe I do. Shall I inquire?"

" No, let it go."

Still Conklin waited. " Paul. Is this another atomic bomb?"

Paul laughed and turned from the mirror. " No, I was just being nosy."

" Sorry I couldn't help. I'm going to order dinner, and then we will investigate the ladies."

VII.

She was a blonde, natural blonde of a rather dark shade and not at all the glossy canescence that is so painfully artificial; she wore a magnificent bronzed tan which complimented the colouring of her hair and eyes, a tan that made her the instant target of admiring male and critical feminine eyes. She said her name was Karen and that she did not mind in the least his awkward dancing or frequent missteps. Paul liked that much of her.

Paul learned more of Karen very early in the evening as she was teaching him some of the simpler, introductory dance steps; his bashfulness and his inability to dance had kept him from suggesting the entertainment, so she had asked him, holding out long beautiful arms to him. Someone, some lost girl in bygone years had once attempted to teach him to dance and they had progressed only as far as the box step when the impatient girl gave him up as hopeless. It had not been a happy experience for either of them. Paul stammered an embarrassed explanation of this to Karen, but she only laughed and pulled him away from the chair.

He took her in his arms with reluctance.

After the first few moments Paul admitted to himself that it was fun; holding a beautiful girl so close to him, the sensation of her hair against his cheek and her perfume in his nostrils could hardly be otherwise, but still there remained the awkward quandary of listening to her careful instructions, of being led, and then of making mistakes that were painful to them both. Karen did not once display the least distress when he trod on her toes or moved in the wrong direction, unexpectedly separating them; instead, with a patient and smiling manner

she pointed out the error and then directed him to the proper movement. After some time Paul had the brilliant idea of anticipating her, realizing that in her mind Karen was going through the mental motions of teaching him and he had only to look to see what was expected of him next—a formula not far removed from those early training sergeants who barked their orders.

Slowly, as though he were opening the door into a dark room, he inquired into her thoughts, seeking only to find the directions expected of him.

He fumbled, nearly stepped on her feet again, and stopped.

" I'm sorry—I really am. Are you sure you want to go on?"

Karen lifted her face. " I'm not complaining. Now let's try that last one again. Use the pressure of your hand on my back to guide me. Ready?"

Karen was an agent and had been planted on him.

Her orders had been briefly noted on an interoffice memo and were signed only with a pair of initials that were foreign to him. She had been asked to attend the party, to be as friendly as possible and to determine if he could keep his mouth shut. No more than that was written out in words, but the implications would have filled several pages of the memo, and she had been expected to understand all that was implied. In that one brief sweep of her mind he saw too that she had known such work before; she had been used to bait military officers and government employees for similar information and purposes.

Paul continued moving, watching the surface of her mind and gradually improving his dancing by careful prognostication. But aside and to himself he speculated on her presence in the hotel suite. Slater had sent her—there was nothing overt to indicate that, but he was certain of it. Slater had probably passed the verbal order on to someone else, someone who owned the pair of initials at the bottom of the memo sheet, and that anonymous someone had issued the actual order. But Slater had originated the idea, and, remembering the false entries he once attempted to slip into the list of stolen war materials, had arranged matters so that the order could not be traced back to him. Or so he had supposed. Carnell would be as anxious as anyone to know if he could hold his silence, but Carnell's mentality would devise some other method for a test, if he felt a test was needed.

No, Slater was the chap who would turn loose a dazzling woman on him, a woman experienced in such matters.

As yet, Karen had done or said nothing to invite confidences, to draw him out. He supposed that she would be careful about it, would take her time until the place and the moment suggested it. Briefly Paul wondered just how much was implied in that part of the order

asking her to be " as friendly as possible." And just as briefly he held a notion to tempt her.

They danced, she drank highballs while he chased bourbon with beer, they stopped beside the windows to look at the lights of Washington, they talked with Peter and the other girl who had been introduced as Emily. No one seemed to possess family names.

" Where do you come from, Paul?"

" Illinois."

" Really? I have an aunt in East Saint Louis. Have you ever been there?"

" Not in that direction, no. I mean, I never stopped there. Went through it on the train."

" What do you do?"

" I was a movie projectionist."

" Oh, I should imagine that would be fun. Do you like pictures?" they paused beside a tray of food.

" Some of them; there are an awful lot of stinkers."

" How I agree with that ! Were you in the army?"

" I put in a hitch."

" Did you like it?" And then she answered her own question. "No, I don't suppose you did—few people do. "Karen had made a small sandwich and handed it to him. " What did you do in the army?"

" Do?"

" You know—what kind of service?"

" Infantry."

She started a sandwich for herself. " I don't suppose you want to talk about it?"

" No."

" Not even your war experiences? Were you ever in great danger?"

" A corporal once threatened to bloody my nose."

Karen laughed delightedly. " I guess I don't understand men. Some of them never seem to stop talking about how they are winning the war and others won't speak a word."

" The same with women," Paul told her, biting into the sandwich. " Some think much but say little."

" Do you prefer that kind?"

" I don't like women who chatter all the time. The quiet ones are more comfortable."

She arched her brows. " Is that a hint?"

" Too early to tell; the evening is young."

" But I like to talk to new men; they are fascinating." Karen led the way to chairs and sat down. " Tell me all about yourself."

" Nope."

" No? But why not?"

" I don't trust that opening."

" Ah !" She assumed an all-wise expression. " You've been bitten before."

" My grandfather said that was pulled on him ninety years ago."

" Your grandfather was a wise old man ! Just between you and me, that has been used for nine hundred years. What kind of a man was he?"

" Grandfather? A hell-raiser, I guess." Paul put his tongue in his cheek and began the manufacture of a story. " When he was young he lived in the Ohio Valley, trapping game, rustling a few head of cattle, anything to make a living. But he got mad one day when a new family moved in about twenty miles away—he claimed the neighbourhood was getting too blamed crowded. And besides, a girl in that family fell into the habit of coming over to visit him every Sunday and he swore no female was going to tie him to apron strings, so he pulled out. Went West."

" That *is* fascinating ! What else?"

" Oh, he knocked around out West for quite a while; always getting into one scrape after another. Rustling cattle on a big scale, cheating at cards, selling liquor to the Indians—things like that. Some dance-hall woman made a play for him once and he shot the high heels off her shoes; he didn't trust women. Later on he teamed up with a man named Bowie from New Orleans and I understand they made quite a fortune. No one ever found it though; he and Bowie both died at the Alamo."

" Why, Paul, that's . . . that's . . ."

" That's what?" he asked innocently.

" That's rather hard to believe. What a magnificent old man. Where did he meet your grandmother?"

" He didn't. I told you he had no use for the women. He never did get married."

" Now, Paul !"

" Want another drink?" Paul asked her.

He closed his eyes, relaxing, but a part of him would not rest. His mind wandered.

Captain Evans was sitting on a bed removing his shoes; Evans had evidently forgotten him for the moment, for now he was only looking forward to an hour's pleasure. The bedroom was an ordinary one with the usual lotions and combs on the dresser, a bit of discarded clothing cast over a chair and a pair of pink mules waiting beside the bathroom door. Evans dropped the second shoe to the floor and glanced again

at the dresser. Through the man's eyes Paul followed the glance and saw the backside of a picture frame which had been turned to the wall; through his ears he heard the sound of the distant shower being shut off and then Evans turned to the bathroom door. A woman emerged. Paul thought he recognized her as someone he had seen on the post and withdrew his attention.

There was a moment of aimlessness and then a mental picture of himself captured his attention. Palmer, the F.B.I. man. Palmer lay abed nursing a painful knee and idly thinking of Breen. Palmer thought of many things as he alternately rubbed and cursed the arthritis in his knee: his obnoxious son-in-law, his wife's chiding because he had not worn clean socks that day, the skepticism and then the rough going-over he had received on his report of the loss of Breen to the C.I.C., the lack of a new assignment in the past few days, the reminder to lay in next winter's coal supply now while summer prices were in effect, the coming rain that the knee never failed to prophesy, a mild wonder if Breen could predict the weather . . . Paul pulled away.

A young woman in a mountain cabin. She was quite drunk, as was her companion. Paul watched her for only a long second, staring in utter fascination at what she was doing, and then twisted his percipience elsewhere.

The former sergeant who had sat in the dining car now sat in a nondescript window above the street, looking down on moving traffic and walking people on the neon lights blinking to either side of him. An opened bottle of beer was near at hand, but the man was thirsty for more than what the bottle offered, craved more than could be had from the dark room in which he sat and the window from which he peered. He wanted freedom, he wanted to go down on the street and mix with the people he saw there, wanted to run into the nearest bar and have one hell of a good time ! He wanted women, lots of women and all the rye whiskey his money would buy—he had plenty of money. Alex and Dave had taken good care of him, had made good their promises. But now Alex and Dave wouldn't let him go out on the street. Too risky. What the hell ! He didn't intend to spend the rest of his life cooped up in this damned room. If Alex didn't like it, he could shove it ! The former sergeant reached for the bottle of beer and took another swallow.

