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BALLANTINE BOOKS

CONDITIONALLY HUMAN

3 SCIENCE FICTION NOVELLAS BY

WALTER M. MILLER JR.

Author of "A Canticle for Leibowitz"

CONDITIONALLY HUMAN

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Which is more important—the life of a dog (even a very smart, very long-lived dog) or of a child? No question, surely—unless you're not allowed to have kids.

How much courage does it take to maintain the dignity of man? Is it just a question of adaptability, or does it have to take a life?

Where does tolerance end and true acceptance begin? Where skin, everyone's skin, becomes a scaly grey horror? Or does one need some private, personal motive for growing up?

MOVING, PROVOCATIVE, AND STIMULATING, THESE ARE STORIES THAT STAY WITH THE READER LONG AFTER THE BOOK IS FINISHED.

Also by Walter M. Miller Jr.
A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ

CONDITIONALLY HUMAN

WALTER M. MILLER JR.

BALLANTINE BOOKS NEW YORK

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CONDITIONALLY HUMAN

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He knew there was no use hanging around after breakfast, but he could not bear leaving her like this. He put on his coat in the kitchen, stood uncertainly in the doorway, and twisted his hat in his hands. His wife still sat at the table, fingered the handle of an empty cup, stared fixedly out the window at the kennels behind the house, and pointedly ignored his small coughings and scrapings. He watched the set of her jaw for a moment, then cleared his throat.

"Anne?"

"What?"

"I can't stand seeing you like this."

"Then go away."

"Can't I do anything—?"

"I've told you what to do."

Her voice was a monotone, full of hurt. He could neither endure the hurt nor remove it. He gingerly crossed the room to stand behind her, hoping she'd look up at him and let her face go soft, maybe even cry a little. But she kept gazing out the window in accusing silence. He chuckled suddenly and touched her silk-clad shoulder. The shoulder shivered away. Her dark hair quivered as she shuddered, and her arms were suddenly locked tightly about her breasts as if she were cold. He pulled back his

hand; his big pliant face went slack. He gulped forlornly.

"Honeymoon's over, huh?"

"Ha!"

He backed a step away, paused again. "Hey, baby, you knew before you married me," he reminded her.

"I did not."

"You knew I was District Inspector for the F. B. A. You knew I had charge of a pound."

"I didn't know you *killed* them!" she snapped, whirling.

"I don't have to kill many," he offered.

"That's like saying you don't kill them very dead."

"Look, honey, they're only animals."

"*Intelligent* animals!"

"Intelligent as a human imbecile, maybe."

"A baby is an imbecile. Would you kill a baby? of course you would! You do! That's what they are: babies. I hate you."

He withered, groped desperately for a new approach. "Look, 'intelligence' is a word applicable only to humans. It's the name of a human function, and . . ."

"And that makes *them* human!" she finished. "Murderer!"

"Baby!"

"Don't call me baby! Call them baby!"

He made a miserable noise in his throat, backed a few steps toward the door, and beat down his better judgment against speaking again. "Anne, honey, look! Think of the good things about the job. Sure, everything has its ugly angle. But just think: we get this house rent-free; I've got my own district with no local boss to hound us; I make my own hours; you'll meet lots of people that stop in at the pound. It's a fine job, honey!"

Her face was a mask again. She sipped her coffee and seemed to be listening. He blundered hopefully on.

"And what can I do about it? I can't help my Placement Aptitude score. They say Bio-Authority is where I belong, and it's to Bio I have to go. Oh, sure, I don't *have* to work where they send me. You can always join the General Work Pool, but that's all the law allows, and GWP'ers don't have families. So I go where Placement Aptitude says I'm needed."

"You've got aptitudes for killing kids?"

He groaned and closed his eyes. "They gave me the job because I like kids. And because I have a biology degree, and a knack for being neighborly, maybe—with plain people. And because I'm not really brainy enough to be a scientists' scientist. Just a technician. Understand? And destroying the unclaimed animals is the smallest part of it. Honey, before the evolvotron, before anybody ever heard of Anthropol Incorporated, people used to have municipal officials for such things. Dogcatchers, I think they called them. Didn't have the Dog-R series then, of course—not mutants. But that's all it is. I'm just an up-to-date dogcatcher."

Ice-green eyes turned slowly to meet his gaze. Her face by window-light seemed delicately cut from dusty marble. A corner of her mouth twitched contempt. Then she looked out the window toward the kennels again.

He backed to the door, plucked nervously at a splinter on the woodwork, watched her hopefully for a moment.

"Work to do. Got to go."

"Do you need to be kissed?" Sweetly contemptuous. He ripped the splinter loose. "See you tonight."

The front door slammed. She sat listening to his footsteps on the porch and down the walk. Then the kennel truck's starter grumbled, and its turbines whined to life. She choked back a sob and started after him, but by the time she got to the porch, the truck was already backed into the street. It lurched suddenly away with angry acceleration toward the highway that lay to the east. She stood blinking in the red morning sunlight, shoulders slumped. Things were wrong with the world.

A bell rang somewhere, rang again. She started slightly, shook herself, went to answer the telephone. A carefully enunciated voice that sounded chubby and professional called for Inspector Norris. She told it disconsolately that he was gone.

"Gone? Oh, you mean to work. I thought for a moment you meant . . . heh heh. Can this be the new Mrs. Norris?" The voice was hearty, greasy. She muttered affirmatively.

"Ah, yes. Norris told me. Ah, this is Doctor Georges, my dear. I have a rather urgent matter to talk over with your husband, but perhaps I can talk to you."

"You can probably get him on the highway. There's

a phone in the truck." What sort of urgent matters, she wondered, did doctors discuss with dogcatchers.

"I'm afraid not, my dear. The inspector doesn't switch on his phone until office hours. I know him well."

"Can't you wait?"

"It's really an emergency, Mrs. Norris. I need an animal from the pound—a Chimp K-48-3, preferably a five-year-old."

"I know nothing about the kennels," she said rather stiffly. "You'll have to talk to him."

"Now see here, Mrs. Norris, this is an emergency, and I have to have . . ."

"Why don't you just do whatever you would have done if I hadn't answered the phone?" she said, and quietly hung up.

It began ringing again. She glanced back at it with a twinge of guilt. Emergency? What sort of emergency would require a chimp K-48? "Butchery," she muttered vaguely, and let the phone ring. She was not not *not* going to get involved in his work. I'll leave him first, she told herself.

The truck whirled slowly along the suburban street that wound among nestled groups of pastel plastic cottages set approximately two to an acre on the lightly wooded land. With its population fixed by law at half a billion, the continent was one sprawling suburb, dotted with community centers, between the dense belts and blots of industrial development. There was no open country, had been none since the days of his grandparents. This was relative wilderness; he liked it, but there was still no place to be alone.

He approached an intersection. A small animal sat on the curb, wrapped in its own busy tail. The crown of its oversized head was bald, but its body was covered with gray-blue fur. A pink tongue licked daintily at small forepaws that were equipped with prehensile thumbs. It eyed the truck morosely as Norris drew to a halt and smiled down at it from the cab.

"Hi, kitten. What's *your* name?"

The Cat-Q-5 stared at him indifferently for a moment. "*Kiyi Rorry*," it wailed at last.

"Kitty Rorry. That's a fine name. Where do you live, Rorry?"

The Cat-Q-5 ignored him.

"Whose child are you, Rorry? Will you tell me that?"

Rorry regarded him disgustedly. Norris glanced around. There were no houses near the intersection, and he feared the animal might be lost. It blinked at him sleepily, bored, then resumed its paw bath. He repeated the question.

"Mama kiyi, kiyi Mama," it finally reported.

"That's right, Mama's kitty. But where is Mama? Suppose she ran away?"

The Cat-Q-5 looked startled. It stuttered briefly. Its fur crept erect. It glanced both ways along the street, shot suddenly away at a fast scamper along the sidewalk. Norris followed it in the truck for two blocks, until it darted onto a porch and began wailing through the screen. "Mama no run ray! Mama no run ray!"

He chuckled and drove on. A couple who had failed to satisfy the genetic requirements for legal childbearing could become quite attached to a Cat-Q-5, but the cats were safer, emotionally safer, than any of the quasi-human models such as the Chimp-K, or neutroid. The death of a neutroid struck some families as hard as might the death of a child; most couples at least managed to endure the loss of a Cat-Q or Dog-F without formal mourning or quasi-religious rites. A genetic-C couple were permitted to own one neutroid, or two nonanthropic models whose daily food requirements would not exceed eight hundred calories. Many psychologists seemed to regard neutroids as dynamite, recommended pets with a lower love-demand potential.

What about Anne? Norris lost his vestigial smile. His own card was stamped "genetic-C." They had agreed to a childless marriage. Anne loved kids. But he had agreed to it. He had been thinking about the kennel animals: how she might help with them, direct her maternal feelings toward them, divert her basic need . . . But now, the hostility.

What if she wanted a pseudoparty, a neutroid for herself?

An invitation for a pseudoparty had come in yesterday's mail. He fumbled in his pocket for the battered card:

You are cordially invited
to attend the pseudoparturition
and ensuing cocktail hour
to celebrate the arrival of

HONEY BLOSSOM

Cherished event to occur on
Twelveweek's Sixday of 2063 at
19:30 hours

Reception Room, Rockabye Hours Clinic

R.s.v.p.

Mr. & Mrs. John Hanley Slade

The invitation had come late, the party would be to-night. He had meant to call Slade today and say that he and Anne would probably drop in for cocktails, but would be unable to get there in time for the delivery. But now that she had reacted so sharply to the less pleasant aspects of his job, perhaps he had better keep her away from sentimental occasions involving neutroids.

Glancing at the card again reminded him to stop at Sherman III Community Center for the mail. He turned onto the shopping street that paralleled the great highway and drove past several blocks of commercial buildings that served the surrounding suburbs. At the down-ramp he gave the attendant a four-bit bill and sent the truck down to be parked under the street, then went to the message office. When he dropped his code-disk into the slot, the feedway under his box number chattered out a yard of paper tape. He scanned it slowly end to end—note from Aunt Maye, bill from Synthamilk Products, letter from Anne's mother. The only item of importance was the memo from the chief: a troublesome tidbit, but he had expected it:

Attention All District Inspectors: Subject? Deviant Neutroid. You will immediately initiate systematic and thorough survey of all animals bearing serial numbers in the Bermuda-K-99 series for birth dates during 26th through 32nd weeks of year 2062, in re Delmont Negligency Case. Seize animals in this category, impound, run applicable sections of normalcy tests. Observe signs of endocrinal deviation and nonstandard response patterns. Del-

mont confessed to passing only one nonstandard model, but suspect others. He disclaims memory of deviant's serial number. Possible ruse to stop investigation after first animal found, if more than one.

If allowed to reach age-set or adulthood, such a deviant could be dangerous to its owner or to others. Hold all seized K-99s who exhibit the slightest departure from standard. Forward to Central Lab. Return standard units to owners. Accomplish within seven days.

C. Franklin.

"Seven days," he remarked irritably, wadded the tape in his pocket, stalked out to get the truck.

The district covered two hundred square miles. With a replacement quota of seventy-five neutroids a week, the district would probably have picked up about forty K-99s from the Bermuda factory influx during the six-week period last year. Could he round them all up in a week? It seemed doubtful. And there were only eleven empty cages in the kennel. The other forty-nine were occupied by the previous inspector's unclaimed inventory, awaiting destruction. The crematorium behind the kennels appeared slated for a busy week. Anne, Anne.

He was halfway to Wylo City when the radiophone buzzed on the dash. He pulled into the slow lane and answered quickly, hoping for his wife's voice. Instead, there was a polite professional purr.

"Inspector Norris?"

Norris made a sour mouth. "Yes, Georges?"

"Are you extremely busy at the moment?"

"What rich bitch is your problem now, Doctor?"

"Now Norris!"

"Busy. Extremely busy."

"One of my patients, a Mrs. Sarah Glubbes, called a while ago and said her baby was sick."

"So?"

"She has no baby. I'm getting absent-minded; I forgot she's genetic-C until I got there."

"Let me guess. It turned out to be a neutroid."

"That's right."

"Why tell me?"

"It's dying. Eighteenth order virus. Naturally, I can't get it admitted to a hospital."

"Ever hear of vets?"

"You don't understand. She insists it's her baby, believes it's her own. How can I send it to a vet?"

"That's your worry. Is she an old patient of yours?"

"Why, yes, I've known Sarah since—"

"Since you presided at her pseudopart?"

"How did you know?"

"Just a guess. If you put her through pseudopart, then you deserve all the trouble you get."

"I take it you're an abolitionist."

"Skip it. What did you want from me?"

"A replacement neutroid. From the kennel."

"Baloney. You couldn't fool her. If she's blind, she'd still know her own animal."

"I'll have to take the chance. Listen, Norris, it's pathetic. She knows the disease can be cured—in humans—with hospitalization and expensive treatment that I can't get for a neutroid. No vet could get the drug either. Scarce. It's pathetic."

"I'm crying all over the steering wheel."

The doctor paused. "Sorry, Norris, I thought you were human."

"Not to the extent of doing half-legal favors that won't be appreciated for some rich neurotic dame and a doc who practices pseudopart."

"One correction," Georges said stiffly. "Sarah's not rich. She's a middle-aged widow and couldn't pay for treatment if she could get it. But thanks anyway, Norris."

"Hold it," he grunted. "What's the chimp's series?"

"It's a K-48, a five-year-old with a three-year age set."

Norris thought for a moment. It was a dirty deal, and it wouldn't work.

"I think I've got one in the kennel that's fairly close," he offered doubtfully.

"Good, good, I'll have Fred go over and—"

"Wait, now. This one'll be spooky, won't know her, and the serial number will be different."

"I know, I know," Georges sighed. "But it seems worth a try. An attack of V-18 can cause mild amnesia in hu-

mans; that might explain why it won't know her. About the serial number—"

"Don't try changing it," Norris growled.

"How about obliterating—"

"Don't, and I'll check on it a couple of weeks from now to make damn sure you don't. That's a felony, Georges."

"All right, all right, I'll just have to take the chance that she won't notice it. When can I pick it up?"

"Call my wife in fifteen minutes. I'll speak to her first."

"Uh, yes . . . Mrs. Norris. Uh, very well, thanks, Inspector." Georges hung up quickly.

Norris lit a cigarette, steeled himself, called Anne. Her voice was dull, depressed, but no longer angry.