Paul sat at attention, straining his senses to find where the man was located. There was no clue. He did not think of the city's name nor see anything with his eyes that might give a scrap of identification. only the moving cars and people and blinking signs.

" Are you sleeping?" Karen demanded.

" No," Paul opened his eyes and looked at her.

" I thought that bourbon and beer might have taken toll. Are you tired?"

He nodded. " Some. I'm still not much of a dancer. We've been walking a lot today."

" Then let's just sit here and enjoy ourselves. Where did you walk to? What did you see?"

He laughed, remembering the discomfiture of the two bodyguards. " All over town !" He told her about some of the points of interest they had visited, some of the famous buildings he had seen in pictures many times but not in the stone until yesterday, or today.

" Then you like Washington?"

" Very much so." He nodded.

" What do you do here?" Karen watched him with gay, laughing eyes.

" Nothing."

The brows went up again. " Nothing?"

" Nothing."

" The idle rich?" Her tone was bantering.

" Well, idle anyway."

" That is quite fascinating. I've always wanted to meet a man who could afford to do nothing." She laughed, and set a fresh drink before him. " I should warn you I'm husband hunting."

" Have fun."

" You're supposed to pick me up on that."

Paul sampled the bourbon. " Someday I might. I like blonde hair."

" But someday won't do. I'm getting old."

He studied her. " Twenty-six."

Her eyes widened, but her lips disclaimed. " That's unkind, really. Twenty-three."

" Twenty-six," he said with finality.

" I think you're mean." When he said nothing more, she nibbled on a sandwich and pretended to sip at the drink. " Emily and Peter are getting on very well—but then, they always do. Are you a good friend of Peter's?"

" You might call it that."

" Have you known him long?"

" Not very long."

She dropped her voice to a secretive whisper. " He's in government—high-up in government."

" Oh, not so high," Paul contradicted. " Not nearly as high as Slater."

"Who is Slater?"

"The man above Peter."

"Paul Breen, I think you talk in riddles!"

He said casually, "Who told you my last name?"

Karen stared at him. "Well, we *were* introduced."

"As Paul, and Peter, and Karen and Emily, yes. I don't believe I heard any other names mentioned."

"Someone must have mentioned it," Karen recovered nicely. "Or I wouldn't have known it."

"I guess that's right. How's your drink?"

She said her drink was warm, and he offered to make another, but she declined. She left him for a moment to mix the new drink herself and to recover her inward composure. She had slipped up. Five years with the department, the last two of them employed on confidential matters, and she had made her first slip. His name had been written on the memo pad, confound it! And she *was* twenty-six. How had he guessed that with such smug accuracy? But damn his good-looking eyes, he wouldn't talk; only those two sentences in which he mentioned Slater's name could be construed as loose talk—and that was next to nothing. If the remainder of the evening was to be no more than this, she could turn in a complimentary report on him. Nice guy. Seemed to be a bit younger than she, but then that did not matter.

Karen carried the drink back to where they had been sitting, only to find him gone. She looked around. Emily, also alone, pointed a finger toward the bathroom and drifted over to where Karen waited.

"Beautiful party!" She glanced at her watch. "I can't stay too late. How's your Joe?"

"Quiet," Karen said. "The strong, silent type."

Paul leaned against the wall and watched Conklin combing his hair, peering closely into the bathroom mirror. "Having fun?" Conklin wanted to know.

Paul nodded. "She's nice. Talks too much, but nice."

Conklin glanced sidewise in the mirror and caught Paul's reflected image. He seemed to be asking a question.

"Yeah," the image replied. "I know."

"I'm sorry, Paul. I truly am."

"Not your fault."

"No, it isn't, but I might have guessed it in advance. I spoke with Carnell on the telephone, but still I might have guessed what was coming. I didn't *know* until Karen entered the door; she was expecting to find me here, and of course I recognized her instantly." He paused. "Slater?"

" The initials on her message were *R.B.*"

Conklin nodded unhappily. " Rose Busch. I know her. Slater."

" That's what I figured."

" Well—what do you want to do?"

Paul grinned at him. " Let's get on with it. I'm having fun, are you?"

" Emily is always fun."

" Too bad about the two shadows outside. No girls for them."

" To the victor . . ." Conklin quoted.

The victors rejoined the ladies.

One of the two victors awoke the next morning with a head and a mouth which betrayed the beginnings of a hangover. Conklin groaned and lay very still on the pillow, pressing his fists into his closed eyes.

Paul, long awake, sat up in the opposite bed to stare across at him. " You must be rusty."

" I didn't drink that much," Conklin protested indignantly. " I swear it ! That vixen poisoned me."

" The vixen is too much in love with you to know which day is Tuesday." He swung his feet to the floor and started for the bathroom. " I'll get an aspirin."

" They never help," Conklin told him. " And there aren't any; we didn't buy aspirin. I'd like to crawl under a rock."

Paul continued on to the bathroom and soaked a washcloth with cold water, which he folded and placed over Conklin's eyes and forehead. He stood there for a moment, pressing his fingers lightly on the covered eyelids. " Go back to sleep, Peter. You'll feel better when you wake up." He looked down at the partly concealed face and the tiny drops of water streaming from the cloth. Conklin relaxed. When his breathing changed to a sleepful state, Paul removed his fingers from the eyes. " And forget all this," he said with finality.

Paul shaved and dressed, then put his head into the other room where the bodyguards slept. They were up.

" How about breakfast?"

" Any time you're ready, we are ! The boss awake?"

" Not yet. He had a hard night."

" Hard night—*hah* !" Lips and eyes suggested just how terrible the evening must have been.

" Knock it off," the second fellow advised. He said to Paul, " Any of that bourbon left?"

Paul nodded and pointed to the far room. " Help yourself. I'm going to phone down and order." As he spoke into the phone he could hear one of the shadows mumbling behind him, a long rambling

dissertation having to do with soft lights, sweet music, beautiful women and a never-ending supply of liquor. He grinned and finished ordering.

They breakfasted while Conklin slept on.

Paul fell to considering the problem of the army sergeant who now inhabited a couple of anonymous rooms in some unknown city. He could see the man clearly whenever he chose to look, could see his near surroundings, his thoughts and his wishes. Right at the moment the ex-sergeant was sleeping off a beer-bust that had been in progress the night before; and at that moment Paul could see nothing outside the man's mind because his eyes were closed in sleep. But once he awoke, Paul would be able to follow his every move with ease, to see the surroundings the sergeant was seeing, to know everything that crossed the sergeant's line of vision and train of thought. The trouble was, Paul reflected wryly, the object of the desperate search wasn't thinking *enough*. During that short interval in the dining car Paul hadn't bothered to inquire too deeply into the noncom's mind and so he did not know too much of his background; the scanning had covered the surface thoughts and no more. The result now was that the man was like a stranger to him. He could follow only those random thoughts the man chose to contemplate, could see only what the other was seeing.

There was someone named Alex and another someone called Dave involved, plus a considerable sum of money and a fanatical interest in secrecy. There was also that horrible new weapon called the atomic bomb which had recently been tested in the Western desert. (*That* had come from Slater; all unknowingly Slater had passed on to Paul the fiery scene witnessed in New Mexico). And of course there was now the feverish anxiety to find the missing sergeant. Alex and Dave were somehow aware of that, or had anticipated it, and had impressed on the man's reluctant mind the necessity of remaining under cover. Paul easily guessed that the Alex and Dave had purchased information from the sergeant, but no one seemed to know the precise nature or extent of the information—and the sergeant never dwelt on it. And that was the fine point where he personally was disappointed. He simply didn't know the hiding man well enough to discover anything worth while.

(He *must* develop his talent further in that respect. He must carefully cultivate the ability to follow anyone he had once met, however briefly. He must train his mind to locate and observe them at any time—to observe all of them and not merely what they chose to consider. Conklin, Palmer, and now Slater and Carnell—he knew them well enough to track their movements with ease, and after last night he could trace Karen. A clever man like Slater could still keep secrets

from him by sheer determination; but because he was angry with Slater he resolved to discover the identity of Willis. As for those others who had not fallen under his close scrutiny—the sergeant, Emily, and two bodyguards—why, he knew no more about them or the girl on the switchboard than what had been told him. And he wanted very much to know more of Martha Merrill. All *that* was a part of his still developing faculty which he must encourage. If he were able. Was there a finite limit to his powers?)

Paul experienced a sudden thought, and it frightened him momentarily.

Suppose he could *force* that hiding man to reveal his whereabouts? Well . . . ? There were two recent precedents which gave rise to faint hope. That other day in the office of Slater and Carnell he had caused Slater to develop a bad headache. Not actually caused it—no; the headache had been there in the beginning, but in an angry moment Paul had reached into his mind and magnified it, had made Slater acutely aware of it. And only a few minutes ago he had sent Conklin back to sleep with the gentlest of hypnotic pressure, suggesting to him that the hangover would have vanished when he again awoke. As well as all memory of the incident. If that worked—and Paul never doubted that it would—then why could not he force the sergeant out of the room and into the open? Had he the ability to do that over the distance?

Paul closed his eyes and tried, tried harshly.

He thrust his will power across the space separating them and attempted to seize the mind of the sleeping man, to jerk him into wakefulness. The sergeant growled in his sleep and only turned over to bury his face in the pillow. There was no more.

"What's the matter? Too hot in here?"

Paul opened his eyes on the breakfast table. "What?"

"You're dripping sweat. Something the matter?"

"No, I'm all right. Last night's bourbon, I guess." That had failed; he couldn't do it. Was it necessary to be in contact with a person, be in the same room? He continued eating.

Late in July an army bomber crashed into the fog-enshrouded top of the Empire State Building and Paul read the headlines of a New York paper through the eyes of the still-hiding sergeant in that distant, dirty room. He never ceased his periodic watch over the man, and, although he did not mention the subject to Conklin, he learned from Slater and Carnell that the search was going on. The fugitive stayed where he was, and occasionally the one called Alex visited him, attempted to cheer him and repeated over and again the need to remain out of sight. Paul could discover next to nothing about Alex because

the sergeant knew him as only a contact and there were no telltale thoughts. So day by day he looked in, always seeking some new clue. The New York paper had been a day old and so meant little; Alex brought it on a visit along with a varied stack of magazines, but the age of the paper only suggested the hide-out was somewhere near New York. Alex had arranged for periodic shipments of beer and food. The man did his own cooking, and was always there when the deliveries were made. Paul bided his time.

Almost without mental debate he decided to say nothing to anyone of this ability to watch the fugitive over a distance. It would do little to improve his situation and might even cause further personal distress in the strained relations with Slater. Slater and Carnell knew only so much concerning him, and even Conklin who was now his closest friend knew little more; all of them had assumed it was necessary for Paul to be in the same room with a given person to know that person's mind, and they had used him accordingly. None of them had cause to suspect there was a broader scope to his talent, and so he did not enlighten them.

Whatever may have been believed about Slater's sudden headache, no one supposed Paul had created it with some mysterious, devilish mental magic; and the morning after the party Conklin had sprung from the bed fresh for a day's work, holding no memory of a previous awakening. But they used Paul to the extent of their knowledge of him.

He sat in on interviews which were conducted in one office or another, always the silent second or third party in the room who listened politely to the conversations and then afterward reported the visitor's mental reservations. It was a thrilling experience to meet some of the people in those interviews. He sat silent, watching, weighing, prying, as Congressmen, State Department personnel, military officers of all branches, job seekers, industrialists, planners and engineers, espionage agents, security people, governmental assistants, diplomats, pests, all trooped into the room and had their say or listened to what was said and trooped out again. Palmer and his superiors at the F.B.I. appeared, argued and were shown out. Captain Evans was called in from his post, sworn to silence and sent away. And after each interview, Paul would report to Carnell or Slater what had been freely spoken, what had been thought, what had been held back.

When the long-absent presidential party returned from Potsdam there had been one hell of a row between Slater and Carnell in a locked office. Paul and Peter Conklin waited in another room, Conklin hearing none of it but Paul listening attentively. Slater was quite certain that events had transpired in Potsdam which were not duly reported to

proper agencies—meaning himself; Carnell argued that a presidential party was above their jurisdiction and they had no right to force the intrusion of this particular privacy. In the end, Slater and Carnell, Conklin and Paul all visited the White House, where Paul was offhandedly presented to a president who had never before seen or heard of him. Slater did not make Paul's talent known, and afterward pumped him of everything observed during the visit.

In early August, Paul discovered the answers to some questions he had been mildly curious about. Slater was definitely withholding knowledge of him from high government figures, was confining the knowledge to a small knot of people. Apparently only seven people knew a telepathic agent existed in Washington: Palmer and two of his superiors of the F.B.I., Evans, Conklin, Carnell and Slater himself. Only those seven. The president had not been told, nor of course Karen, Emily, the bodyguards or those other persons in contact with Breen.

Only seven.

Still mildly curious, Paul wondered why.

Barely a week later he suddenly interrupted a cocktail at the hotel to seize Conklin's arm.

" Peter—send down for a paper."

" A paper? Can't it wait until we finish?"

" No, please. Get a paper now."

One of the bodyguards left his unfinished drink and took an elevator to the lobby. He was back in a hurry, breathless.

" Hey !" he yelled from the doorway, " look what we did to those Japs ! We got a new bomb and they don't have a town called Hiroshima any more."

VIII.

1945 - 1948

The routine continued, with but two exceptions before the end of the year. The party of four moved from the hotel into new quarters and were increased in numerical strength " for greater security purposes," and Paul located the undercover fugitive.

That event happened first.

Paul had never given up his watch over the dingy rooms despite occasional misgivings that it would come to nought. He had tried once again to force the man to move, to obey his will from a distance, and failed as before. And then one late November night, via the waiting

man's senses, he saw and heard Alex enter the room for the last time, listened to the careful plans of escape and flight which were outlined to the former sergeant. Places were named, timetables read, tickets exchanged and certain persons mentioned. The two of them would leave shortly after dawn from the Newark airport.

Paul sat upright in bed—and then hesitated. How to give this information to Conklin without revealing all? He sat there for long minutes, fuming at his own delay, and then thought of a passable scheme. It was weak, but the only subterfuge he was capable of concocting at the moment. Its only strength lay in the knowledge that all people have mirages that come in the night time. He got out of bed and crossed over to Conklin, shaking him.

" Peter—Peter !"

The agent was instantly awake, jerking upward. " What's the matter?"

" Remember the sergeant, the one we met on the train?"

" How can I ever forget him !"

" Then listen: he and a man named Alex are leaving the Newark airport on a flight at six-fifteen in the morning. They are flying to Miami and will change planes there for New Orleans. In New Orleans they will take another plane for Mexico City. In Mexico, they will drive to Vera Cruz and then ship out for Portugal." He paused. " I don't know what happens after that."

Conklin peered at him through the darkness. " What's all this?"

" Straight stuff. Honest."

" I am probably asking a silly question, but how do you know?"

Paul turned and pointed to his rumpled bed. " It just came to me. Peter, you'd better hurry."

Without another word Conklin leaped for the telephone, but still someone didn't move fast enough. The two hunted men left the Newark airport on schedule and were not caught until they landed in Miami.

Afterwards they quizzed him, the three of them by turns, but the sessions with Slater were more properly grillings than quizzes. He stayed with his original explanation: the entire line of flight had suddenly come to him in his sleep, and they were able to gain no more. To their questions as to why that should have happened, he said that he had constantly kept the sergeant in mind since the meeting in the dining car—which was truth. He left it to them to place interpretations as they pleased, quite sure they would assign to him the passive role.

Occasionally in later weeks, Conklin would arise in the mornings with a standard question.

And Paul would say, " Nope, nothing last night."

The move from the hotel suite occurred just before Christmas, with Paul, Peter Conklin and the two ever-present shadows being driven to a brick house far out on the Columbia Pike, well beyond the Naval Office building. It was a two-storey affair and had evidently been in preparation for them for some time. A telephone switchboard was installed in the first room beyond the entrance, and Paul looked quickly to see who was manning the board. Disappointed, he continued the first inspection of the house.

The rooms on the lower floors had been arranged to provide informal offices and lounging rooms, a large dining room and a kitchen. Upstairs were four bedrooms; Paul found that he and Conklin each had one to themselves, with a connecting door between. He noted with approval that bookcases had been installed in his for the small library he was slowly gathering. (He still clung to the worn copy of Roy's *Studies in Psychokinesis*). The bodyguards shared a third bedroom while the fourth and last was occupied by two new men assigned to the same job " for greater security purposes." All of the basement rooms except those used for heating and storage equipment had been given over to recreation facilities.

" Home." Conklin nodded approval.

" Maybe they put a swimming pool in the attic," Paul suggested.

Conklin looked to see if he was truly joking.

A cook and housekeeper appeared daily, went home nights. Three relays of switchboard operators turned their eight hour shifts and disappeared until the following day. Paul was on hand when each shift changed the first time, but the three girls were strangers to him. Emily occasionally appeared when someone came out from Washington, and the following interview needed the services of a stenographer. The parade of people trooping in and out waxed and waned, with Carnell holding court.

Conklin arranged a Christmas party for the household and Emily brought Karen to the new place.