"All right, Terry," she said tonelessly. "I'll go out to the kennel and get the one in cage thirty-one, and give it to Georges when he comes."

"Thanks, babe."

He heard her mutter, "And then I'll go take a bath," just before the circuit clicked off.

He flipped off the auto-driver, took control of the truck, slipped into the fast lane and drove furiously toward Wylo City and the district wholesale offices of Anthropos Incorporated to begin tracing down the suspected Bermuda K-99s in accordance with Franklin's memo. He would have to check through all incoming model files for the six-week period, go over the present inventory, then run down the Bermuda serial numbers in a mountain of invoices covering a thirty-week period, find the pet shops and retail dealers that had taken the doubtful models, and finally survey the retail dealers to trace the models to their present owners. With cooperation from wholesaler and dealers, he might get it down to the retail level by mid-afternoon, but getting the models away from their owners would be the nasty part of the job. He was feeling pretty nasty himself, he decided. The spat with Anne, the distasteful thoughts associated with Slade's pseudoparty, the gnawing remorse about collaborating with Dr. Georges in a doubtful maneuver to pacify one Sarah Glubbes, a grim week's work ahead, plus his usual charge of suppressed resentment toward Chief Franklin—it all added up to a mood that could turn either black or vicious, depending on circumstance.

If some doting Mama gave him trouble about impounding her darling tail-wagger, he was, he decided, in the right kind of mood to get a warrant and turn the job over to the sheriff.

The gasping neutroid lay on the examining table under the glaring light. The torso quivered and twitched as muscles contracted spasmodically, but the short legs were already limp and paralyzed, allowing the chubby man in the white coat to lift them easily by the ankles and retrieve the rectal thermometer. The neutroid wheezed and chattered plaintively as the nurse drew the blanket across its small body again.

"A hundred and nine," grunted the chubby man, his voice muffled by the gauze mask. His eyes probed the nurse's eyes for a moment. He jerked his head toward the door. "She still out there?"

The nurse nodded.

The doctor stared absently at the thermometer stem for a moment, looked up again, spoke quietly. "Get a hypo—necrofine."

She turned toward the sterilizer, paused briefly. "Three c.c.s?" she asked.

"Twelve," he corrected.

Her eyes locked with his for several seconds; then she nodded and went to the sterilizer.

"May I leave first?" she asked tonelessly while filling the syringe.

"Certainly."

"What'll I say to Mrs. Glubbes?" She crossed to the table again and handed him the hypo.

"Nothing. Use the back way. Go tell Fred to run over to the kennels and pick up the substitute. I've called Mrs. Norris. Oh yeah, and tell Fred to stop in here first. I'll have something for him to take out."

The nurse glanced down at the squirming, whimpering newt, shivered slightly, and left the room. When the door closed, Georges bent over the table with the hypo. When the door opened again, Georges looked up to see his son looking in.

"Take this along," he grunted, and handed Fred the bundle wrapped in newspapers.

"What'll I do with it?" the youth asked.

"Chuck it in Norris's incinerator."

Fred glanced at the empty examining table and nodded indifferently. "Can Miss Laskell come back now?" he asked in going.

"Tell her yeah. And hurry with that other newt."

"Sure, Pop. See you later."

The nurse looked in uncertainly before entering.

"Get cleaned up," he told her. "And go sit with Mrs. Glubbes."

"What'll I say?"

"The 'baby' will recover. She can take it home late this afternoon if she gets some rest first."

"What're you going to do—about the substitute?"

"Give it a shot to put it to sleep, give her some codeine to feed it."

"Why?"

"So it'll be too groggy for a few days to even notice her, so it'll get addicted and attached to her because she gives it the codeine."

"The serial number?"

"I'll put the tattooed foot in a cast. V-18 paralysis—you know."

"Smart," she muttered, but there was no approval in her voice.

When she had changed clothes in the anteroom, she unlocked the door to the office, but paused before passing on into the reception room. The door was ajar, and she gazed through the crack at the woman who sat on the sofa.

Sarah Glubbes was gray and gaunt and rigid as stone. She sat with her hands clenched in her lap, her wide empty eyes—dull blue spots on yellowed marble orbs—staring ceilingward while the colorless lips of a knife-slash mouth moved tautly in earnest prayer. The nurse's throat felt tight. She rubbed it for a moment. After all, the thing was only an animal.

She straightened her shoulders, put on a cheerful smile, and marched on into the reception room. The yellowed orbs snapped demandingly toward her.

"Everything's *all* right, Mrs. Glubbes," she began.

"Finished," Norris grunted at three o'clock that afternoon.

"Thirty-six K-99s," murmured the Anthropos file-clerk, gazing over Norris's shoulder at the clip-board with the list of doubtful newts and the dealers to whom they had been sent. "Lots of owners may be hard to locate."

"Yeah. Thanks, Andy, and you too Mabel."

The girl smiled and handed him a slip of paper. "Here's a list of owners for thirteen of them. I called the two local shops for you. Most of them live here close."

He glanced at the names, felt tension gathering in his stomach. It wasn't going to be easy. What could he say to them?

Howdy, ma'am, excuse me, but I've come to take your little boy away to jail. . . . Oh, yes ma'am, he'll have a place to stay—in a little steel cage with a forkful of straw, and he'll get vitaminized mush every day. What's that? His sleepy-time stories and his pink honey-crumbles? Sorry, ma'am, your little boy is only a mutated chimpanzee, you know, and not really human at all.

"That'll go over great," he grumbled, staring absently at the window.

"Beg pardon, sir?" answered the clerk.

"Nothing, Andy, nothing." He thanked them again and strode out into the late afternoon sunlight. Still a couple of hours working time left, and plenty of things to do. Checking with the other retail dealers would be the least unpleasant task, but there was no use saving the worst until last. He glanced at the list Mabel had given him, checked it for the nearest address, then squared his shoulders and headed for the kennel truck.

Anne met him at the door when he came home at six. He stood on the porch for a moment, smiling at her weakly. The smile was not returned.

"Doctor Georges' boy came," she told him. "He signed for the—"

She stopped to stare at him, then opened the screen, reached up quickly to brush light fingertips over his cheek.

"Terry! Those welts! What happened—get scratched by a Cat-Q?"

"No, by a human-F," he grumbled, and stepped past her into the hall; Anne followed, eyeing him curiously while he reached for the phone and dialed.

"Who're you calling?" she asked.

"Society's watchdog," he answered as the receiver buzzed in his ear.

"Your eye, Terry—it's all puffy. Will it turn black?"

"Maybe."

"Did the human-F do that too?"

"Uh-uh. Human-M—name of Pete Klusky . . ."

The phone craked at him suddenly. *"This is the record-voice of Sheriff Yates. I'll be out from five to seven. If it's urgent, call your constable."*

He hung up briefly, then irritably dialed the locator service.

"Mnemonic register, trail calls, and official locations," grated a mechanical voice. *"Your business, please."*

"This is T. Norris, Sherman-9-4566-78B, Official rating B, Priority B, code XT-88-U-Bio. Get Sheriff Yates for me."

"Nature of the call?"

"Offish biz."

"I shall record the call."

He waited. The robot found Yates on the first probability-trial attempt—in the local poolhall.

"I'm getting to hate that infernal gadget," Yates snapped. "Acts like it's got me psyched. Whattaya want, Norris?"

"Cooperation. I'm mailing you three letters charging three Wylo citizens with resisting a federal official—namely me—and charging one of them with assault. I tried to pick up their neutroids for a pound inspection, and—"

Yates bellowed lusty laughter in his ear.

"Not funny," he growled. "I've got to get those neutroids. It's connected with the Delmont case."

Yates stopped laughing. "Oh? Well . . . I'll take care of it."

"Rush order, Sheriff. Can you get the warrants tonight and pick up the animals in the morning?"

"Easy on those warrants, boy. Judge Charleman can't be bothered just any time. I can get the newts to you by noon, I guess, provided we don't have to get a helicopter posse to chase down the mothers."

"Well, okay. But listen—I want the charges dropped if they cooperate with you. And don't shake the warrants

at them unless you have to. Just get those newts, that's all I want."

"Okay, boy. Give me the dope."

Norris read him the names and addresses of the three unwilling owners, and a precise account of what happened in each case. As soon as he hung up, Anne muttered "Sit still," perched on his knees, and began stroking chilly ointment across his burning cheek. He watched her cool eyes flicker from his cheek to his own eyes and down again. She was no longer angry, but only gloomy and withdrawn from him. He touched her arm. She seemed not to notice it.

"Hard day, Terry?"

"Slightly. I picked up nine newts out of thirteen, anyhow. They're in the truck now."

"Good thing you didn't get them all. There are only twelve empty cages."

"Twelve? Oh, Georges picked one up, didn't he?"

"And sent a package," she said, eyeing him soberly.

"Package? Where is it?"

"In the crematorium. The boy took it back there."

He swallowed a tight spot in his throat, said nothing.

"Oh, and darling—Mrs. Slade called. Why didn't you tell me we're going out tonight?"

"Going out?" It sounded a little weak.

"Well, she said she hadn't heard from you. I couldn't very well say no, so I told her *I'd* be there, at least."

"You—?"

"Oh, I didn't say about you, Terry. I said you'd like to go, but you might have to work. I'll go alone if you don't want to."

He stared at her with a puzzled frown. "*You* want to go to the psuedoparty?"

"Not particularly. But I've never been to one. I'm just curious."

He nodded slowly, felt grim inside. She finished with the ointment, patted his cheek, managed a cheerful smile.

"Come on, Terry. Let's go unload your nine neurotroids."

He stared at her dumbly.

"Let's forget about this morning, Terry."

He nodded. She averted her face suddenly, and her lip quivered. "I—I know you've got a job that's got to be—"

She swallowed hard and turned away. "See you out in the kennels," she choked gaily, then hurried down the hall toward the door. Norris scratched his chin unhappily as he watched her go.

After a moment, he dialed the mnemonic register again. "Keep a line on this number," he ordered after identifying himself. "If Yates or Franklin calls, ring continuously until I can get in to answer. Otherwise, just memorize the call."

"Instructions acknowledged," answered the circuitry.

He went out to the kennels to help Anne unload the neutroids.

A sprawling concrete barn housed the cages, and the barn was sectioned into three large rooms, one housing the fragile, humanoid chimpanzee-mutants, and another for the lesser breeds such as Cat-Qs, Dog-Fs, dwarf bears, and foot-high lambs that never matured into sheep. The third room contained a small gas chamber, with a conveyor belt leading from it to the crematorium. He usually kept the third room locked, but he noticed in passing that it was open. Evidently Anne had found the keys in order to let Fred Georges dump his package.

A Noah's Ark chorus greeted him as he passed through the animal room, to be replaced by the mindless chatter of the doll-like neutroids as soon as he entered the air conditioned neutroid section. Dozens of blazing blond heads began dancing about their cages. Their bodies thwacked against the wire mesh as they leaped about their compartments with monkey grace, in recognition of their feeder and keeper.

Their human appearance was broken only by two distinct features: short beaver-like tails decorated with fluffy curls of fur, and an erect thatch of scalp hair that grew up into a bright candle-flame. Otherwise, they appeared completely human, with baby-pink skin, quick little smiles, and cherubic faces. They were sexually neuter and never grew beyond a predetermined age-set which varied for each series. Age-sets were available from one to ten years, human equivalent. Once a neutroid reached its age-set, it remained at this stage of retarded development until death.

"They must be getting to know you pretty well," Anne

said as she came from behind a section of cages. "A big loud welcome for Pappa, huh?"

He frowned slightly as he glanced around the gloomy room and sniffed the animal odors. "That's funny. They don't usually get this excited."

She grinned. "Big confession: it started when I came in."

He shot her a quick suspicious glance, then walked slowly along a row of cages, peering inside. He stopped suddenly beside a three-year-old K-76 to stare.

"Apple cores!"

He turned slowly to face his wife, trying to swallow a sudden spurt of anger.

"Well?" he demanded.

Anne reddened. "I felt sorry for them, eating that goo from the mechanical feeders. So I drove down to Sherman III and bought six dozen cooking apples."

"That was a mistake."

She frowned irritably. "We can afford it."

"That's not the point. There's a reason for mechanical feedings."

"Oh? What is it?"

He hesitated, knowing she wouldn't like the answer. But she was already stiffening.

"Let me guess," she said coldly. "If you feed them yourself they get to love you. Right?"

"Uh, yeah. They even attach some affection to me because they know that right after I come in, the feeders get turned on."

"I see. And if they love you, you might get queasy about running them through Room 3's line, eh?"

"That's about the size of it," he admitted.

"Okay, Terry, I feed them apples, you run your production line," she announced firmly. "I can't see anything contradictory about that, can you?"

Her eyes told him that he had damn well better see something contradictory about it, whether he admitted it or not.

"Planning to get real chummy with them, are you?" he inquired stiffly.

"Planning to dispose of any soon?" she countered.

"Honeymoon's off again, eh?"

She shook her head slowly, came toward him a little.

"I hope not, Terry—I hope not." She stopped again. They watched each other doubtfully amid the chatter of the neutroids.

After a time, he turned and walked to the truck, pulled out the snare pole and began fishing for the squealing, squeaking doll-things that bounded about like frightened monkeys in the truck's wire mesh cage. They were one-family pets, always frightened of strangers, and these in the truck remembered him only as the villain who had dragged them away from Mama into a terrifying world of whirling scenery and roaring traffic.

They worked for a time without talking; then Anne asked casually: "What's the Delmont case, Terry?"

"Huh? What makes you ask?"

"I heard you mention it on the phone. Anything to do with a black eye and a scratched face?"

He nodded sourly. "Indirectly. It's a long story. Well—you know about the evolvotron."

"Only that Anthropos Incorporated uses it to induce mutation."

"It's sort of a sub-atomic surgical instrument—for doing 'plastic surgery' to reproductive cells— Here! Grab this chimp! Get him by the leg."

"Oops! Got him. . . . Go ahead, Terry."

"Using an evolvotron on the gene-structure of an ovum is like playing microscopic billiards—with protons and deuterons and alpha particles for cue balls. The operator takes the living ovum, mounts it in the device, gets a tremendously magnified image of it with the slow-neutrino shadowscope, compares the image with a gene-map, starts gouging out sub-molecular tidbits with single-particle shots. He juggles them around, hammers chunks in where nothing was before, plugs up gaps, makes new gaps. Catch?"