" Well !" Karen greeted him warmly. " And how is your darling old grandfather?"

Paul shook his head in mock seriousness. " Barely escaped a noose just the other day. Horse stealing. He convinced them the horse followed him because he had sugar in his pocket."

" The old one must have a silver tongue. And how is your dancing?"

" The same as before—I haven't done a thing since that evening."

" Do you have a radio? Oh, yes—I see it. Shall we go on from where we left off?"

" Can you stand it?"

Karen laughed. " Try me." She held out her arms, and Paul found her still as blonde, still as warm.

" Nice," he said into her ear.

" Thank you."

The Christmas party brought something Paul had not expected. Their visitors stayed all night. No one objected afterward except the two familiar, grumbling bodyguards.

In mid-November, 1948, the house on Columbia Pike was shaken by a storm that was really an aftermath of another storm two weeks earlier. Paul wormed it out of Conklin a little at a time. Slater had not seen fit to enlarge the circle of seven people who were aware of Paul, and the sudden entry of two more was not to his liking—although there was nothing he could do about it. Slater had particularly omitted informing the White House because he felt, with many others, that the coming election would effect a change; there was a reasonable security risk involved in having too many people know about the first and only telepath. Slater was but one of the many who were rudely surprised on the morning after election, and as quickly as possible he hurried over to admit his dereliction. And so, in mid-November, 1948, a squall enveloped the house on the Pike and two new members joined the exclusive circle of Breen-watchers.

The second new man was a personal representative of the other, a major with suspicious eyes who stared at Paul as he would at a two-headed calf, and who visited the White House several times daily.

Nine men now knew a telepath lived in Washington.

Actually, Paul realized, there were eleven. He held his silence and waited, meanwhile containing his resentment as to his status there. He was, he knew, half guest and half prisoner.

IX

1949

The long routine abruptly changed in early 1949.

The change began with a perfunctory knock on Paul's bedroom door. He did not get up from the bed but merely raised his eyes above the book he was holding, to study the closed door. Carnell waited on the other side, a mentally agitated Carnell. He was alone. Paul called out, " Come in."

The panel opened immediately and a visibly agitated Carnell stood

there looking at him. " I'd like to talk to you, Paul. It's very important."

Paul laid down the book and sat up. " Come on in. Or would you rather talk downstairs?"

Carnell entered the bedroom and carefully closed the door behind him. " This will do nicely. Paul, I'm afraid we're in for a hell of a lot of trouble—all of us." He walked over beside the bed, turned a chair about and sat down.

Paul said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

Carnell lit a cigarette just to be doing something with his hands. " Do you remember the two men we nabbed three years ago in connection with the bomb information?"

Paul nodded. " I went to see them."

" Yes, and couldn't find a really worthwhile fact ! One was a courier who received information, paid for it, and then handed it over to still another person. He also arranged flights from the country when that became necessary. Acting on orders from some other unknown person, our courier purchased atomic bomb information from the sergeant, hid him, and then attempted to help him escape. Well, those two are in jail and I'll never understand why they didn't swing. But we still know nothing of the people higher up ! Do you also remember the escape route the sergeant was to follow?"

" Miami, New Orleans, Mexico, Portugal—yes."

" Yes. Well, shortly after we nabbed those two men we sent one of our own operatives down that trail. We supplied him with all the information known to the courier and the sergeant and shipped him down the route. He did everything in proper order, everything you found in the courier's mind; he trans-shipped at Miami, at New Orleans he drove from Mexico City to Vera Cruz and waited for the steamer fitting the description you furnished. He sailed for Portugal." Carnell stubbed out the cigarette with a savage motion. " In Portugal he was shot dead."

Paul watched him emotionlessly, already knowing the full story on his mind, but waiting for the man to tell it.

" We covered him all the way; we had men in each city, at each stop, shadows who followed him and watched him go through the right motions at the right time. He performed those movements letter perfect, according to the directions gleaned from the courier. When he sailed from Vera Cruz, we put men in Portugal to cover his landing; we wanted to see who contacted him there and where he would be sent next. We were fully prepared to follow him all the way to Siberia —if that was his unknown destination."

" But he was murdered."

" Murdered," Carnell repeated. " His unknown destination was Lisbon, a few hours after he landed. The instrument of death was a gutter Spaniard who would—and did—commit murder for fifty American dollars. The Spaniard was unable to describe the man who hired him, but he had been furnished with a pencil sketch of the agent and the name of the ship on which the agent was arriving. It was very simple. The Spaniard did not live very long; I regret that, for you might have been able to obtain more information—but then, our boys in Lisbon know nothing of you, and so the man died."

Paul questioned, " A pencil sketch?"

" An excellent likeness. Drawn by someone who waited at Miami, or New Orleans, or Mexico City, and then air-mailed the picture to Portugal. Well, we didn't try that again. But neither did anyone else. The particular route was closed down and never used again." He paused, looking beyond Paul. " A few months ago a new one was opened—or rather, we discovered a new one. We don't know how long it has been used."

" Mexico, again." Paul nodded.

" Mexico is a favourite jumping-off-place. Even during the war they didn't fully patrol their coastlines."

Paul closed his eyes, knowing what else must be said before Carnell left the room and feeling sorry for Carnell for having to say it. Slater had handed him the assignment and he was not happy about the matter; Carnell and Breen had got along very well together in the past years. But still, it must come out. What was it Conklin has said that long ago day on the train? " I believe that an older man in your place would never have permitted his discovery." And, " Let us suppose the Neanderthal leaders discovered that man, captured him, tied him with a rope and put his wits and skills to work for them. Nothing but trouble can come . . ." Now some of it was coming. Paul let Carnell take his time.

Carnell lit another cigarette. " We have reason to believe that fugitives and information are flowing along this new route—and perhaps others still undiscovered. That in itself isn't so alarming; there will always be escape routes and lines of information into and out of every country in the world. We have ours, of course. But one phase of it has become alarming. Since July of 1945 we've had a brand-new kind of headache to contend with, and the remedies we're prescribing are desperate ones. Paul, the United States is *supposed* to be the only nation in the world with nuclear weapons."

Paul nodded knowingly. " Supposed to be."

" But we aren't. We have reason to believe Great Britain has them or almost has them. If not at this date, they will very shortly. We

also have reason to believe that Russia will have the bomb much sooner than the five years predicted by our scientists. The sergeant who sold us out—and people like him—will see to that. You can appreciate our problem."

Paul nodded, waiting for that other matter.

" We must stop these information leaks, we must find and stop the people responsible for them, and we must search out the men higher up—the men in this country directing the espionage. We've about reached the limit of our natural resources. There remains only you." He fell silent.

Paul blinked at him and, seeking to ease him out of an embarrassing situation, suggested, " Mr. Carnell, I know what's on your mind; it isn't necessary to say it unless you want to."

" I want to !" Carnell burst out. " I want to spell the entire thing out in words so that each of us may know where we stand."

" All right."

Carnell hesitated, looked at the smoldering cigarette he had not smoked and mashed it out. He discovered himself absently reaching for the pack and stuffed it back into his pocket. " This isn't easy, Paul."

" No, sir."

" It began shortly after the ' dream ' you had—that one in which you saw the sergeant's exact escape route."

Paul nodded. Each motion of assistance involved him in still larger problems.

" To be precise," Carnell corrected himself, " a part of it began before that particular night. Ever since the day you were discovered, since the day you first walked into my office downtown, we have carried on an unceasing search for others like you. It hasn't been easy and it has taken much time; the number of men and women who have been processed into the armed services since 1940 is really astonishing. But one by one we have examined every single record, every rating and every intelligence test." He shook his head. " With negative results. But still, we aren't stopping. *Now* we're examining the record of every man, woman and child who has at any time applied for government service."

" That's going to take some doing !" Paul declared.

" A tremendous task," Carnell agreed. " But if we find just one more like *you* it will be well worth it."

" Let me answer one question in your mind," Paul interrupted, "and be quite honest at the same time. No, I don't know of anyone else."

" Thank you. It had occurred to us that you would be the first person to discover another telepathic, but we wondered if you'd reveal

that information. So, thank you." Again he reached for his cigarettes and again stopped himself. "Well, to get on with it . . . .

"After that night when you so clearly saw the escape route, we began wondering about you and we did something we should have done much sooner. To be brief, we set a team of scientific analysts on you. Those men were given every assistance possible, every faculty at our command, and that is not meager, if you'll permit a boast. Geneticists were sent to your home and the place of your birth, where they succeeded in tracing your ancestors back five generations. Their findings were given to the analysts. Psychologists were given your intelligence and aptitude tests, your army records as far as you progressed, and their reports were turned over to the analysts. And finally a dossier was compiled. A written record covering every hour of your life from the moment Conklin found you in that office on the post; the things you said, the movements you made, the expressions you displayed; the emotions you seemed to have. Into that dossier went the memories and impressions of many people who had observed you: Conklin, Palmer, Slater, Karen, Emily, the two men in the other room, myself—everyone. Your every spoken word that we could remember, your every mood." He stopped for a moment, quite embarrassed. "Forgive me, Paul. The way you danced and the manner in which you made love. Everything."

Paul's eyes slid toward an old book on the shelf. "Roy," he said aloud.

Carnell nodded. "Dr. Roy, and a fellow scientist he recommended, Dr. Grennell. You see, the book you carried everywhere with you finally opened our eyes, and we contacted Dr. Roy." Carnell grinned absently. "He was beside himself with joy. It nearly broke his heart when we refused to let you two meet. You would have guessed everything."

"I'd like to meet him now," Paul said wistfully.

"I suppose you may now. I'll check with Slater. Well, the dossier was complete and we turned it over to the analysts, Roy and Grennell. They were the only two outsiders who had to be told of you. And then we sat back to await the results." Carnell took out the cigarettes again and finally lit one. He said suddenly, "Karen isn't coming back."

"No," Paul responded bitterly. "I realize that."

"She's a wonderful woman!" He gestured with his two fingers. "Now if we only had polygamy in this country . . . Karen never knew *what* you were of course, but in time she guessed you were aware of her prying activities; it depressed her. Feminine intuition, I suppose. She felt quite badly about it because she had grown fond of you.

When she was ordered to include in the dossier the details of the night she spent here with you, we had a battle on our hands. She did it, but she requested never to be sent here again. She couldn't face you."

"How did you like my technique?" Paul asked coldly.

"Please, Paul. This is more embarrassing to me than it is to you. And please remember that I'm only following orders. I'm second in command."

"*He* hasn't been around lately either."

"He thinks it best to stay away; he realizes you dislike him."

"And vice versa."

"Yes, that's true. You don't have many friends."

"I seem to be losing them all the time." Paul was still hurt over the incidents leading up to Karen's forced entry in the dossier, even though it happened many weeks ago and he had known of it for as long. At a distance of many miles he had watched her prepare the report, had known the turmoil in her mind as she wrote it out, had known when it was finished that she would never again come back to the house on the Pike.

"The analysts," Carnell continued after a silence, "turned in their report."

"And Dr. Roy danced with glee?"

"Danced with glee. He said it was like seeing his own book come true; a Nobel Award couldn't please him as much. But—we got what we were looking for." Carnell turned his eyes away, seeking the sunlight at the window. "Paul, you haven't been entirely co-operative."

"I've done everything you've asked."

"Yes, you have, but still . . ." His eyes remained at the window. "The findings of Roy and Grennell indicate that your particular talents are *much* greater than we have believed. Much greater than the two manifestations thus far disclosed. The analysts have taken all the studies into consideration and, based upon their beliefs, have made a conservative estimate of the extent of your talents, wild talents, Roy termed them. In brief, Paul, they told us that you should be able to do *more* than merely scan the minds of persons in the same room with you, more than discover the route an escaping man is about to take—and that on but a single occasion." He stopped and turned his eyes back to the man on the bed.

"They are quite right," Paul replied woodenly.

Carnell peered at him. "They are?"

"They are."

"What . . . what more can you do?"

"Didn't Roy's report tell you?" he mocked.

"All right, if you want it that way." Carnell was obviously unhappy with the situation. "The report suggested that you need not be in the same room with a person, that it was entirely possible to scan minds at a distance."

"That's correct—to a degree."

"To a degree?"

"I must first meet the person and get to know him. I can mentally follow you, or Conklin, or Karen, wherever you go and what ever you do. At any time of the day or night. Whether you like it or not." Paul glanced at the man's face and saw the pressure there. "But I can do very little with those people I don't know as well—Slater, for instance. And I can do nothing with people I've never met."

"But that sergeant, and the courier——"

"I kept watch on the sergeant from the day you first questioned me about him. I knew it was something important and stayed with him. I saw his surroundings through his eyes, heard his conversations through his ears. But I could do nothing at all with the courier at the time because I had never met him, I saw him only when the sergeant saw him. It's a different situation now since I visited them in jail and deliberately probed their minds. They can never hide from me until they die. Nor can you, or Conklin, or Karen."

"Slater?" Carnell noted the omission.

Paul frowned at him. "Slater is a slightly different proposition, and I'm not sure I can explain it to you. Slater has the most disciplined mind I've ever known. Please don't take offense at the comparison, but you believe you have an iron-willed mind. Slater's is impermeable steel compared to yours; I can *know* his mind and yet I can't. In the same room with him, I am able to follow most of his thinking with ease, but yet if he desires to keep something hidden from me he can do so by rigidly avoiding all thought of the matter. I can see what he is doing, but I cannot see behind that barrier. I can perceive the erection of the barrier, the reasons for it, the strain to maintain it, but I cannot discover what the barrier is concealing. And that is why he has stayed away from here of late. He senses the limitations of my powers and believes that I can read him only if he's in the house."

"What about that last?" Carnell wanted to know.

Paul studied him, knowing that the conversation would be reported to Slater. "Yes and no—I can't give a clear answer. There are times when I follow him about Washington as easily as I follow you; there are other times when he is lost to me. If I concentrate deeply, I can see him in his office and see what he is doing. But I can't always discern what he is thinking in that office. I simply haven't been able to know him as well as I know you. So he stays away from here."

" I think I understand. Very well; Roy and Grennell are correct in that instance. You are able to scan some minds at a distance. That would seem to explain the knowledge of the escape route."

" It does. I listened to the courier read it off."

Carnell's gaze drifted back to the window. " Roy next suggested powers of clairvoyance and precognition; he believed that knowledge of the escape route was explainable by those terms. But they weren't . . . ." He paused, waiting.

" Roy is again correct. And again the power is limited. I am aware that you—or Slater—are intending to separate Conklin and myself; I've realized for some time that Conklin is to be reassigned somewhere else." He stopped talking as a train of thought flashed into Carnell's mind. " Now," he said, " I know why and where. Until this moment I didn't know why or where, I only realized he was leaving."

Carnell brushed his hands across his face. " Our analysts seem to have done a complete job. I'm still embarrassed by all this, Paul." His mind skipped down a list committed to memory. " Dr. Roy's report indicates some sort of mental phenomenon he termed parabolic receptivity. He likened it to radar. The report states that you should have the ability to be constantly aware of persons and things about you, even though you have not seen or touched those objects. Is that true?"

" Yes."

Carnell waited.

Paul said, " I can describe to you the people in the house at this moment and what each of them is doing. The man who drove you out here today is sitting down in the hall flirting with the telephone operator. I don't know him, can't scan his mind. But I'm aware that he is there. Our cook is out in the yard and the potatoes she left on the stove are beginning to burn."

Carnell started from his chair. " Well, hadn't we better warn her—"

" No," Paul grinned at him. " Someone downstairs will smell them in about thirty seconds and yell at her."

They sat in silence, Carnell straining his ears and absently glancing at his wrist watch. Paul continued to watch the agent's face, grinning in high humour. A sudden yell sounded through the closed door Carnell's eyes darted to his watch.

" Twenty-six seconds," he announced.

" I missed by four," Paul said laconically.

" Paul . . ." Carnell turned to him. " All this makes me feel better, immeasurably better, You know the trouble we're having downtown." Paul nodded but said nothing. Carnell said, " They pass the most impossible laws to maintain the most impossible secrecy and then

give us hell when we can't fully comply. I thank God Russia doesn't have you."

Paul asked quietly, "How do you know they haven't?"

Carnell's jaw dropped. "Paul! You wouldn't——"

"Don't be silly. I'm not talking about myself."

The suggestion so unnerved the C.I.C. officer that it was many minutes before he could force himself back into the chair, many minutes before the purpose of his visit returned to mind and he could once again objectively consider the analysts' report. Carnell paced the floor, his fist smacking into his open palm with monotonous regularity. The suggestion upset him, not only because if true the consequences could be unbelievable, but because they hadn't thought of *that* before. They had searched their own military records seeking another possible telepath and now they were searching other government records. Even if it were possible, no one had suggested examining the files of foreign countries. No one had imagined that any other country but the United States could possess a telepath! What idiotic blindness!

Carnell whirled around. "Paul . . . ?"

"I've already answered that one. There are no others to my knowledge."

"But you would *know* if another should appear?"

"I don't know. Maybe—maybe not. What would I look for? What indications? I've never met another person like myself. How would I recognize them?"

"But you could read their minds!"

"If they wanted their minds read," Paul reminded him.

"Do you mean they could forbid it—conceal it?"

"*I don't know*, Mr. Carnell. I have nothing to guide me! How can I cope with something I've never experienced before, something of that nature? I would actually have to meet one and try."