She looked thoughtful, nodded. "Catch. And the Lord Man made neutroid from the slime of an ape," she murmured.

"Heh? Here, catch this critter! Snare's choking him!"

"Okay—come to Mama. . . . Well, go on, tell me about Delmont."

"Delmont was a green evolvotron operator. Takes years of training, months of practice."

"Practice?"

"It's an art more than a science. Speed's the thing. You've got to perform the whole operation from start to finish in a few seconds. Ovum dies if you take too long."

"About Delmont—"

"Got through training and practice tryouts okay. Good rating, in fact. But he was just one of those people that blow up when rehearsals stop and the act begins. He spoiled over a hundred ova the first week. That's to be expected. One success out of ten tries is a good average. But he didn't get any successes."

"Why didn't they fire him?"

"Threatened to. Guess he got hysterical. Anyhow, he reported one success the next day. It was faked. The ovum had a couple of flaws—something wrong in the nervous system's determinants, and in the endocrinal setup. Not a standard neutroid ovum. He passed it on to the incubators to get a credit, knowing it wouldn't be caught until after birth."

"It wasn't caught at all?"

"Heh. He was afraid it might *not* be caught. So he suppressed the testosterone flow to its incubator so that it *would* be—later on."

"Why that?"

"All the neutroids are potential females, you know. But male hormone is pumped to the foetus as it develops. Keeps female sexuality from developing, results in a neuter. He decided that the inspectors would surely catch a female, and that would be blamed on a malfunction of the incubator, not on him."

"So?"

Norris shrugged. "So inspectors are human. So maybe a guy came on the job with a hangover and missed a trick or two. Besides, they all *look* female. Anyhow, she didn't get caught."

"How did they ever find out Delmont did it?"

"He got caught last month—trying it again. Confessed to doing it once before. No telling how many times he *really* did it."

Norris held up the final kicking, squealing, tassel-haired doll from the back of the kennel truck. He grinned down at Anne.

"Now take this little yEEP, for instance. Might be a potential she. Might also be a potential murderer. *All* these

kiddos from the truck came from the machines in the section where Delmont worked last year when he passed that fake. Can't have nonstandard models on the loose. Can't have sexed models either—then they'd breed, get out of hand. The evolvotron could be shut down any time it became necessary, and when that generation of mutants died off . . ." He shrugged.

Anne caught the struggling baby-creature in her arms. It struggled and tried to bite, but subsided a little when she disentangled it from the snare.

"Kkr-r-reeee!" it cooed nervously. "Kree. Kkr-r-reee!"

"You tell him you're no murderer," she purred to it.

He watched disapprovingly while she fondled it. One code he had accepted: steer clear of emotional attachment. It was eight months old and looked like a child of two years—a year short of its age-set. And it was designed to be as affectionate as a human child.

"Put it in the cage, Anne," he said quietly.

She looked up and shook her head.

"It belongs to somebody else. Suppose it transfers its fixation to you? You'd be robbing its owners. They can't love many people at once."

She snorted, but installed the thing in its cage.

"Anne—" Norris hesitated, knowing that it was a bad time to approach the subject, but thinking about Slade's pseudoparty tonight, and wondering why she had accepted.

"What, Terry?"

He leaned on the snare pole and watched her. "Do you want one of them for yourself? I can sign an unclaimed one over to you. Wouldn't cost anything."

She stared at him evenly for a moment, glanced down at her feet, paced slowly to the window to stand hugging her arms and looking out into the twilight.

"With a pseudoparty, Terry?"

He swallowed a lump of anxiety, found his voice. "Whatever you want."

"I hear the phone ringing in the house."

He waited.

"It stopped," she said after a moment.

"Well, babe?"

"Whatever I want, Terry?" She turned slowly to lean back against a patch of gray light and look at him.

He nodded. "Whatever you want."

"I want your child."

He stiffened with hurt, stared at her open-mouthed.

"I want your child."

He thrust his hand slowly in his hip pocket.

"Oh, don't reach for your social security card. I don't care if it's got 'genetic triple-Z' on it. I want your child."

"Uncle Federal says 'no,' babe."

"To hell with Uncle Federal! They can't send a human through your Room 3! Not yet, anyhow! If it's born, the world's stuck with it!"

"And the parents are forcibly separated, reduced to common-labor status. Remember?"

She stamped her foot and whirled to the window again.

"Damn the whole hellish world!" she snarled.

Norris sighed heavily. He was sorry she felt that way. She was probably right in feeling that way, but he was still sorry. Righteous anger, frustrated, was no less searing a psychic acid than the unrighteous sort, nor did a stomach pause to weigh the moral worth of the wrath that drenched it before giving birth to an ulcer.

"Hey, babe, if we're going to the Slade affair—"

She nodded grimly and turned to walk with him toward the house. At least it was better having her direct her anger at the world rather than at him, he thought.

The expectant mother played three games of badminton before sundown, then went inside to shower and dress before the guests arrived. Her face was wreathed in a merry smile as she trotted downstairs in a fresh smock, her neck still pink from the hot water, her wake fragrant with faint perfume. There was no apparent need for the smock, nor was there any pregnant caution in the way she threw her arms around John's neck and kicked up her heels behind her.

"Darling," she chirped. "There'll be plenty of milk. I never believed in bottle-feeding. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Great. The injections are working, I guess."

She looked around. "It's a lovely resort hotel. I'm glad you didn't pick Angel's Haven."

"So am I," he grunted. "We'll have the reception room all to ourselves tonight."

"What time is it?"

"Seven ten. Oh, the doc called to say he'd be a few minutes late. He was busy all day with a sick baby."

She licked her lips and glanced aside uneasily. "Class A couple?"

"No, doll. Class C—and a widow."

"Oh." She brightened and watched his face teasingly.

"Will you pace and chain-smoke while I'm in delivery?"

He snorted amusement. "Hey, it's not as if you were really . . ." He stopped amid a fit of coughing.

"Not as if I were really what?"

"Now look, I didn't mean . . ."

"*Not as if I were really what?*" she demanded, eyes beginning to brim.

"Listen, darling, I'll pace and I'll chain-smoke."

A nurse came clicking across the floor. "Mrs. Slade, it's time for your first injection. Doctor Georges just called. Will you come with me, please?"

"Not as if I what, John?" she insisted, ignoring the nurse.

He lit a cigarette from the butt of the last and looked around nervously. "She'll be all right?" he asked the nurse.

"Mrs. Slade, will you please . . ."

"All right, nurse, I'm coming." She tossed her husband a hurt glance, walked away dabbing at her eyes.

"Expectant dames are always cranky," sympathized an attendant who sat on a bench nearby. "Take it easy. She won't be so touchy after it comes."

John Hanley Slade shot an irritable glare at the eaves-dropper, saw a friendly comedian-face grinning at him, returned the grin uneasily, and went over to sit down.

"Your first?"

John Hanley nodded, stroked nervously at his thin hair.

"I see 'em come, I see 'em go. It's always the same."

"Whattaya mean?" John grunted.

"Same expressions, same worries, same attitudes, same conversation, same questions. The guy always makes some remark about how it's not *really* having a baby, and the dame always gets sore. Happens every time."

"It's all pretty routine for you, eh?" he muttered stiffly.

The attendant nodded. He watched the expectant fa-

ther for several seconds, then grunted: "Go ahead, ask me."

"Ask you what?"

"If I think all this is silly. They always do."

John stared at the attendant irritably. "Well—?"

"Do I think it's silly? No, I don't."

"Fine. That's settled, then."

"No, I don't think it's silly, because for a dame it ain't satisfying if she plunks down the dough, buys a newt, and lets it go at that. There's something missing between bedroom and baby."

"That so?"

John's sarcastic tone was apparently lost on the man. "It's so," he announced. "Physiological change—that's what's missing. For a newt to really take the place of a baby, the mother's got to go through the whole build-up. Doc gives her injections, she craves pickles and mangoes. More injections for morning sickness. More injections, she gets chubby. And finally shots to bring mild labor and false delivery. So then she gets the newt, and everything's right with the world."

"Mmmph."

"Ask me something else," the attendant offered.

John looked around helplessly, spied an elderly woman near the entrance. She had just entered, and stood looking around as if lost or confused. He did not recognize her, but he got up quickly.

"Excuse me, chum. Probably one of my guests."

"Sure, sure. I gotta get on the job anyhow."

The woman turned to stare at him as he crossed the floor to meet her. Perhaps one of Mary's friends, he thought. There were at least a dozen people coming that he hadn't met. But his welcoming smile faded slightly as he approached her. She wore a shabby dress, her hair was disheveled in a gray tangle, her matchstick legs were without makeup, and there were fierce red lines around her eyelids. She stared at him with wide wild eyes—dull orbs of dirty marble with tiny blue patches for pupils. And her mouth was a thin slash between gaunt leathery cheeks.

"Are—are you here for the party?" he asked doubtfully.

She seemed not to hear him, but continued to stare at

or through him. Her mouth made words out of a quivering hiss of a voice. "I'm looking for *him*."

"Who?"

"The doctor."

He decided from her voice that she had laryngitis. "Doctor Georges? He'll be here soon, but he'll be busy tonight. Couldn't you consult another physician?"

The woman fumbled in her bag and brought out a small parcel to display. "I want to give him this," she hissed.

"I could—"

"I want to give it to him myself," she interrupted.

Two guests that he recognized came through the entrance. He glanced toward them nervously, returned their grins, glanced indecisively back at the haggard woman.

"I'll wait," she croaked, turned her back, and marched to the nearest chair where she perched like a sick crow, eyes glued to the door.

John Hanley Slade felt suddenly chilly. He shrugged it off and went to greet the Willinghams, who were the first arrivals.

Anne Norris, with her husband in tow, zig-zagged her way through a throng of chattering guests toward the hostess, who now occupied a wheel chair near the entrance to the delivery room. They were a few minutes late, but the party had not yet actually begun.

"Why don't you go join the father's sweating circle?" Anne called over her shoulder. "The men are all over with John."

Norris glanced at the group that had gathered under a cloud of cigar smoke over by the portable bar. John Slade stood at the focus of it and looked persecuted.

"Job's counselors," Terry grunted.

A hand reached out from a nearby conversation-group and caught his arm. "Norris," coughed a gruff voice.

He glanced around. "Oh—Chief Franklin. Hello!"

Anne released his hand and said, "See you later," then wound her way out of sight in the milling herd.

Franklin separated himself from the small congregation and glanced down coolly at his district inspector. He

was a tall man, with shoulders hunched up close to his head, long spindly legs, a face that was exceedingly wide across the cheekbones but narrow at the jaw. Black eyes gazed from under heavy brows, and his unruly black hair was badly cut. His family tree had a few Cherokee Indians among its branches, Norris had heard, and they were frequently on the warpath.

Franklin gulped his drink casually and handed the glass to a passing attendant. "Thought you'd be working tonight, Norris," he said.

"I got trapped into coming, Chief," he replied amiably.

"How're you doing with the Delmont pickup?"

"Nearly finished with record-tracing. I took a break today and picked up nine of them."

"Mmmph. I *wondered* why you plastipainted that right eye." Franklin rolled back his head and laughed loudly toward the ceiling. "Newt's mama tossed the crockery at you, did she?"

"Her husband," he corrected a little stiffly.

"Well—get them in a hurry, Norris. If the newt's owner knows it's a deviant, he might hear we're after something and hide it somewhere. I want them rounded up quickly."

"Expect to find the one?"

Franklin nodded grimly. "It's somewhere in this part of the country—or *was*. It narrows down to about six or eight districts. Yours has a good chance of being it. If I had my way, we'd destroy every Bermuda K-99 that came out during that period. That way, we'd be sure—in case Delmont faked more than one."

"Be pretty tough on dames like Mary," Norris reminded him, glancing toward Mrs. Slade.

"Yeah, yeah, five hundred Rachels blubbering for their children, and all on my neck. I'd almost rather let the deviant get away than have to put up with the screaming mommies."

"The burdens of office, Chief. Bear up under the brick-bats. Herod did."

Franklin glowered at him suspiciously, noticed Norris's bland expression, muttered "eh heh heh," and glanced around the room.

"Who's presiding over the whelping tonight?" Norris asked.

"Local doctor. Georges. You ought to know him."

Terry's eyebrows went up. He nodded.

"He's already here. Saw him come in the doctor's entrance a few minutes ago. He's probably getting ready. Well, Norris . . . if you'll excuse me . . ."

Norris wandered toward the bar. He had been to several pseudoparties before. There was nothing to it, really. After the guests had gathered, the medics rolled the mother into delivery, and everyone paced restlessly and talked in hushed voices while she re-enacted the age-old drama of Birth—in a way that was only mildly uncomfortable and did nothing to aggravate the population problem. Then, when they rolled her out again—fatigued and emotionally spent—the nurse brought out a newly purchased neutroid, only a few days out of the incubator, and presented it to the mother. When the oohs and aahs were finished, the mother went home with her child to rest, and the father whooped it up with the guests. Norris hoped to get away early. He had things to do before dawn.

"Who's that hag by the door?" a guest grunted in his ear.

Norris glanced incuriously at the thin-lipped woman who sat stiffly with her hands in her lap, not gazing at the guests but looking through and beyond them. He shook his head and moved on to shake hands with his host.

"Glad you came, Norris!" Slade said with a grin, then leaned closer. "Your presence could be embarrassing at a time like this, though."

"How's that?"

"You should have brought your net and snare pole, Norris," said a man at Slade's elbow. "Then when they bring the baby out, go charging across the room yelling: 'That's it! That's the one I'm after!'"

The men laughed heartily. Norris grinned weakly and started away.

"Hey, Slade," a voice called. "They're coming after Mary."

Norris stood aside to let John hurry toward his wife. Most of the crowd stopped milling about to watch Dr. Georges, a nurse and an attendant coming from a rear door to take charge of Mary.

"Stop! Stop right there!"

The voice came from near the front entrance. It was a choked and hoarse gasp of sound, not loud, but somehow penetrating enough to command the room. Norris glanced aside during the sudden lull to see the thin-lipped woman threading her way through the crowd, and the crowd folded back to clear a way. The farther she walked, the quieter the room became, and Norris suddenly realized that somehow the center of the room was almost clear of people so that he could see Mary and John and the medics standing near the delivery room door. They had turned to stare at the intruder. Georges' mouth fell open slightly. He spoke in a low voice, but the room was suddenly silent enough so that Norris could hear.

"Why, Sarah—what're you doing here?"

The woman stopped six feet away from him. She pulled out a small parcel and reached it toward him. "This is for you," she croaked.

When Georges did not advance to take it, she threw it at his feet. "Open it!" she commanded.

Norris expected him to snort and tell the attendants to toss the nutty old dame out. Instead, he stooped, very slowly, keeping his eyes on the woman, and picked up the bundle.

"Unwrap it!" she hissed when he paused.

His hands fumbled with it, but his eyes never left her face. The package came open. Georges glanced down. He dropped it quickly to the floor.

"An amputated—"

Chubby mouth gaping, he stared at the gaunt woman.

"My Primrose had a black cowlick in her tail!"

The doctor swallowed and continued to stare.

"Where is my Primrose?"

The woman had her hand in her purse. The doctor retreated a step.

"Where is my baby?"

"Really, Sarah, there was nothing to do but—"

Her hand brought a heavy automatic out of the purse. It wavered and moved uncertainly, too weighty for her scrawny wrist and arm. The room was suddenly a scramble and a babble.

"You killed my baby!"

"The first shot ricocheted from the ceiling and shattered a window," said the television announcer. "The second shot went into the wall. The third shot struck Doctor Georges in the back of the head as he ran toward the delivery room door. He died instantly. Mrs. Glubbes fled from the room before any of the guests could stop her, and a dragnet is now combing . . ."

Norris shuddered and looked away from the television screen that revealed the present state of the reception room where they had been not more than two hours ago. He turned off the set, nervously lit a cigarette, and glanced at Anne who sat staring at nothing at the other end of the sofa.

"How do you feel?" he murmured.

She looked at him dumbly, shook her head. Norris got up, paced to the magazine rack, thumbed idly through its contents, glanced back at her nervously, walked to the window, stood smoking and staring toward the street for a time, moved to the piano, glanced back at her nervously again, tried to play a few bars of *Beethoven's Fifth* with one finger, hit a foul note after the opening ta-ta-ta-taaaahh, grunted a curse, banged a crashing discord with his fist, and leaned forward with a sigh to press his forehead against the music rack and close his eyes.

"Don't blame yourself, Terry," she said softly.

"If I hadn't let him have that impounded newt, it wouldn't have happened."

She thought that over briefly. "And if my maternal grandfather hadn't lied to his wife back in 2013, I would never have been born."

"Why not?"

"Because if he'd told her the truth, she'd have up and left him, and Mother wouldn't have been born."

"Oh. Nevertheless—"

"Nevertheless nothing!" She shook herself out of the blue mood. "You come here, Terry Norris!"

He came, and there was comfort in holding her. She was prepared to blame the world all right, but he was in the world, and a part of it, and so was she. And there was no sharing of guilt, but only the whole weight of it on the shoulders of each of them. He thought of the Delmont case, and the way Franklin talked casually of slaughtering five hundred K-9s just to be sure, and how

he continued to hate Franklin's guts for no apparent reason. Franklin was not a pleasant fellow, to be sure, but he had done nothing to Norris personally. He wondered if he hated what Franklin represented, but directed the hate at Franklin's person because he, Norris, represented it *too*. Franklin, however, liked the world as he found it, and was glad to help keep it that way.

If I think something's wrong with the setup, but keep on being a part of it, then the wrongness is not part mine, he thought, it's *all* mine, because I bought it.

"It's hard to decide," he murmured.

"What's that, Terry?"

"Whether it's all wrong, dead wrong—or whether it's the best that can be done under the circumstances."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

He shook himself and yawned. "About going to bed," he grunted.

They went to bed at midnight. At one o'clock, he became certain she was asleep. He lay in darkness for a time, listening to her even breathing. Then he sat up and eased himself out of bed. There was work to be done. He tiptoed quietly out of the bedroom, carrying his shoes and his trousers. He dressed in the kitchen by the glow of a cigarette ember and stole quietly out into the chilly night. A half-moon hung low in a misty sky, and the wind was sharp out of the north. He walked quietly toward the kennels. There were only three empty cages. He needed twenty-seven to accommodate the doubtful K-99s that were to be picked up during the next few days. There was work to be done.

He went into the neutroid room and flicked a switch. A few sleepy chatters greeted the light.

One at a time he awoke twenty-four of the older creatures and carried them to a large glass-walled compartment. These were the longtime residents; they knew him well, and they came willingly, snuggling sleepily against his chest. He whistled tunelessly while he worked, began carrying them by the tails, two in each hand, to speed the chore.

When he had gotten them in the glass chamber, he sealed the door and turned on the gas. Then he switched off the lights, locked up for the night again, and walked

back toward the house through the crisp grass. The conveyor belt from the chamber to the crematorium would finish the job unaided.

Norris felt suddenly ill. He sank down on the back steps and laid his head on his arms across his knees. His eyes burned, but thought of tears made him sicker. When the low *chug* of the crematorium's igniter coughed quietly from the kennels, he staggered hurriedly away from the steps to retch.

She was waiting for him in the bedroom. She sat on the windowseat, her small figure silhouetted against the paleness of the moonlit yard.

She was staring silently out at the dull red tongue of exhaust gas from the crematorium chimney when he tiptoed down the hall and paused in the doorway. She looked around. Dead silence between them, then:

"Out for a walk, eh, Terry?"

A resumption of the dead silence. He backed quietly away without speaking. He went to the parlor and lay down on the couch.

After a time, he heard her pattering around in the kitchen, and saw a light. A little later, he opened his eyes to see her dark shadow over him, surrounded by an aura of negligence. She sat down on the edge of the couch and offered him a glass.

"Drink it. Make your stomach rest easy."

"Alcoholic?"

"Yeah."

He tasted it: milk, egg yolk, honey, and rum.

"No arsenic?"

She shook her head. He drank it quickly, lay back with a grunt, took her hand. They were silent for a time.

"I—I guess every new wife thinks her husband's flawless, for awhile," she murmured absently. "Silly, how it's such a shock to find out the obvious: that he's not much different from other bull humans of the tribe."

Norris stiffened, rolled his face away from her. After a moment her hand crept out to touch his cheek. Her fingertips traced a soft line up and along his temple.

"It's all right, Terry," she whispered.

He kept his face averted. Her fingers stroked for a moment more, as if she were feeling something new and

different in the familiar texture of his hair. Then she arose and padded quietly back to the bedroom.

Norris lay awake until dawn, knowing that it would never be all right Terry, nor all right World—never, as long as the prohibiting, the creating, the killing, the mockery, the falsification of birth, death, and life continued.

Dawn inherited the night mist, gathered it into clouds, and made a gloomy gray morning of it.

Anne was still asleep when he left for work. He backed out the kennel truck, meaning to get the rest of the Bermuda K-99s as quickly as possible so that he could begin running the normalcy tests and get the whole thing over with. The night's guilt was still with him as he drove away, a sticky dew that refused to depart with morning. Why should he have to kill the things? Why couldn't Franklin arrange for a central slaughter house for destroying neutroids that had been deserted, or whose owners could not be located, or that found themselves unclaimed for any other reason? But Franklin would purple at the notion. It was only a routine part of the job. Why shouldn't it be routine? Why were neutroids manufactured anyhow? Obviously, because they were disposable—an important feature which human babies unfortunately lacked. When the market became glutted with humans, the merchandise could not be dumped in the sea.

Anthropos' mutant pets fulfilled a basic biological need of Man—of all life, for that matter—the need to have young, or a reasonable facsimile, and care for them. Neutroids kept humanity satisfied with the restricted birth rate, and if it were not satisfied, it would breed itself into famine, epidemic, and possible extinction. With the population held constant at five billions, the Federation could insure a decent living standard for everyone. And as long as birth must be restricted, why not restrict it logically and limit it to genetic desirables?

Why not? Norris felt no answer, but he was acutely aware of the "genetic-C" on his social security card.

The world was a better place, wasn't it? Great strides since the last century. Science had made life easier to live and harder to lose. The populace thoughtlessly responded by pouring forth a flood of babies and doddering old codgers to clutter the earth and make things tougher again

by eating and not producing; but again science increased the individual's chances to survive and augmented his motives for doing so—and again the populace responded with fecundity and long white beards, making more trouble for science again. So it had continued until it became obvious that progress wasn't headed toward "The Good Life" but toward more lives to continue the same old meager life as always. What could be done? Impede science? Unthinkable! Chuck the old codgers into the sea? Advance the retirement age to ninety and work them to death? The old codgers still had the suffrage, and plenty of time to go to the polls.

The unborn, however, were not permitted to vote.

Man's technology had created little for the individual. Man used his technology to lengthen his life and sweeten it, but something had to be subtracted somewhere. The lives of the unborn were added onto the years of the aged. A son of Terry Norris might easily live till 110, but he would have damn little chance of being born to do it.

Neutroids filled the cradles. Neutroids never ate much, nor grew up to eat more or be on the unemployment roles. Neutroids could be bashed with a shovel and buried in the back yard when hard times came. Neutroids could satisfy a woman's longing for something small and lovable, but they never got in the economic way.

It was no good thinking about it, he decided. It was a Way Of Doing Things, and most people accepted it, and if it sometimes yielded heartache and horrors such as had occurred at Slade's pseudoparty, it was still an Accepted Way, and he couldn't change it, even if he knew what to do about it. He was already adjusted to the world-as-it-was, a world that loved the artificial mutants as children, looked the other way when crematorium flames licked in the night. He had been brought up in such a world, and it was only when emotion conflicted with the grim necessity of his job that he thought to question the world. And Anne? Eventually, he supposed, she would have her pseudoparty, cuddle a neutroid, forget about romantic notions like having a kid of her own.

At noon he brought home another dozen K-99s and installed them in the cages. Two reluctant mothers had put up a howl, but he departed without protest and left

seizure of animals to the local authorities. Yates had already delivered the three from yesterday.

"What, no more scratches, bruises, broken bones?" Anne asked at lunch.

He smiled mechanically. "If Mama puts up a squawk, I go. Quietly."

"Learned your lesson yesterday?"

"Mmm! One dame pulled a fast one on me, though. I think. Told her what I wanted. She started moaning, but she let me in. I got her newt, started out with it. She wanted a receipt. So, I took the newt's serial number off the check list, made out the receipt. She took one look and squealed, 'That's not Chichi's number!' and grabbed for her tail-wagger. I looked at its foot-tattoo. Sure enough—wrong number. Had to leave it. A K-99 all right, but not even from Bermuda Plant."

"I thought they were all registered."

"They are, babe. Wires get crossed sometimes. I told her she had the wrong newt, and she started boiling. Got the sales receipt and showed it to me. Number checked with the newt's. Something's fouled up somewhere."

"Where'd she get it?"

"O'Reilly's pet shop—over in Sherman II. Right place, wrong serial number."

"Anything to worry about, Terry?"

"Well, I've got to track down that doubtful Bermuda model."

"Oh."

"And—well—" He frowned out the window at the kennels. "Ever think what'd happen if somebody started a black market in neutroids?"

They finished the meal in silence. Apparently there was going to be no further mention of last night's mass-disposal, nor any rehash of the nightmare at Slade's party. He was thankful.

The afternoon's work yielded seven more Bermuda neutroids for the pound. Except for the missing newt that was involved in the confusion of serial numbers, the rest of them would have to be collected by Yates or his deputies, armed with warrants. The groans and the tears of the owners left him in a gloomy mood, but the pick-up phase of the operation was nearly finished. The normalcy tests, however, would consume the rest of the week and

leave little time for sleeping and eating. If Delmont's falsification proved extensive, it might be necessary to deliver several of the animals to Central Lab for dissection and complete analysis, thus bringing the murderous wrath of the owners upon his head. He had a hunch about why bio-inspectors were frequently shifted from one territory to another.

On the way home, he stopped in Sherman II to check with the dealer about the confusion of serial numbers. Sherman II was the largest of the Sherman communities, covering fifty blocks of commercial buildings. He parked in the outskirts and took a sidewalk escalator toward O'Reilley's address. He had spoken to O'Reilley on the phone, but had not yet visited the dealer's shop.

It lay on a dingy side street that was reminiscent of centuries past, a street of small bars and bowling alleys and cigar stores. There was even a shop with three gold balls above the entrance, but the place was now an antique store. A light mist was falling when he stepped off the escalator and stood in front of the pet shop. A sign hung out over the sidewalk, announcing:

**J. "DOGGY" O'REILLEY
PETS FOR SALE
DUMB BLONDES AND GOLDFISH
MUTANTS FOR THE CHILDLESS
BUY A BUNDLE OF JOY**

He frowned at the sign for a moment, then wandered through the entrance into a warm and gloomy shop, wrinkling his nose at the strong musk of animal odors. O'Reilley's was no shining example of cleanliness.

Somewhere a puppy was yapping, and a parrot croaked the lyrics of *A Chimp To Call My Own*—theme song of a soap opera about a lady evolvotron operator, Norris recalled.

He paused briefly by a tank of silk-draped goldfish. The shop had a customer. An elderly lady haggled with the wizened manager over the price of a half-grown second-hand Dog-F. She shook her last dog's death certificate under his nose and demanded a guarantee of the dog's alleged F-5 intelligence. The old man offered to swear on a Bible that the dog was more knowledgeable than some

humans, but he demurred when asked to swear by his ledger.

The dog was lamenting, "Don' sell me, Dada, don' sell me," and punctuating the pleas with mournful train-whistle howls.

Norris smiled quietly. The nonhuman pets were brighter than the neutroids. A K-108 could speak a dozen words, but a K-99 never got farther than "mama," "papa," and "cookie." Anthropos feared making quasi-humans too intelligent, lest sentimentalists proclaim them really human.

He wandered on toward the rear of the building, pausing briefly by the cash register to inspect O'Reilley's license which hung in a dusty frame on the wall behind the counter: "James Fallon O'Reilley . . . authorized dealer in mutant animals . . . all nonpredatory mammals including Chimpanzee-K series . . . license expires 15w 3d 2063y. . . ."

Expiration date approaching, he noticed, but otherwise okay. He headed for a bank of neutroid cages along the opposite wall, but O'Reilley minced across the floor to meet him. The elderly lady was leaving. O'Reilley's face wore a v-shaped smirk on a loose-skinned face, and his bald head bobbed professionally.

"And a good afternoon to ye, sir. What'll it be this foine drizzlin' afternoon? A dwarf kangaroo perhaps, or a—" He paused to adjust his spectacles as Norris flashed a badge and presented his card. O'Reilley's smile waned. "Inspector Norris is it," he muttered at the card, then looked up. "What'd they do with the last 'un, flay him alive?"