Carnell had to be satisfied with that although he didn't like it. It was difficult for him to understand, because he was not a telepath and did not know the mental processes involved, did not know the problems and shortcomings present in theoretical cases. Another such telepath might or might not readily be apparent to the first one; there would be no real way of knowing until such a meeting occurred. In time, Carnell returned to the matter under discussion, the report on Breen handed in by the analysts.

"Ah, Paul . . . about this matter of teleportation. Dr. Roy indicates that——"

"Dr. Roy missed fire completely on that one," Paul cut in. "I can't. I've tried, and I can't move myself an inch unless my legs carry me."

"You—tried?"

"Certainly. I wanted to find out."

"But it failed?"

"It failed. If it had worked, I would be tempted to move myself away from here at the first opportunity. I'd jump into the next state or the next country, or to the very limit of my powers. I've even had some ideas about a writ of *habeas corpus* to get me out of here, but I know Slater would quash it because I'm still army. So—I can promise you this—*if* I can make teleportation work in actual practice, I'll go so far and so fast your department will never find me."

Carnell dropped his gaze to the rug and after some moments replied, "I didn't realize you felt that way."

"I got into this with my eyes closed, Mr. Carnell. I was full of patriotism, I was green, and I was eager to help people whether they wanted it or not. Peter Conklin warned me of what might come, but I was too naive to understand his warning. A long time ago I said that I didn't want to be pushed around; I didn't like being pushed around, after I had volunteered for a job. But I was pushed, all the same. You understand what I mean. You have never knowingly pushed me, but it has happened. Karen knowingly did it at first, but she was acting under orders and balked when her conscience hurt. Slater has knowingly and deliberately pushed at all times."

"I'm sorry. I truly am."

"I know that; I know you honestly are." Paul gestured with his hand. "Let's get on with it."

"The report," Carnell continued unhappily, "states that some degree of telekinesis should be present among your talents. The analysts were not too sure just what degree might be expected, what particular direction the faculty might take. They said only that their studies led them to the conclusion that telekinesis is present, in whatever degree of effectiveness." He looked up. "Can you enlighten me?"

"May I ask a question first? A rather personal and alarming question?"

They both noticed the minute hesitation before Carnell answered, "Well—certainly." He was instantly on guard before some unimaginable thing.

"*Must* you report everything said here back to Slater?" Paul wanted to know. "Or can you keep your mouth shut on certain parts of it?"

Carnell was gaping at him, taken aback. "Are you suggesting that I withhold——"

"I'm asking if it is possible to tell you something that will *not* be repeated to Slater?"

Carnell reached again for the package of cigarettes, found it empty and hurled the crumpled paper across the room. He glanced at Paul in anxious uncertainty, looked away, made up his mind and came back again.

" I'm sorry, no," he answered finally.

" I'm sorry too," Paul told him softly. He moved off the bed and stood up. " I guess this has gone about as far as it can go."

" But the telekinesis——"

" I'd like to tell you about telekinesis, Mr. Carnell. Believe me, I really would. I like you and trust you. There are some matters I'd like to discuss with you in strict privacy, but they aren't for Slater's ears. I'm sorry, but you'll have to ask Dr. Roy about telekinesis."

Carnell said hesitantly, " Paul, you should know my position. It's more than a matter of personal loyalty; it's a national loyalty as well. I have sworn to do my duty, to uphold my office. In a manner of speaking, Slater and myself *are* the department, and he is my commanding officer. I can't withhold information from him."

" He keeps it from you."

Carnell was caught by surprise, staring at Paul with some incredulity. " That's his privilege," he said stiffly. He wandered about the room for a moment waiting for Paul to say more. When nothing more was forthcoming he asked, " Is this all?"

Paul said, " Until I can talk to you alone—yes."

Carnell walked out without another word.

There was a light tap at the door. Without turning from the window and his casual watching of the cook puttering about the yard, he called, " Come in, Peter."

" How did you guess it was me?" Conklin asked with a wide grin. He pushed the door shut behind him and stood surveying the room, studying Paul's back, knowing the signs. " Carnell went by me in a dream—is it raining or snowing? Somebody handed him a big one."

Paul turned around and leaned against the window sill. " I'm going to hand you another, just as big."

" Fire away."

" Would you be able to do something for me, or discuss a matter with me, and not report it to your superiors?"

Conklin blinked and his eyes grew round. " No wonder Carnell was asleep; you knocked him out. Paul, this might be a serious matter."

" Could you?" Paul persisted.

" I don't know . . ." Conklin shook his head, puzzled. " Let me think about this. If it is an official matter involving the department, absolutely no. If it were a private matter—Well, let me think about it a moment."

Paul crossed over to a closet and opened it, getting a bottle of bourbon and two glasses from a rack inside the door. Conklin watched his movements in silence. Paul said, " I will guarantee you, Peter, that what I ask will not harm you in any way. There are two things I would like to have done without knowledge of them going beyond us. I want to make a purchase, and I want some information found. The first will be easy, but the second may prove difficult. When you can make up your mind, I will tell you about it."

" Let me think," Conklin repeated.

Paul poured two drinks of bourbon and handed one to Conklin. " Take your time," he suggested. " But I'd like to know your answer in the next few days."

" Is there a reason for hurry?" He stared at the drink and at Paul.

" Yes. You're leaving."

" The hell I am?"

" I'm afraid you are."

" Why?"

" Two reasons why. Slater has decided that you and I are too friendly to suit him; he's breaking us up. He also may believe that in time a part of your loyalty will switch to me, and he doesn't want that. Do you know about Roy and Grennell?"

" I've heard something about the matter," Conklin replied cautiously.

" Have you read their report?"

" No."

" That's the second reason you're leaving. The report revealed to Slater there's more to the iceberg than appears on the surface. He's going to take advantage of that and the advantage involves you."

" And I'm leaving here?"

" Yes."

" When?"

" In less than a week, I should judge."

" Where am I going?"

" Russia."

" *Russia* ! Ye gods—why there?"

" Bomb hunting."

Conklin rubbed his yes, dazed by the sudden turn of events. "Russia! Oh, hell. When will I see you again?"

" You won't."

X

Peter Conklin was struck dumb.

He gulped down the bourbon without really tasting it and held himself still, enveloped with shock, his hand enfolding the empty glass.

A thinner glass would have been crushed under the brutal pressure. While his eyes seemed to be staring at Paul, they weren't seeing him, weren't seeing the room; instead they were looking at something else far away and beyond immediate comprehension. Something halfway around the world.

In all the years Paul had known Conklin, this was the first time he had seen the agent lose his mental equilibrium, had witnessed a fall from character. Since that initial meeting in the captain's office nearly four years before, Conklin had always been the cool and self-possessed operative who cloaked his identity and his profession behind a poker face. Of late, the face was tempered with laughter and friendliness, with camaraderie and amity, but it remained constantly in original character. Until now.

" I—won't?" he asked uselessly.

Paul shook his head, mute.

" Oh, hell !" Conklin said again. He struggled to express his emotions, and managed, " I feel sort of pushed in."

" I'm not happy about it," Paul offered.

Conklin looked down at the glass in his hand and swished the tiny amount of liquor remaining in the bottom. The few drops raced around the glass. " I guess the honeymoon is over; I have to go back to work. It's been nice."

" Honeymoon," Paul repeated with a humourless grin. " Those are almost the words Slater used when he read Dr. Roy's report on me. Carnell didn't have the nerve to repeat them, but he was told to tell me, ' Tell that son of a bitch the honeymoon is over. He goes to work for us—or else.'

" Carnell is delicate about such matters." Conklin looked up at Paul. " Or *else*?"

" Slater didn't elaborate. Maybe he meant the salt mines."

" Go easy, Paul. Watch your step. He can make it tough for you."

" Not half as tough as I can make it for him," Paul retorted flatly. " Not *half*. Carnell was partially upset because I wouldn't confirm a part of Roy's report. Roy had made some brilliant deductions in the field of telekinesis, and they wanted to know if the doctor was right or wrong. I gave them no satisfaction."

" They'll keep prying."

" Slater will make me mad someday and find out the sudden way. I owe him a lot of nastiness."

Conklin walked over to the window, sat down and put his heels up on the window sill. Paul moved another chair beside him and set the liquor bottle between them. The winter sky was dark with leaden clouds, threatening rain or snow. After a reflective silence, Conklin spoke.

" So I won't be seeing you again?"

" Not after you leave here—no."

" Well ! We've come a long way together. And I think I've enjoyed every minute of it, despite some rather stiff jolts back there at the beginning. Is there"—he hesitated—" no chance?"

" None. Slater does not intend to let us see each other again."

Conklin moved his head away from the window to lock glances with him, a direct question in his eyes. He repeated the question aloud. " And *you* see no later meeting?"

" None at all."