"My predecessor was transferred to the Montreal area."

"And I thought that I spoke to him only yesterday!"

"On the phone? That was me, O'Reilley. About the rundown on the K-99 sales."

"I gave it to you properly, did I not?" the oldster demanded.

"You gave it to me. Maybe properly."

O'Reilley seemed to puff up slightly and glower. "Meaning?"

"There's a mix-up in serial numbers on one of them. May not be your mistake."

"No mistakes, no mistakes."

"Okay, we'll see." Norris glanced at his list. "Let's check this number again—K-99-LJZ-351."

"It's nearly closing time," the oldster protested. "Come back some other day, Norris."

"Sorry, this one's rush. It'll only take a minute. Where's your book?"

The oldster began to quiver angrily. "Are you suggestin', sir, that I falsely—"

"No," he growled, "I'm suggesting that there was a mistake. Maybe *my* mistake, maybe yours, maybe Anthropos', maybe the owner's. I've got to find out, that's all. Let's have the book."

"What kind of a mistake? I gave you the owner's name!"

"She has a different newt."

"Can I help it if she traded with somebody?"

"She didn't. She bought it here. I saw the receipt." Norris was beginning to become impatient, tried to suppress it.

"Then she traded with one of my other customers!" O'Reilley insisted.

Norris snorted irritably. "You got two customers named Adelia Schultz? Come on, pop, let's look at the duplicate receipt. *Now*."

"Doubt if it's still around," O'Reilley grumbled, refusing to budge.

Norris suddenly erupted. He turned away angrily and began pacing briskly around the shop, looking under cages, inspecting fixtures, probing into feeding troughs with a pencil, looking into feed bags, examining a Dog-F's wiry coat.

"Here there! What do you think you're doing?" the owner demanded.

Norris began barking off check-points in a loud voice. "Dirty cat-cage . . . inadequate ventilation . . . food trough not clean . . . no water in the newt cages . . ."

"I water them twice a day!" O'Reilley raged.

". . . mouldy rabbit-meal . . . no signs of disinfectant . . . What kind of a disease-trap are you running here?"

He came back to face O'Reilley who stood trembling with rage and cursing him with his eyes.

"Not to mention that sign outside," Norris added cas-

ually. "Dumb blondes"—they outlawed that one the year Kleyton got sent up for using hormones on K-108s, trying to grow himself a harem. Well?"

"Doubt if it's still around," O'Reilley repeated.

"Look, pop!" Norris snapped. "You're required to keep sales receipts until they're microfilmed. There hasn't been a microfilming for over a year . . ."

"Get out of my shop!"

"If I go, you won't *have* a shop after tomorrow."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yeah."

For a moment, Norris thought the old man would attack him. But O'Reilley spat a sudden curse, scurried toward the counter, grabbed a fat book from beneath the cash register, then hurried away toward the stairs at the rear of the shop.

"Hey, pop! Where you going?"

"Get me glasses!"

"You're wearing your glasses!" Norris started after him.

"New ones. Can't see through them." O'Reilley bounded upstairs.

"Leave the book *here* and *I'll* check it!"

Norris stopped with his foot on the bottom step. O'Reilley slammed the door at the head of the stairs, locked it behind him. Grumbling suspiciously, the inspector went back to the counter to wait.

Five minutes passed. The door opened. O'Reilley came downstairs, looking less angry but decidedly nervous. He slammed the book on the counter, riffled its pages, found a place, muttered, "Here it is, see for yourself," and held it at a difficult angle.

"Give it here."

O'Reilley reluctantly released it, began babbling about bureaucracy and tin-horn inspectors who acted like dictators and inspection codes that prescribed and circumscribed and prohibited. Norris ignored him and stared at the duplicate receipt.

"Adelia Schultz . . . received Chimpanzee-K-99-LJZ-351 on . . ."

It was the number on the list from Anthropos. It was the number of the animal he wanted for normalcy tests. But it was not the number of Mrs. Schultz's neutroid, nor

was it the number written on Mrs. Schultz's copy of *this very same invoice*.

O'Reilley was still babbling at him. Norris held the book up to his eye, took aim at the bright doorway across the surface of the page. O'Reilley stopped babbling.

"Rub marks," the inspector grunted. "Scrape marks on the paper."

O'Reilley's breathing sounded asthmatic. Norris lowered the book.

"Nice erasure job—for a carbon copy. Do it while you were upstairs?"

O'Reilley said nothing. Norris took a scrap of paper, folded his handkerchief over the point of his pocketknife blade, used the point to clean out the eraser dust from between the receipts, emptied the dust on the paper, folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Evidence."

O'Reilley said nothing.

Norris tore out the erased receipt, pocketed it, put on his hat and started for the door.

"See you in court, O'Reilley."

"Wait!"

He turned. "Okay—I'm waiting."

"Let's go sit down first," the deflated oldster muttered weakly.

"Sure."

They walked up the flight of stairs and entered a dingy parlor. He glanced around, sniffed at the smell of cabbage boiling and sweaty bedclothing. An orange-haired neotroid lay sleeping on a dirty rug in the corner. Norris stared down at it curiously. O'Reilley made a whining sound and slumped into a chair, his breath coming in little whiffs that suggested inward sobbing. Norris gazed at him expressionlessly for a moment, then went to kneel beside the newt.

"K-99-LJZ-351," he read aloud, peering at the sole of the tattooed foot. The newt stirred in its sleep at the sound of a strange voice. When Norris looked at O'Reilley again, the old man was staring at his feet, his forehead supported by a leathery old hand that shielded his eyes.

"Lots of good explanations, O'Reilley?"

"Ye've seen what ye've seen; now do what ye must. I'll say nothing to ye."

"Look, O'Reilley, the newt is what I'm after. So I found it. I don't know what else I've found, but juggling serial numbers is a serious offense. If you've got a story, you better tell it. Otherwise, you'll be telling it behind bars. I'm willing to listen here and now. You'd better grab the chance."

O'Reilley sighed, looked at the sleeping newt in the corner. "What'll ye do with her?"

"The newt? Take her in."

O'Reilley sat in gloomy silence while he thought things over. "We were class-B, me and the missus," he mumbled suddenly, "allowed a child of our own if we could have 'um. Fancy that, eh? Ugly old coot like me—class-B."

"So?"

"The government said we could have a child, but Nature said we couldn't."

"Tough."

"But since we were class-B, we weren't entitled to own a newt. See?"

"Yeah. Where's your wife?"

"With the saints, let's hope."

Norris wondered what sort of a sob-story this was getting to be. The oldster went on quietly, all the while staring at the sleeping figure in the corner.

"Couldn't have a kid, couldn't own a newt either—so we opened the pet shop. It wasn't like havin' yer own, though. Missus always blubbered when I sold a newt she'd got to feeling like a mother to. Never swiped one, though—not till Peony came long. Last year this Bermuda shipment come in, and I sold most of 'em pretty quick, but Peony here was puny. People afraid she'd not last long. Couldn't sell her. Kept her around so long thet we both loved her. Missus died last year. 'Don't let anybody take Peony,' she kept saying afore she passed on. I promised I wouldn't. So I switched 'em around and moved her up here."

"That's all?"

O'Reilley hesitated, then nodded.

"Ever done this before?"

O'Reilley shook his head.

There was a long silence while Norris stared at the

child-thing. "Your license could be revoked," he said absently.

"I know."

He ground his fist thoughtfully in his palm, thought it over some more. If O'Reilley told the truth, he couldn't live with himself if he reported the old man . . . unless it wasn't the whole truth.

"I want to take your books home with me tonight."

"Help yourself."

"I'm going to make a complete check, investigate you from stem to stern."

He watched O'Reilley closely. The oldster was unaffected. He seemed concerned—grief-stricken—only by the thought of losing the neutroid.

"If plucking a newt out of stock to keep you company was the only thing you did, O'Reilley, I won't report you."

O'Reilley was not consoled. He continued to gaze hungrily at the little being on the rug.

"And if the newt turns out not to be a deviant," he added gently, "I'll send it back. We'll have to attach a correction to that invoice, of course, and you'll just have to take your chances about somebody wanting to buy it, but . . ." he paused. O'Reilley was staring at him strangely.

"And if she *is* a deviant, Mr. Norris?"

"He started to reply, hesitated.

"*Is she, O'Reilley?*"

The oldster said nothing. His face tightened slowly. His shoulders shook slightly, and his squinted eyes were brimming. He choked.

"I see."

O'Reilley shook himself, produced a red bandanna, dabbed at his eyes, blew his nose loudly, regathered his composure.

"How do you know she's deviant?"

O'Reilley gave him a bitter glance, chuckled hoarsely, shuffled across the room and sat on the floor beside the sleeping newt. He patted a small bare shoulder.

"Peony? . . . Peony-girl . . . wake up, me child, wake up."

Its fluffy tail twitched for a moment. It sat up, rubbed its eyes, and yawned. There was a lazy casualness about

its movements that caused Norris to lean closer to stare. Neutroids usually moved in bounces and jerks and scrambles. This one stretched, arched its back, and smiled—like a two-year-old with soft brown eyes. It glanced at Norris. The eyes went wider for a moment, then it studiously ignored him.

“Shall I play bouncey, Daddy?” it piped.

Norris sucked in a long slow breath and sat frozen.

“No need to, Peony.” O’Reilley glanced at the inspector. “Bouncey’s a game we play for visitors,” he explained. “Making believe we’re a neutroid.”

The inspector could find nothing to say.

Peony licked her lips. “Wanna glass of water, Daddy.”

O’Reilley nodded and hobbled away to the kitchen, leaving the man and the neutroid to stare at each other in silence. She was quite a deviant. Even a fully age-set K-108 could not have spoken the two sentences that he had heard, and Peony was still a long way from age-set and a K-99 at that.

O’Reilley came back with the water. She drank it greedily, holding the glass herself while she peered up at the old man.

“Daddy’s eyes all wet,” she observed.

O’Reilley began trembling again. “Never mind, child. You go get your coat.”

“Whyyyy?”

“You’re going for a ride with Mr. Norris.”

She whirled to stare hostilely at the stunned visitor.

“I don’t *want* to!”

The old man choked out a sob and flung himself down to seize her in his arms and hug her against his chest. He tearfully uttered a spasmodic babble of reassurances that would have frightened even a human child.

The deviant neutroid began to cry. Standard neutroids never cried, they whimpered and yeped. Norris felt weak inside. Slowly, the old man lifted his head to peer at the inspector, blinking away tears. He began loosening Peony from the embrace. Suddenly he put her down and stood up.

“Take her quickly,” he hissed, and strode away to the kitchen. He slammed the door behind him. The latch clicked.

Peony scampered to the door and began beating on it

with tiny fists. "Daddy . . . Daddy! ! ! Open 'a door!" she wailed.

Norris licked his lips and swallowed a dry place. Still he did not budge from the sofa, his gaze fastened on the child-thing. Disjointed phrases tumbled through his mind . . . what Man hath wrought . . . out of the slime of an ape . . . fat legs and baby fists and a brain to know . . . and the State spoke to Job out of a whirlwind, saying . . .

"Take her!" came a roaring bellow from the kitchen. *"Take her before I lose me wits and kill ye!"*

Norris got unsteadily to his feet and advanced toward the frightened child-thing. He carried her, kicking and squealing, out into the early evening. By the time he turned into his own driveway, she had subsided a little, but she was still crying.

He saw Anne coming down from the porch to meet him. She was staring at the neutroid who sat on the front seat beside him, while seven of its siblings chattered from their cages in the rear of the truck. She said nothing, only stared through the window at the small tear-stained face.

"Home! I want to go home!" it whined.

Norris lifted the newt and handed it to his wife. "Take it inside. Keep your mouth shut about it. I'll be in as soon as I chuck the others in their cages."

She seemed not to notice his curtness as she cradled the being in her arms and walked away. The truck lurched on to the kennels.

He thought the whole thing over while he worked. When he was finished, he went back in the house and stopped in the hall to call Chief Franklin. It was the only thing to do: get it over with as quickly as possible. The operator said, "His office fails to answer. No taped readback. Shall I give you the locator?"

Anne came into the hall and stood glaring at him, her arms clenched across her bosom, one foot tapping the floor angrily. Peony stood behind her, no longer crying, and peering at him curiously around Anne's skirt.

"Are you doing what I think you're doing, Terry?"

He gulped. "Cancel the call," he told the operator. "It'll wait till tomorrow." He dropped the phone hard

and sank down in the straight chair. It was the only thing to do: delay it as long as he could.

"We'd better have a little talk," she said.

"Maybe we'd better," he admitted.

They went into the living room. Peony's world had evidently been restricted to the pet shop, and she seemed awed by the clean, neat house, no longer frightened, and curious enough about her surroundings to forget to cry for O'Reilley. She sat in the center of the rug, occasionally twitching her tail as she blinked around at the furniture and the two humans who sat in it.

"The deviant?"

"A deviant."

"Just what are you going to do?"

He squirmed. "You know what I'm supposed to do."

"What you were going to do in the hall?"

"Franklin's bound to find out anyway."

"How?"

"Do you imagine that Franklin would trust *anybody*?"

"So?"

"So, he's probably already got a list of all serial numbers from the District Anthropos Wholesalers. As a double-check on *us*. And we'd better deliver."

"I see. That leaves you in a pinch, doesn't it?"

"Not if I do what I'm supposed to."

"By whose law?"

He tugged nervously at his collar, stared at the child-thing who gazed at him fixedly. "Heh heh," he said weakly, waggled a finger at it, held out his hands invitingly. The child-thing inched away nervously.

"Don't evade, Terry."

"I wanna go home . . . I want Dada."

"I gotta think. Gotta have time to think."

"Listen, Terry, you know what calling Franklin would be? It would be M, U, R, D, E, R."

"She's just a newt."

"*She*?"

"Probably. Have to examine her to make sure."

"Great. Intelligent, capable of reproduction. Just great."

"Well, what they do with her after I'm finished with the normalcy tests is none of my affair."

"It's not? *Look at me, Terry. . . . No, not with that patiently suffering . . . Terry!*"

He stopped doing it and sat with his head in his hands, staring at the patterns in the rug, working his toes anxiously. "Think—gotta think."

"While you're thinking, I'll feed the child," she said crisply. "Come on, Peony."

"How'd you know her name?"