" Then I suppose I must accept it." He refilled the glass in his hand and stared through the liquid. " Cheers."

" And good luck."

" I'll need that, too ! Russia, by hell ! I wish you'd tell me about it; what happened this time?"

" Boiled down, you're going bomb hunting. Enough information to cause alarm has slipped through the security net and been smuggled abroad; some plans and actual drawings have gone over. Top brass

thinks that Russia will have the atomic bomb pretty soon, much sooner than the original estimate based on research calculations. They underestimated Russia's potential and never dreamed outside information would be channeled over to them. The calculations had to be discarded when it was discovered that White Sands and Chalk River leaked secrets. So—they have no hope of preventing or even circumventing a foreign atomic programme now. All they can do is watch and wait, pry and peer, keep abreast of developments to learn *how soon and how much.*"

" And I'm the eyes and ears?"

" One set, yes. Others are already over there and still more will follow you, but you won't be allowed to contact any of them. You'll be briefed and then shipped over to find out for yourself. What you discover you'll report to me. You see, you're supposed to be something different than all those others."

" Why? Because I know about you?"

" Because you pass your thinking along to me. You do the mental broadcasting and I do the receiving. No couriers, no cables, no in-between contacts. No other man ever approaches you to expose your activities."

" I just *think* about it? At that distance?" Conklin moved in his chair, the better to study him.

" Can do, yes. They will either give you Dr. Roy's report to read or they'll tell you all about it. They found out that I'm able to follow you wherever you go, see what you see, hear what you hear, know every thought that passes through your head. I can do it any time, all the time. The distance involved is no barrier at all—not as well as I know you. So they're setting us up as a relay team."

" Paul . . . this new thing, this extended faculty, is it a recent development?"

" My being able to read you at a distance? No. I've done it for some time; wherever you go in the world I can follow you." He chuckled. " One of the reasons Slater is unhappy. He thinks it has been going on for years."

" Has it?"

" Some of the years, yes. Not all of them."

Conklin considered that for a moment, dwelling on the many personal episodes firmly lodged in his heart and memory. And suddenly he whistled.

" *No,*" Paul cut short the dawning trend of thought. " I've never done that, Peter. Not to you. I've looked in at odd moments without your knowledge, seeking the answer to some particular question; and I've unconsciously sopped up the residue which spills from you like

water, but I've never done what you must be thinking now. And I'm not peeking now—I'm looking at the expression on your face." Paul had to grin. " Sometimes I find myself an involuntary Peeping Tom, but I get the hell out of there in a hurry !"

" Thanks, pal !" Conklin's answering grin was weak. " You worried me for a moment. And Emily wouldn't have liked it, if she knew."

" Slater forced Karen to tell him about ours."

" The devil he did !"

" Yes. And she won't come back to see me again. That's another thing I'm saving up. One by one I'm losing my friends: Karen, you, and I suspect Carnell will be moved after a while. I suspect Slater's long-range intention is to surround me with strangers."

" Why?"

" Because he hates my guts, and he knows I hate his. How's your memory?"

" It stretches back four years," Conklin replied.

" That's the answer."

Conklin drummed fingernails on the whiskey glass. " How does it feel to be Cro-Magnon?"

" I wish I were a Neanderthal." He put out his hand to touch the other's arm. " I'd change places with you right now—Russia and all."

" Sorry. I wouldn't change with you."

They sat for a while without talking, and now and then someone would refill the glasses. Conklin placed a cold pipe in his mouth and stared at a colder sky, wondering if the same forbidding overcast would be seen on the other side of the world. *That* was certainly ruining a lot of things ! A suddenly heating romance must now be postponed and the many plans they had foolishly made would have to be filed away or abandoned altogether. He had already made a down payment on an engagement ring and started inquiries into the possibility of an apartment; finding one in Washington still was not easy, and he expected the search to last many months. He had not taken time to figure out how he would make the move away from the house on the Pike—or even considered the possibility that his superiors would disapprove. But Emily certainly couldn't live there in the house with them; he had supposed some arrangements for living out and working in could be made. Well—so much for that.

No marriage, no apartment, no heaven with Emily. It would be no more than a rosy dream, something that would have to await his return. And how long might that be? There was no knowing; Paul himself couldn't foresee the reunion. And Paul could see . . .

What *could* Paul see and know? That analysts' report must have been astonishing, to judge by what occurred between Paul and Carnell an hour ago. He fervently hoped his superiors would allow him to read the report before he went overseas. It would be rewarding—if frightening—to discover some of his own theories had borne fruit. Since that long ago day four years ago he constantly speculated on Paul, forming new impressions and revising old ones, almost from day to day. And now, he had been told, his innermost thoughts could be traced and read, halfway around the world. A reading of that report would certainly be a treat!

"What now?" he asked suddenly. "When do we start?"

"You start in a few weeks—I don't know just when. You're going to Europe as a tourist; some of the airlines are offering off-season rates until warm weather, and you're a bargain-hunting tourist. New York to Shannon, Shannon to London, London to Paris. From Paris you'll probably take a sightseeing bus to the Low Countries—and then you vanish. In a casual manner. No search, no hue and cry. Have fun, Peter." He considered a moment. "And, Peter, watch your step. Pretend you're in enemy territory the moment you reach Shannon. Do you know what happened in Portugal?"

Conklin said grimly, "I know."

"All right then. It could happen to you before you ever see Paris. Use your head."

"Meanwhile, what?"

"Meanwhile, you are going to teach me to play spy. This afternoon, or maybe this evening or tomorrow morning at the latest, we're going into town." Paul scratched his chin, ruminating. "We're going down to haunt an embassy."

"Oh? Someone there?"

"I gather that someone will be there soon; he's in New York now, he just got off the ship and checked into a New York hotel. I gather that he's chock-full of information and instructions from home. When he leaves New York for Washington, we go down and hang around the embassy to await his arrival. I'm supposed to find out what he knows."

"Jolly," Conklin commented, "real jolly. Why don't you simply inquire now?"

"I can't do that. I don't know the man, I've never seen him in my life; he's a total stranger. If I knew him, I could reach him now. I could find out what Carnell wants to know." Paul shrugged. "But a stranger remains a stranger as long as he *is* a stranger. If that makes sense to you."

"In a vague way."

"So we're going down to the embassy and wait for him. Carnell is hoping he has inside information on a very hot subject."

"Those bombs?"

"Those bombs." Paul nodded solemnly.

"See here. Doesn't the fact that he speaks a different language many any difference?"

"No. You speak French and Spanish, don't you?"

"Both, yes."

"All right, try this. Think of something in either of those languages or both of them. Try not to form English word pictures; try to *think* in French or Spanish."

Conklin closed his eyes, frowning with effort.

"*Esprit fort*," Paul quoted from his mind, "I am a free thinker—I am a strong-minded man."

"Well, I am!" Conklin laughed ruefully.

"No doubt about it. You used to scare me. Let's go downstairs and see if the cook has burned up all the lunch." He pushed back the chair.

The afternoon light was fading early, even for January, and a cold, drizzling rain dampened visibility. A black Packard sedan waited in the drive a few steps away. Paul Breen pulled the collar of his overcoat higher and tighter about his neck, then ducked his head to ward off the slanting rain. He moved down the steps toward the car and then suddenly stopped as somebody opened a rear door for him. Paul stared at the man, recognized him as having been around before, raked the Packard with a quick glance and recognized it, and finally climbed inside the car.

Inside, the sense of depression gripped him.

Peter Conklin moved in beside him. One of the two bodyguards ran around to the opposite side of the car and entered, placing Paul in the middle. The second bodyguard climbed into the front seat with the driver. The Packard began moving along the drive.

"Peter . . ."

"Yes?"

Instead of answering, Paul reached forward to tap the driver's shoulder. "Stop."

The Packard slammed to a halt, jolting those who had not time to brace themselves.

"What is it, Paul?"

"Something's wrong."

Conklin made a sound deep in his throat and his hand slid toward a shoulder holster. The bodyguard sitting on the opposite side already had a gun in his hand, searching the surrounding lawn and shrubbery.

" What's wrong? Can you tell me what it is?"

" No, I don't know what it is."

" You're sure?" Conklin knew it to be a foolish question.

" As wrong as hell, but I can't see what it is !"

The man in the front seat twisted around. " I'll take a look at the street." He slipped out of the car and trotted along the drive, one hand in a coat pocket. Behind them, the hesitation and the subsequent activity had been noted in the house. The front door was flung open and two men ran down the steps toward the car, coatless, but armed.

" There's nothing in the street," Paul protested.

" Let him look anyway." The men from the house ran up and peered into the windows. Conklin shook his head, but they waited beside the car, looking over the grounds.

The street was clear. The bodyguard standing at the entrance of the drive waved them on.

" Okay?" the driver asked.

" Go ahead," Paul answered. The Packard moved slowly along the drive. At the street it paused, and the bodyguard got in.

" All clear," he said uselessly. The car continued out onto the Pike and nosed toward Washington.

Conklin was sweating. He wanted to ask where the trouble might lie, where it might be located, but he couldn't ask such a direct question in front of the car's passengers for fear of getting a direct answer. The bodyguards knew only whom they were guarding, not what they were guarding. And then he cursed his own stupidity. He didn't have to ask and be overheard. Briefly, he touched Paul's arm and then ran his hand across his forehead.

" *Paul, is something wrong with the car? Tyres?*" Because he was not used to it, he enunciated each word clearly and slowly in his mind. His lips said nothing.

Paul closed his eyes as though he were examining the automobile. At last he shook his head.

" *The men in it? Any of them?*"

The same negative reply.

" *Along the street?*" was the next thought.

Paul frowned, hesitated before answering and then shrugged.

" *But it's a possibility—is that what you mean?*"

A nod.

" *Something ahead of us then. It must be that.*" He ceased to direct his thoughts at Paul, to review mentally the route ahead of them. Abruptly he tapped the driver's shoulder. " Do you know where we are going?"

" Yes, sir."

" Then take a different route. Twist around and come in by some other direction."

The Packard slowed and left the Pike at the next intersection, turning north to make a wide swing around behind Arlington Cemetery. " This is silly," Conklin hurled the thought at Paul. " *We've never gone to the embassy before*; *there is no set route.*"

Paul nodded, gazing ahead through the windshield. The grim sense of imminent depression clung to him. Slowly, he looked at the faces of each man in the car or as much of their faces as he could see without attracting attention. He found no rewarding sign. But something was ahead of them, something was to happen—of that he was certain. The car sped toward the intersection with Lee Boulevard, and Paul suddenly gripped Conklin's arm.

" Slow !" Conklin commanded, catching the suggestion. " Watch the traffic coming in on either side."

They moved onto Lee and then across it, without incident. A prowl car swung from Lee and followed them for a moment, until the driver caught their license plate. The prowler fell back and was lost in traffic.

" *Any ideas*?" Conklin shot at Paul.

" Do you have hunches?" Paul asked aloud.

" Sometimes."

" I don't want to upset you—I'm not just making this up. But—well, it feels funny. You know what I mean."

Conklin nodded, staring at the backs of the men in the front seat. " I know what you mean."

" When I was a kid, sometimes I'd wake up in the morning with hunches, good or bad ones. If it was a happy hunch something nice would happen before the day was out; if it wasn't . . ."

Conklin's only answer was a whisper under his breath. He understood the idea Paul was trying to communicate to him, and he saw with some satisfaction that his own unease was spreading among the car's passengers. Damn Carnell and his harebrained ideas ! He wished he had Breen back at the house, safe and sound inside four walls. Anywhere but here on a Washington street outside an unfriendly embassy. But still—*this* was Breen's purpose, his job.

The Packard worked its way north and east past the island, sped over the Key Bridge and turned on M Street. " Not much choice now," the driver said.

" Take the shortest way; let's get this over."

The long sedan was parked innocently at the curb a block distant from the embassy. Five men remained seated inside, studying the

street, the embassy building and the iron-grillwork gate swung shut across its entrance drive.

" Listen carefully," Conklin said swiftly, " this is the schedule. We can't drive down there and park without arousing suspicion; after all, they know their man is coming home, too. We'll get perhaps a minute's warning that he's on the way. A tail is waiting at the station for him now; that tail will get here a jump ahead of him and give us the sign." Conklin turned to the man sitting on the other side of Paul. " Gordon, you and I and Breen will stroll along the walk, talking; we'll time our arrival at the gate so that we'll have to stop and let the car pass."

Gordon nodded, judging the distance.

" Their chauffeur drives like a madman and he swings off the street and through that gate like a kid with a hot-rod. So we'll stop, to keep from being run over. If we've mistimed our arrival and have gone past the gate, Breen turns around for a curious look. Only Breen." He tapped Paul's arm in emphasis. " Paul, your man will be in the rear seat and probably sitting on the right side. He's sixty, has a small mustache, wears rimless glasses and a hat such as Gordon is wearing. If the hat is off—fine white hair. Look fast, Paul. You won't have more than a second."

" Do my best." He was aware of the curiously subtle glances of the bodyguards, wondering what was going on.

" Hell and Maria !" Conklin snapped petulantly. " I don't see why we couldn't have planted you in one of those windows across the street. Perfect cover."

" That's no good. I have to see the man close up. I need a good look at him and as long as possible."

" Well, we can hope for the best. I can't imagine them trying to pull something in the middle of Washington. All right . . . . Forrie, you'll drive on to the next corner and wait for us. Gates will follow us by fifty feet. And if anything goes wrong, close in fast !"

Conklin pursed his lips, watching Paul. " Still got it?"

Paul nodded. " Hard." He fingered the back of his neck. " Here."

" Want to back out?"

" Will Slater let us?"

" No."

" That's my answer, too."

" All right," Conklin repeated tautly. " If anything goes wrong, you jump ! And jump fast. Pick your spot and don't think about us —if we can't get out of the way it's our tough luck. Maybe that damned fool chauffeur will go over the curb at us, maybe anything. . . . You be ready to move, one way or the other. I'll be in front of you, Gordon stays behind you." He turned cold eyes on the bodyguard. " And

I mean *close* behind. If something is to happen, you or I get it first. Understand?"

I'll breathe down the back of his neck."

A noisy car appeared out of the darkness on the street ahead, headlights dim with age. Behind the wheel, Forrie said quickly, " Here's the tip."

" Positive?"

Forrie nodded. " I know that car." He peered through the darkness. " Two people in the front seat."

The old car rattled toward them. Paul watched it, knew that Karen was driving, knew that she had picked up her companion on the run at the station. As they neared, Karen rolled down the window on her side and reached for the glowing cigarette between her lips. Her eyes slanted toward the Packard, searching out the occupants. When the two cars were abreast, she flicked the cigarette out the window. It sailed in a fiery arc across the short space and hit the Packard broadside, to tumble to the street. Gordon had his door open, already moving. Paul flung a quick look at the old car, but it was past them and Karen kept her attention on the street ahead. She was striving furiously not to think of him.

" Move," Conklin urged, pushing at him.

Paul slid out of the car and crossed to the walk. As he left the protection of the car's bulk he stopped short and flung up a sudden hand to clasp the back of his neck. " Oh, damn, Peter ! We're hexed."

" Move !" Conklin snapped again. " Keep moving. It's a matter of seconds now." He took a position on one side of Paul. Gordon moved up on the opposite side. " Neck hurt?"

" They're behind us."

" Who's behind us?" Conklin jerked his head around, saw only Gates leaving the Packard. " Use your head, Paul ! What is it?"

" *I don't know.* It's too . . . dark, I can't see anything. Something's behind us."

" Get behind, Gordon." Conklin turned and motioned for Gates to close in. Gordon obediently stepped close behind Paul, almost walking on his heels. Gates came up, narrowing the fifty-foot gap between them. There was a soft mesh of gears and the Packard slid by them in the night, toward the rendezvous at the farther corner. Beyond the Packard the bright headlights of another car rushed to meet it, travelling fast.

" Embassy car," Conklin said tersely. " Step up the pace." They moved faster, watching the grillwork gate to gauge the ground and their speed. A horn sounded in the near distance and the great gate started to swing open, moved by an embassy guard. " Faster," Conklin whispered. " We're going to make it."

Paul walked with his head high, eyes closed and holding on to Conklin's arm for guidance. He was searching the street behind them, desperately seeking the danger he knew was there. The thing in the back of his head was like an ice pick biting into his skull. Something like a——

The embassy car slowed almost imperceptibly, abreast of the gate, and snapped around in a fast arc into the drive.

—a gun. "Gun!" Paul shouted aloud. "Down!" He brought up a knee in lightning action, jolting Conklin's spine and sending him staggering. In the same instant he whipped out his arm, grabbed Gordon around the neck and tried to drag him to the ground with him.

There was a soft, faraway bark. The embassy car shot forward through the open gate, faces peering out at the tumbling figures. Paul hit the sidewalk hard, bruising his face and smashing a gash over one eye. Just ahead of him, Conklin was whirling on his belly, gun out, searching the night behind them.

"Paul? Were you hit?"

"I'm all right."

"Where'd it come from?"

"I don't know. Some window I think." He caught a new movement. "*Look out*!" He flinched.

The thing barked again and a streak of pure white fire raced across the back of his neck. He dropped his head limply. Conklin fired blindly across the street, seeking the hidden marksman.

Beside Paul, Gordon spouted a fountain of blood.

In an apartment nearly three miles away, a girl screamed. She stared with horror at the scene on the sidewalk.

To be concluded