"*She told me, naturally.*"

"Oh." He sat trying grimly to concentrate, but the house was infused with Anne-ness, and it influenced him. After a while, he got up and went out to the kennels where he could think objectively. But that was wrong too. The kennels were full of Franklin and the system he represented. Finally he went out into the back yard and lay on the cool grass to stare up at the twilight sky. The problem shaped up quite formidably. Either he turned her over to Franklin to be studied and ultimately destroyed, or he didn't. If he didn't, he was guilty of Delmont's crime. Either he lost Anne and maybe something of himself, or his job and maybe his freedom.

A big silence filled the house during dinner. Only Peony spoke, demanding at irregular intervals to be taken home. Each time the child-thing spoke, Anne looked at him, and each time she looked at him, her eyes said "See?"—until finally he slammed down his fork and marched out to the porch to sulk in the gloom. He heard their voices faintly from the kitchen.

"You've got a good appetite, Peony."

"I like Dada's cooking better."

"Well, maybe mine'll do for awhile."

"I wanna go home."

"I know—but I think your dada wants you to stay with us for awhile."

"I don't want to."

"Why don't you like it here?"

"I want Dada."

"Well maybe we can call him on the phone, eh?"

"Phone?"

"After you get some sleep."

The child-thing whimpered, began to cry. He heard Anne walking with it, murmuring softly. When he had heard as much as he could take, he trotted down the

steps and went for a long walk in the night, stalking slowly along cracked sidewalks beneath overhanging trees, past houses and scattered lights of the suburbs. Suburbs hadn't changed much in a century, only grown more extensive. Some things underwent drastic revision with the passing years, other things—like walking sticks and garden hoes and carving knives and telephones and bicycles—stayed pretty much as they were. Why bother the established system?

He eyed the lighted windows through the hedges as he wandered past. Fluorescent lights, not much different from those of a century ago. But once they had been campfires, the fires of shivering hunters in the forest, when man was young and the world was sparsely planted with his seed. Now the world was choked with his riotous growth, glittering with his lights and his flashing signs, full of the sound of his engines and the roar of his rockets. He had inherited it and filled it—filled it too full, perhaps.

There was no escaping from the past. The last century had glutted the Earth with its children and grandchildren, had strained the Earth's capacity to feed, and the limit had been reached. It had to be guarded. There was no escape into space, either. Man's rockets had touched two planets, but they were sorry worlds, and even if he made them better, Earth could beget children—if allowed—faster than ships could haul them away. The only choice: increase the death rate, or decrease the birth rate—or, as a dismal third possibility—do nothing, and let Nature wield the scythe as she had once done in India and China. But letting-Nature-do-it was not in the nature of Man, for he could always do it better. If his choice robbed his wife of a biological need, then he would build her a disposable baby to pacify her. He would give it a tail and only half a mind, so that she would not confuse it with her own occasional children.

Peony, however, was a grim mistake. The mistake had to be quickly corrected before anyone noticed.

What was he, Norris, going to do about it, if anything? Defy the world? Outwit the world? The world was made in the shape of Franklin, and it snickered at him out of the shadows. He turned and walked back home.

Anne was rocking on the porch with Peony in her arms

when he came up the sidewalk. The small creature dozed fitfully, muttered in its sleep.

"How old is she, Terry?" Anne asked.

"About nine months, or about two years, depending on what you mean."

"Born nine months ago?"

"Mmm. But two years by the development scale, human equivalent. Newts would be fully mature at nine or ten, if they didn't stop at an age-set. Fast maturation."

"But she's brighter than most two-year-olds."

"Maybe."

"You've heard her talk."

"You can't make degree-comparisons between two species, Anne. Not easily anyhow. 'Bright'—signifying I.Q.—by what yardstick?"

"Bright—signifying on-the-ball—by my yardstick. And if you turn her over to Franklin, I'll leave you."

"Car coming," he grunted tonelessly. "Get in the house. It's slowing down."

Anne slipped out of her chair and hurried inside. Norris lingered only a moment; then followed. The headlights paused in front of a house down the block, then inched ahead. He watched from deep in the hall.

"Shall I take her out to the kennels right quick?" Anne called tensely.

"Stick where you are," he muttered, and a moment later regretted it. The headlights stopped in front. The beam of a powerful flashlight played over the porch, found the house number, winked out. The driver cut the engine. Norris strode to the living room.

"Play bouncy!" he growled at Peony.

"Don't want to," she grumbled back.

"There's a man coming, and you'd better play bouncy if you ever want to see your Dada again!" he hissed.

Peony yeepped and backed away from him, whimpering.

"Terry! What're you talking about! You should be ashamed!"

"Shut up. . . . Peony, play bouncy."

Peony chattered and leaped to the back of the sofa with monkeylike grace.

"She's frightened! She's acting like a common newt!"

"That's bouncy," he grunted. "That's good."

The car door slammed. Norris went to put on the

porch light and watch the visitor come up the steps—a husky, bald gentleman in a black suit and Roman collar. He blinked and shook his head. Clergyman? The fellow must have the wrong house.

“Good evening.”

“Uh—yeah.”

“I’m Father Mulreany. Norris residence?” The priest had a slight brogue; it stirred a vague hunch in Norris’ mind, but failed to clear it.

“I’m Norris. What’s up?”

“Uh, well, one of my parishioners—I think you’ve met him—”

“Countryman of yours?”

“Mmm.”

“O’Reilley?”

“Yes.”

“What’d he do, hang himself?”

“Nothing that bad. May I come in?”

“I doubt it. What do you want?”

“Information.”

“Personal or official?”

The priest paused, studied Norris’ silhouette through the screen. He seemed not taken aback by the inspector’s brusqueness, perhaps accepting it as normal in an era that had little regard for the cloth.

“O’Reilley’s in bad shape, Inspector,” Mulreany said quietly. “I don’t know whether to call a doctor, a psychiatrist, or a cop.”

Norris stiffened. “A cop?” He hesitated, feeling a vague hostility, and a less vague suspicion. He opened the screen, let the priest in, led him to the living room. Anne muttered half-politely, excused herself, snatched Peony, and headed for the rear of the house. The priest’s eyes followed the neutroid intently.

“So O’Reilley did something?”

“Mmm.”

“What’s it to you?”

Mulreany frowned. “In addition to things you wouldn’t understand—he was my sister’s husband.”

Norris waved him into a chair. “Okay, so—?”

“He called me tonight. He was loaded. Just a senseless babble, but I knew something was wrong. So I went over to the shop.” Mulreany stopped to light a cigarette and

frown at the floor. He looked up suddenly. "You see him today?"

Norris could think of no reason not to admit it. He nodded irritably.

Mulreany leaned forward curiously. "Was he sober?"

"Yeah."

"Sane?"

"How should I know?"

"Did he impress you as the sort of man who would suddenly decide to take a joint of pipe and a meat cleaver and mass-slaughter about sixty helpless animals?"

Norris felt slightly dazed. He sank back, shaking his head and blinking. There was a long silence. Mulreany was watching him carefully.

"I can't help you," Norris muttered. "I've got nothing to say."

"Look, Inspector, forget this, will you?" He touched his collar.

Norris shook his head, managed a sour smile. "I can't help you."

"All right," Mulreany sighed, starting to his feet. "I'm just trying to find out if what he says . . ."

"Men talking about Dada?" came a piping voice from the kitchen.

Mulreany shot a quick glance toward it. ". . . is true," he finished softly.

There was a sudden hush. He could hear Anne whispering in the kitchen, saw her steal a glance through the door.

"So it *is* true," Mulreany murmured.

Face frozen, Norris came to his feet. "Anne," he called in a bitter voice. "Bouncey's off."

She came in carrying Peony and looking murderous. "Why did you ask him in?" she demanded in a hiss.

Mulreany stared at the small creature. Anne stared at the priest.

"It's poison to you isn't it!" she snapped, then held Peony up toward him. "Here! Look at your enemy. Offends your humanocentrism, doesn't she?"

"Not at all," he said rather wistfully.

"You condemn them."

He shook his head. "Not *them*. Only what they're used

for by society." He looked at Norris, a bit puzzled. "I'd better leave."

"Maybe not. Better spill it. What do you want?"

"I told you. O'Reilley went berserk, made a butcher shop out of his place. When I got there, he was babbling about a talking neutroid—'his baby'—said you took it to the pound to destroy it. Threatened to kill you. I got a friend to stay with him, came over to see if I could find out what it's all about."

"The newt's a deviant. You've heard of the Delmont case?"

"Rumors."

"She's it."

"I see." Mulreany looked glum, grim, gloomy. "Nothing more I need to know I guess. Well—"

Norris grabbed his arm as he turned. "Sit a spell," he grunted ominously.

The priest looked puzzled, let himself be guided back to the chair. Norris stood looking down at him.

"What's the matter with Dada?" Peony chirped. "I wanna go see Dada."

"Well?" Norris growled. "What about her?"

"I don't understand."

"You people are down on Anthropos, aren't you?"

Mulreany kept patience with an effort. "To make nitroglycerin for curing heart trouble is good, to make it for blowing open safes is bad. The stuff itself is morally neutral. The same goes for mutant animals. As pets, okay; as replacements for humans, no."

"Yeah, but you'd just as soon see them dead, eh?"

Mulreany hesitated. "I admit a personal dislike for them."

"This one?"

"What about her?"

"Better dead, eh?"

"I didn't say that."

"You couldn't admit she might be human?"

"Don't know her that well. Human? How do you mean—biologically? Obviously not. Theologically? Why should you care?"

"I'm interested in your particular attitude, buster."

Mulreany gazed at him, gathering a glower. "I'm a little doubtful about my status here," he growled. "I

came for information; the roles got switched somewhere. Okay, Norris, but I'm sick of neopagan innocents like you. Now sit down, or show me the door."

Norris sat down slowly.

The priest watched the small neutroid for a moment before speaking. "She's alive, performs the function of living, is evidently aware. Life—a kind of functioning. A specific life—an invariant kind of functioning—with sameness-of-self about it. Invariance of functioning—a principle. Self, soul, call it what you like. Whatever's alive has it." He paused to watch Norris doubtfully.

Norris nodded curtly. "Go on."

"Doesn't have to be anything immortal about it. Not unless she were known to be human. Or intelligent."

"You heard her," Anne snapped.

"I've heard metal boxes speak with great wisdom," Mulreany said sourly. "And if I were a Hottentot, a vocalizing computer would . . ."

"Skip the analogies. Go on."

"What's intelligence? A function of Man, immortal. What's Man? An intelligent immortal creature, capable of choice."

"Quit talking in circles."

"That's the point. I can't—not where Peony's concerned. What do you want to know? If I think she's equal to Man? Give me all the intelligence test results, and all the data you can get—I still couldn't decide."

"Whattaya need? Mystic writings in the sky?"

"Precisely."

"I feel a bush being beat about," Anne said suddenly. "Is this guy going to make things tough, or isn't he?"

Mulreany looked puzzled again.

"To the point, then," Norris said. "Would you applaud if she gets the gasser?"

"Hardly."

"If you had to decide for yourself—"

"What? Whether to destroy her or not?" Mulreany snorted irritably. "Not if there was the least doubt in my mind about her. She's a shadow in the brush. Maybe it's ten to one that the shadow's a bear and not a man—but on the one chance, don't shoot, son, don't shoot."

"You think the authorities have the right to kill her, maybe?" Anne asked.

"Who, him?" Mulreany jerked his head toward Norris.

"Well *say* him."

"I'd have to think about it. But I don't think so."

"Why? The government made her. Why can't it unmake her?"

"Made her? *Did* it now?"

"Delmont did," Norris corrected.

"*Did* he now?" said Mulreany.

"Why not?" Anne snorted.

"I, the state, am Big Fertility," Norris said sourly; then baiting Mulreany: "Thou shalt accept no phallus but the evolvotron."

Mulreany reddened, slapped his knee, and chortled. The Norrises exchanged puzzled glances.

"I feel an affinity," Anne murmured suspiciously.

Norris came slowly to his feet. "If you talk to anybody about Peony, you may be responsible for her death."

"I don't quite see—"

"You don't need to."

Mulreany shrugged.

"Tell O'Reilley the same."

Mulreany nodded. "You've got my word."

"Your which?"

"Sorry, I forgot. Ancient usage. I won't mention Peony. I'll see that O'Reilley doesn't."

Norris led him to the door. The priest was obviously suppressing large quantities of curiosity, but contained it well. On the steps, he paused to look back, wearing a curious smirk.

"It just occurred to me—if the child is 'human' in the broad sense, she's rather superior to you and me."

"Why?"

"Hasn't picked an apple yet."

Norris shrugged slightly.

"And Inspector—if Delmont made her—ask yourself: Just what was it that he 'made'?" He nodded quickly. "Good night."

"What do you make of him?" Anne hissed nervously.

"Backworldsman. Can't say."

"Fool, why'd you bring him in?"

"I'm no good at conspiracies."

"Then you *will* do it?"

"What?"

"Hide her, or something."

He stared at her doubtfully. "The only thing I can hope to do is falsify the test reports and send her back to O'Reilley as a standard model."

"That's better than nothing."

"And then spend the rest of our days waiting for it to be uncovered," he added grimly.

"You've got to, Terry."

Maybe, he thought, maybe.

If he gave her back to O'Reilley, there was a good chance she'd be discovered when the auditor came to microfilm the records and check inventory. He certainly couldn't keep her himself—not with other bio agents wandering in and out every few days. She could not be hidden.

He sat down for a smoke and watched Anne tiptoe to the sofa with the sleeping Peony. It would be easy to obey the law, turn her over to Franklin, and tell Anne that he had done something else with her, something like . . .

He shuddered and chopped the thought off short. She glanced at him curiously.

"I don't like the way you're looking at me," she muttered.

"You imagine things."

"Uh-uh. Listen to me, Terry, if you let that baby . . ."

"I'm sick of your ifs!" he barked. "If I hear another goddam threat of your leaving *if*, then to hell with it, you can leave any time!"

"Terry!"

She stared, puzzled, in his direction for a moment, then slowly wandered out, still puzzling. He sank lower in the chair, brooding. Then it hit him. It wasn't Anne that worried him; it was a piece of himself. It was a piece of himself that threatened to go, and if he let Peony be packed off to Central Lab, it *would* go, and thereafter he would not be able to stomach anything, even himself.

The morning news from the Scriber was carefully folded beside his plate when he came to the table for breakfast. It was so deliberately folded that he bothered

to notice the advertisement in the center of the displayed portion.

"You lay this out for my benefit?" he asked.

"Not particularly," she said casually.

He read it with a suspicious frown:

BIOLOGISTS WANTED
by
ANTHROPOS INCORPORATED
for
Evolvotron Operators
Incubator Tenders
Nursery Supervisors
Laboratory Personnel
in
NEW ATLANTA PLANT
Call or write
Personnel Manager
ANTHROPOS INCORPORATED
Atlanta, Ga.
Note: Secure Labor Dept.
release from present job
before applying.

"What's this supposed to mean to me?" he demanded.

"Nothing in particular. Why? Does it mean something to you?"

He brushed the paper aside and decided to ignore the subtlety, if any. She picked it up, glanced at it as if she had not seen it before. "New jobs, new places to live," she murmured.

After breakfast, he went down to police headquarters to sign a statement concerning the motive in Doctor Georges' murder. Sarah Glubbes had been stashed away in a psychopathic ward, according to Chief Miler, and would probably stay awhile.

"Funny thing, Norris," the cop said. "What people won't do over a newt! You know, it's a wonder you don't get your head blown off. I don't covet your job."

"Good." He signed the paper and glanced at Miler coolly.

"Must take an iron gut, huh, Norris?"

"Sure. Just a matter of adaptation."

"Guess so." Miler patted his paunch and yawned.

"How you coming on this Delmont business? Picked up any deviants yet?"

Norris pitched the fountain pen on the desk, splattering ink. "What made you ask that?" he said stiffly.

"Nothing *made* me. I did it myself. Touchy today?"

"Maybe."

Miler shrugged. "Something made you jump when I said 'deviants.'"

"Nothing made me. I—"

"Ya, ya, sure, but—"

"Save it for a suspect, Fat." He stalked out of the office, leaving Miler tapping his pencil and gazing curiously after him. A phone rang somewhere behind him. He hurried on—angry with himself for jumpiness and for indecisiveness. He had to make a choice, and make it soon. It was the lack of a choice that left him jumpy, susceptible to a jolt from either side.

"Norris . . . Hey, Norris . . ."

Miler's voice. He whirled to see the cop trotting down the steps behind him, his pudgy face glistening in the morning sun.

"Your wife's on the phone, Norris. Says it's urgent."

When he got back to the office, he heard the faint, "Hello, *hello!*" coming from the receiver on the desk, caught it up quickly.

"Anne? What's wrong?"

Her voice was low and strained beneath a cheerful overnote. "Nothing's wrong, darling. We have a visitor. Come right home. Chief Franklin's here."

It knocked the breath out of him. He felt himself going white. He glanced at Chief Miler, sitting calmly nearby.

"Can you tell me about it now?" he asked her.

"Not very well. Please hurry home. He wants to talk to you about the K-99s."

"Have the two of them met?"

"Yes, they have." She paused, as if waiting for him to speak, then said, "Oh, *that!* Bouncey, honey—remember bouncey?"

"Good, I'll be right home." He hung up and started out.

"Troubles?" the chief called after him.

"Just a sick newt, if it's any of your business," he called back.

Franklin's helicopter was parked in the empty lot next door when Norris drove up in front of the house. The departmental chief heard the truck and came out on the porch to watch his agent walk up the path. His bulky body was loosely draped in gray tweeds, and his hawk face was a dark, solemn mask. He greeted Norris with a slow, almost sarcastic nod.

"I see you don't read your mail. If you'd looked at it, you'd have known I was coming. I wrote you yesterday."

"Sorry Chief, I didn't have a chance to stop by the message office this morning."

Franklin grunted. "Then you don't know why I'm here?"

"No, sir."

"Let's sit out on the porch," Franklin said, and perched his bony frame on the railing. "We've got to get busy on these Bermuda K-99s, Norris. How many have you got?"

"Thirty-four, I think."

"I counted thirty-five."

"Maybe you're right. I—I'm not sure."

"Found any deviants yet?"

"Uh—I haven't run any tests yet, sir."

Franklin's voice went sharp. "Do you need a test to know when a neutroid is talking a blue streak?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. We've found at least a dozen of Delmont's units that have mental ages that correspond to their physical age. What's more, they're functioning females, and they have normal pituitaries. Know what that means?"

"They won't take an age-set then," Norris said. "They'll grow to adulthood."

"And have children."

Norris frowned. "How can they have children? There aren't any males."

"No? Guess what we found in one of Delmont's incubators."

"Not a—"

"Yeah. And it's probably not the first. This business about padding his quota is baloney! Hell, man, he was going to start his own black market! He finally admitted it, after twenty hours' questioning without a letup. He

was going to raise them, Norris. He was stealing them right out of the incubators before an inspector ever saw them. The K-99s—the numbered ones—are just the ones he couldn't get back. Lord knows how many males he's got hidden away someplace!"

"What're you going to do?"

"*Do!* What do you *think* we'll do? Smash the whole scheme, that's what! Find the deviants and kill them. We've got enough now for lab work."

Norris felt sick. He looked away. "I suppose you'll want me to handle the destruction, then."

Franklin gave him a suspicious glance. "Yes, but why do you ask? You *have* found one, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," he admitted.

A moan came from the doorway. Norris looked up to see his wife's white face staring at him in horror, just before she turned and fled into the house. Franklin's bony head lifted.

"I see," he said. "We have a fixation on our deviant. Very well, Norris, I'll take care of it myself. Where is it?"

"In the house, sir. My wife's bedroom."

"Get it."

Norris went glumly in the house. The bedroom door was locked.

"Honey," he called softly. There was no answer. He knocked gently.

A key turned in the lock, and his wife stood facing him. Her eyes were weeping ice.

"Stay back!" she said. He could see Peony behind her, sitting in the center of the floor and looking mystified.

Then he saw his own service revolver in her trembling hand.

"Honey, look—it's *me*."

She shook her head. "No, it's not you. It's a man that wants to kill a little girl. Stay back."

"You'd shoot, wouldn't you?" he asked softly.

"Try to come in and find out," she invited.

"Let me have Peony."

She laughed, her eyes bright with hate. "I wonder where Terry went. I guess he died. Or adapted. I guess I'm a widow now. Stay back, mister, or I'll kill you."

Norris smiled. "Okay, I'll stay back. But the gun isn't loaded."

She tried to slam the door; he caught it with his foot. She struck at him with the pistol, but he dragged it out of her hand. He pushed her aside and held her against the wall while she clawed at his arm.

"Stop it!" he said. "Nothing will happen to Peony, I promise you!" He glanced back at the child-thing, who had begun to cry.

Anne subsided a little, staring at him angrily.

"There's no other way out, honey. Just trust me. She'll be all right."

Breathing quickly, Anne stood aside and watched him. "Okay, Terry. But if you're lying—tell me, is it murder to kill a man to protect a child?"

Norris lifted Peony in his arms. Her wailing ceased, but her tail switched nervously.

"In whose law book?" he asked his wife. "I was wondering the same thing." Norris started toward the door. "By the way—find my instruments while I'm outside, will you?"

"The dissecting instruments?" she gasped. "If you intend—"

"Let's call them surgical instruments, shall we? And get them sterilized."

He went on outside, carrying the child. Franklin was waiting for him in the kennel doorway.

"Was that Mrs. Norris I heard screaming?"

Norris nodded. "Let's get this over with. I don't stomach it so well." He let his eyes rest unhappily on the top of Peony's head.

Franklin grinned at her and took a bit of candy out of his pocket. She refused it and snuggled closer to Norris.

"When can I go home?" she piped. "I want Dada."

Franklin straightened, watching her with amusement. "You're going home in a few minutes, little newt. Just a few minutes."

They went into the kennels together, and Franklin headed straight for the third room. He seemed to be enjoying the situation. Norris, hating him silently, stopped at a workbench and pulled on a pair of gloves. Then he called after Franklin.

"Chief, since you're in there, check the outlet pressure while I turn on the main line, will you?"

Franklin nodded assent. He stood outside the gas chamber, watching the dials on the door. Norris could see his back while he twisted the main-line valve.

"Pressure's up!" Franklin called.

"Okay. Leave the hatch ajar so it won't lock, and crack the intake valves. Read it again."

"Got a mask for me?"

Norris laughed. "If you're scared, there's one on the shelf. But just open the hatch, take a reading, and close it. There's no danger."

Franklin frowned at him and cracked the intakes. Norris quietly closed the main valve again.

"Drops to zero!" Franklin called.

"Leave it open, then. Smell anything?"

"No. I'm turning it off, Norris." He twisted the intakes. Simultaneously, Norris opened the main line.

"Pressure's up again!"

Norris dropped his wrench and walked back to the chamber, leaving Peony perched on the workbench.

"Trouble with the intakes," he said gruffly. "It's happened before. Mind getting your hands dirty with me, Chief?"

Franklin frowned irritably. "Let's hurry this up, Norris. I've got five territories to visit."

"Okay, but we'd better put on our masks." He climbed a metal ladder to the top of the chamber, leaned over to inspect the intakes. On his way down, he shouldered a light-bulb over the door, shattering it. Franklin cursed and stepped back, brushing glass fragments from his head and shoulders.

"Good thing the light was off," he snapped.

Norris handed him the gas mask and put on his own. "The main switch is off," he said. He opened the intakes again. This time the dials fell to normal open-line pressure. "Well, look—it's okay," he called through the mask. "You sure it was zero before?"

"Of course I'm sure!" came the muffled reply.

"Leave it on for a minute. We'll see. I'll go get the newt. Don't let the door close, sir. It'll start the auto-matics and we can't get it open for half an hour."

"I know, Norris. Hurry up."

Norris left him standing just outside the chamber, propping the door open with his foot. A faint wind was coming through the opening. It should reach an explosive mixture quickly with the hatch ajar.

He stepped into the next room, waited a moment, and jerked the switch. The roar was deafening as the exposed tungsten filament flared and detonated the escaping anesthetic vapor. Norris went to cut off the main line. Peony was crying plaintively. He moved to the door and glanced at the smouldering remains of Franklin.

Feeling no emotion whatever, Norris left the kennels, carrying the sobbing child under one arm. His wife stared at him without understanding.

"Here, hold Peony while I call the police," he said.

"Police? What's happened?"

He dialed quickly. "Chief Miler? This is Norris. Get over here quick. My gas chamber exploded—killed Chief Agent Franklin. Man, it's awful! Hurry!"

He hung up and went back to the kennels. He selected a normal Bermuda K-99 and coldly killed it with a wrench. "You'll serve for a deviant," he said, and left it lying in the middle of the floor.

Then he went back to the house, mixed a sleeping capsule in a glass of water, and forced Peony to drink it.

"So she'll be out when the cops come," he explained to Anne.

She stamped her foot. "Will you tell me what's happened?"

"You heard me on the phone. Franklin accidentally died. That's all you have to know."

He carried Peony out and locked her in a cage. She was too sleepy to protest, and she was dozing when the police came.

Chief Miler strode about the three rooms like a man looking for a burglar at midnight. He nudged the body of the neutroid with his foot. "What's this, Norris?"

"The deviant we were about to destroy. I finished her with a wrench."

"I thought you said there weren't any deviants."

"As far as the public's concerned, there aren't. I couldn't see that it was any of your business. It still isn't."

"I see. It may become my business, though. How'd the blast happen?"

Norris told him the story up to the point of the detonation. "The light over the door was loose. Kept flickering on and off. Franklin reached up to tighten it. Must have been a little gas in the socket. Soon as he touched it—wham!"

"Why was the door open with the gas on?"

"I told you—we were checking the intakes. If you close the door, it starts the automatics. Then you can't get it open till the cycle's finished."

"Where were you?"

"I'd gone to cut off the gas again."

"Okay, stay in the house until we're finished out here."

When Norris went back in the house, his wife's white face turned slowly toward him.

She sat stiffly by the living room window, looking sick. Her voice was quietly frightened.

"Terry, I'm sorry about everything."

"Skip it."

"What did you do?"

He grinned sourly. "I adapted to an era. Did you find the instruments?"

She nodded. "What are they for?"

"To cut off a tail and a skin-tattooed foot. Go to the store and buy some brown hair-dye and a pair of boy's trousers, age two. Peony's going to get a crew cut. From now on, she's Mike."

"We're class-C, Terry! We can't pass her off as our own."

"We're class-A, honey. I'm going to forge a heredity certificate."

Anne put her face in her hands and rocked slowly to and fro.

"Don't feel bad, baby. It was Franklin or a little girl. And from now on, it's society or the Norrises."

"What'll we do?"

"Go to Atlanta and work for Anthropos. I'll take up where Delmont left off."

"Terry!"

"Peony will need a husband. They may find all of Delmont's males. I'll *make* her one. Then we'll see if a pair of Chimp-Ks can do better than their makers."

Wearily, he stretched out on the sofa.

"What about the priest? Suppose he tells about Peony. Suppose he guesses about Franklin and tells the police?"

"The police," he said, "would then smell a motive. They'd figure it out and I'd be finished. We'll wait and see. Let's don't talk; I'm tired. We'll just wait for Miler to come in."

She began rubbing his temples gently, and he smiled.

"So we wait," she said. "Shall I read to you, Terry?"

"That would be pleasant," he murmured, closing his eyes.

She slipped away, but returned quickly. He heard the rustle of dry pages and smelled musty leather. Then her voice came, speaking old words softly. And he thought of the small child-thing lying peacefully in her cage while angry men stalked about her. A small life with a mind; she came into the world as quietly as a thief, a burglar in the crowded house of Man.

"I will send my fear before thee, and I will destroy the peoples before whom thou shalt come, sending hornets to drive out the Hevite and the Canaanite and the Hethite before thou enterest the land. Little by little I will drive them out before thee, till thou be increased, and dost possess the land. Then shalt thou be to me a new people, and I to thee a God . . ."

And on the quiet afternoon in May, while he waited for the police to finish puzzling in the kennels, it seemed to Terrell Norris that an end to scheming and pushing and arrogance was not too far ahead. It should be a pretty good world then.

He hoped Man could fit into it somehow.

THE DARFSTELLER

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"Judas, Judas" was playing at the Universal on Fifth Street, and the cast was entirely human. Ryan Thornier had been saving up for it for several weeks, and now he could afford the price of a matinée ticket. It had been a race for time between his piggy bank and the wallets of several "public-spirited" angels who kept the show alive, and the piggy bank had won. He could see the show before the wallets went flat and the show folded, as any such show was bound to do after a few limping weeks. A glow of anticipation suffused him. After watching the wretched mockery of dramaturgical art every day at the New Empire Theater where he worked as janitor, the chance to see real theater again would be like a breath of clean air.

He came to work an hour early on Wednesday morning and sped through his usual chores on overdrive. He finished his work before one o'clock, had a shower backstage, changed to street clothes, and went nervously upstairs to ask Imperio D'Uccia for the rest of the day off.

D'Uccia sat enthroned at a rickety desk before a wall plastered with photographs of lightly clad female stars of the old days. He heard the janitor's petition with a faint, almost oriental smile of apparent sympathy, then drew himself up to his full height of sixty-five inches, leaned

on the desk with chubby hands to study Thornier with beady eyes.

"Off? So you wanna da day off? Mmmph—" He shook his head as if mystified by such an incomprehensible request.

The gangling janitor shifted his feet uneasily. "Yes, sir. I've finished up, and Jigger'll come over to stand by in case you need anything special." He paused. D'Uccia was studying his nails, frowning gravely. "I haven't asked for a day off in two years, Mr. D'Uccia," he added, "and I was sure you wouldn't mind after all the overtime I've—"

"Jigger," D'Uccia grunted. "Whoosa t'is Jigger?"

"Works at the Paramount. It's closed for repairs, and he doesn't mind—"

The theater manager grunted abruptly and waved his hands. "I don' pay no Jigger, I pay you. Whassa this all about? You swip the floor, you putsa things away, you all finish now, ah? You wanna day off. Thatsa whass wrong with the world, too mucha time loaf. Letsa machines work. More time to mek trouble." The theater manager came out from behind his desk and waddled to the door. He thrust his fat neck outside and looked up and down the corridor, then waddled back to confront Thornier with a short fat finger aimed at the employee's long and majestic nose.

"Whensa lass time you waxa the upstairs floor, hah?"

Thornier's jaw sagged forlornly. "Why, I—"

"Don'ta tell me no lie. Looka that hall. Sheeza feelth. *Look!* I want you to look." He caught Thornier's arm, tugged him to the doorway, pointed excitedly at the worn and ancient oak flooring. "Sheeza feelth ground in! See? When you wax, hah?"

A great shudder seemed to pass through the thin elderly man. He sighed resignedly and turned to look down at D'Uccia with weary gray eyes.

"Do I get the afternoon off, or don't I?" he asked hopelessly, knowing the answer in advance.

But D'Uccia was not content with a mere refusal. He began to pace. He was obviously deeply moved. He defended the system of free enterprise and the cherished traditions of the theater. He spoke eloquently of the golden virtues of industriousness and dedication to duty.

He bounced about like a furious Pekingese yapping happily at a scarecrow. Thornier's neck reddened, his mouth went tight.

"Can I go now?"

"When you waxa da floor? Palisha da seats, fixa da lights? When you clean op the dressing room, hah?" He stared up at Thornier for a moment, then turned on his heel and charged to the window. He thrust his thumb into the black dirt of the window box, where several prize lilies were already beginning to bloom. "Ha!" he snorted. "Dry, like I thought! You think the bulbs a don't need a drink, hah?"

"But I watered them this morning. The sun—"

"Hah! You letsa little *fiori* wilt and die, hah? And you wanna the day off?"

It was hopeless. When D'Uccia drew his defensive mantle of calculated deafness or stupidity about himself, he became impenetrable to any request or honest explanation. Thornier sucked in a slow breath between his teeth, stared angrily at his employer for a moment, and seemed briefly ready to unleash an angry blast. Thinking better of it, he bit his lip, turned, and stalked wordlessly out of the office. D'Uccia followed him triumphantly to the door.

"Don' you go sneak off, now!" he called ominously, and stood smiling down the corridor until the janitor vanished at the head of the stairs. Then he sighed and went back to get his hat and coat. He was just preparing to leave when Thornier came back upstairs with a load of buckets, mops, and swabs.

The janitor stopped when he noticed the hat and coat, and his seamed face went curiously blank. "Going home, Mr. D'Uccia?" he asked icily.

"Yeh! I'ma worka too hard, the doctor say. I'ma need the sunshine. More frash air. I'ma go relax on the beach a while."

Thornier leaned on the mop handle and smiled nastily. "Sure," he said. "Letsa machines do da work."

The comment was lost on D'Uccia. He waved airily, strode off toward the stairway, and called an airy "*A rivederci!*" over his shoulder.

"*A rivederci, padrone,*" Thornier muttered softly, his pale eyes glittering from their crow's-feet wrappings. For

a moment his face seemed to change—and once again he was Chaubrec's Adolfo, at the exit of the Commandant, Act II, scene iv, from "A Canticle for the Marsman."

Somewhere downstairs, a door slammed behind D'Uccia.

"Into death!" hissed Adolfo-Thornier, throwing back his head to laugh Adolfo's laugh. It rattled the walls. When its reverberations had died away, he felt a little better. He picked up his buckets and brooms and walked on down the corridor to the door of D'Uccia's office.

Unless "Judas-Judas" hung on through the weekend, he wouldn't get to see it, since he could not afford a ticket to the evening performance, and there was no use asking D'Uccia for favors. While he waxed the hall, he burned. He waxed as far as D'Uccia's doorway, then stood staring into the office for several vacant minutes.

"I'm fed up," he said at last.

The office remained silent. The window-box lilies bowed to the breeze.

"You little creep!" he growled. "I'm through!"

The office was speechless. Thornier straightened and tapped his chest.

"I, Ryan Thornier, am walking out, you hear? The show is finished!"

When the office failed to respond, he turned on his heel and stalked downstairs. Minutes later, he came back with a small can of gold paint and a pair of artists' brushes from the storeroom. Again he paused in the doorway.

"Anything else I can do, Mr. D'Uccia?" he purred.

Traffic murmured in the street; the breeze rustled the lilies; the building creaked.

"Oh? You want me to wax in the wall-cracks, too? How could I have forgotten!"

He clucked his tongue and went over to the window. Such lovely lilies. He opened the paint can, set it on the window ledge, and then very carefully he glided each of the prize lilies, petals, leaves, and stalks, until the flowers glistened like the work of Midas' hands in the sunlight. When he finished, he stepped back to smile at them

in admiration for a moment, then went to finish waxing the hall.

He waxed it with particular care in front of D'Uccia's office. He waxed under the throw rug that covered the worn spot on the floor where D'Uccia had made a sharp left turn into his sanctum every morning for fifteen years, and then he turned the rug over and dusted dry wax powder into the pile. He replaced it carefully and pushed at it a few times with his foot to make certain the lubrication was adequate. The rug slid about as if it rode on a bed of bird-shot.

Thornier smiled and went downstairs. The world was suddenly different somehow. Even the air smelled different. He paused on the landing to glance at himself in the decorative mirror.

Ah! the old trouper again. No more of the stooped and haggard menial. None of the wistfulness and weariness of self-perpetuated slavery. Even with the gray at the temples and the lines in the face, here was something of the old Thornier—or one of the *many* old Thorniers of earlier days. Which one? Which one'll it be? Adolfo? Or Hamlet? Justin, or J. J. Jones, from "The Electrocutationer"? Any of them, all of them; for he was Ryan Thornier, star, in the old days.

"Where've you been, baby?" he asked his image with a tight smile of approval, winked, and went on home for the evening. Tomorrow, he promised himself, a new life would begin.

"But you've been making that promise for years, Thorny," said the man in the control booth, his voice edged with impatience. "What do you mean, 'you quit'? Did you tell D'Uccia you quit?"

Thornier smiled loftily while he dabbed with his broom at a bit of dust in the corner. "Not exactly, Richard," he said. "But the *padrone* will find it out soon enough."

The technician grunted disgust. "I don't understand you, Thorny. Sure, if you *really* quit, that's swell—if you don't just turn around and get another job like this one."

"Never!" the old actor proclaimed resonantly, and glanced up at the clock. Five till ten. Nearly time for D'Uccia to arrive for work. He smiled to himself.

"If you really quit, what are you doing here today?" Rick Thomas demanded, glancing up briefly from the

Maestro. His arms were thrust deep into the electronic entrails of the machine, and he wore a pencil-sized screwdriver tucked behind one ear. "Why don't you go home, if you quit?"

"Oh, don't worry, Richard. This time it's for real."

"Pssss!" An amused hiss from the technician. "Yeah, it was for real when you quit at the Bijou, too. Only then a week later you came to work here. So what now, Mercutio?"

"To the casting office, old friend. A bit part somewhere, perhaps." Thornier smiled on him benignly. "Don't concern yourself about me."

"Thorny, can't you get it through your head that theater's *dead*? There isn't any theater! No movies, no television either—except for dead men and the Maestro here." He slapped the metal housing of the machine.

"I *meant*," Thorny explained patiently, "'employment office,' and 'small job,' you . . . you machine-age flint-smith. Figures of speech, solely."

"Yah."

"I thought you *wanted* me to resign my position, Richard."

"Yes! If you'll do something worthwhile with yourself. Ryan Thornier, star of 'Walkaway,' playing martyr with a scrub-bucket! Aaaak! You give me the gripes. And you'll do it again. You can't stay away from the stage, even if all you can do about it is mop up the oil drip-pings."

"You couldn't possibly understand," Thornier said stiffly.

Rick straightened to look at him, took his arms out of the Maestro and leaned on top of the cabinet. "I dunno, Thorny," he said in a softer voice. "Maybe I do. You're an actor, and you're always playing roles. Living them, even. You can't help it, I guess. But you *could* do a saner job of picking the parts you're going to play."

"The world has cast me in the role I play," Thornier announced with a funereal face.

Rick Thomas clapped a hand over his forehead and drew it slowly down across his face in exasperation. "I give up!" he groaned. "Look at you! Matinée idol, pushing a broom. Eight years ago, it made sense—*your* kind of sense, anyhow. Dramatic gesture. Leading actor de-

fies autodrama offer, takes janitor's job. Loyal to tradition, and the guild—and all that. It made small headlines, maybe even helped the legit stage limp along a little longer. But the audiences stopped bleeding for you after a while, and then it stopped making even *your* kind of sense!"

Thornier stood wheezing slightly and glaring at him. "What would *you* do," he hissed, "if they started making a little black box that could be attached to the wall up there"—he waved to a bare spot above the Maestro's bulky housing—"that could repair, maintain, operate, and adjust—do all the things you do to that . . . that contraption. Suppose nobody needed electronics any more."

Rick Thomas thought about it a few moments, then grinned. "Well, I guess I'd get a job making the little black boxes, then."

"You're not funny, Richard!"

"I didn't intend to be."

"You're . . . you're not an artist." Flushed with fury, Thornier swept viciously at the floor of the booth.

A door slammed somewhere downstairs, far below the above-stage booth. Thorny set his broom aside and moved to the window to watch. The *clop, clop, clop* of bustling footsteps came up the central aisle.

"Hizzoner, da Imperio," muttered the technician, glancing up at the clock. "Either that clock's two minutes fast, or else this was his morning to take a bath."

Thornier smiled sourly toward the main aisle, his eyes traveling after the waddling figure of the theater manager. When D'Uccia disappeared beneath the rear balcony, he resumed his sweeping.

"I don't see why you don't get a sales job, Thorny," Rick ventured, returning to his work. "A good salesman is just an actor, minus the temperament. There's *lots* of demand for good actors, come to think of it. Politicians, top executives, even generals—some of them seem to make out on *nothing but* dramatic talent. History affirms it."

"Bah! I'm no schauspieler." He paused to watch Rick adjusting the Maestro, and slowly shook his head. "Ease your conscience, Richard," he said finally.

Startled, the technician dropped his screwdriver,

looked up quizzically. "My conscience? What the devil is uneasy about my conscience?"

"Oh, don't pretend. That's why you're always so concerned about me. I know *you* can't help it that your . . . your trade has perverted a great art."

Rick gaped at him in disbelief for a moment. "*You think I—*" He choked. He colored angrily. He stared at the old ham and began to curse softly under his breath.

Thornier suddenly lifted a finger to his mouth and went *shhhhh!* His eyes roamed toward the back of the theater.

"That was only D'Uccia on the stairs," Rick began. "What—?"

"*Shhhhh!*"

They listened. The janitor wore a rancid smile. Seconds later it came—first a faint yelp, then—

Bbbrroommmph!

It rattled the booth windows. Rick started up frowning.

"What the—?"

"*Shhhhh!*"

The jolting jar was followed by a faint mutter of profanity.

"That's D'Uccia. What happened?"

The faint mutter suddenly became a roaring stream of curses from somewhere behind the balconies.

"Hey!" said Rick. "He must have hurt himself."

"Naah. He just found my resignation, that's all. See? I told you I'd quit."

The profane bellowing grew louder to the accompaniment of an elephantine thumping on carpeted stairs.

"He's not *that* sorry to see you go," Rick grunted, looking baffled.

D'Uccia burst into view at the head of the aisle. He stopped with his feet spread wide, clutching at the base of his spine with one hand and waving a golden lily aloft in the other.

"Lily gilder!" he screamed. "Pansy painter! You fancy-pantsy bom! Come out, you fonny fonny boy!"

Thornier thrust his head calmly through the control-booth window, stared at the furious manager with arched brows. "You calling me, Mr. D'Uccia?"

D'Uccia sucked in two or three gasping breaths before he found his bellow again.

"Thornya!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Itsa finish, you hear?"

"What's finished, boss?"

"Itsa finish. I'ma go see the servo man. I'ma go get me a swip-op machine. You gotta two wiks notice."

"Tell him you don't want any notice," Rick grunted softly from nearby. "Walk out on him."

"All right, Mr. D'Uccia," Thornier called evenly.

D'Uccia stood there sputtering, threatening to charge, waving the lily helplessly. Finally he threw it down in the aisle with a curse and whirled to limp painfully out.

"Whew!" Rick breathed. "What did you do?"

Thornier told him sourly. The technician shook his head.

"He won't fire you. He'll change his mind. It's too hard to hire anybody to do dirty-work these days."

"You heard him. He can buy an autojan installation. 'Swip-op' machine."

"Baloney! Dooch is too stingy to put out that much dough. Besides, he can't get the satisfaction of screaming at a machine."

Thornier glanced up wryly. "Why *can't* he?"

"Well—" Rick paused. "Ulp! . . . You're right. He can. He came up here and bawled out the Maestro once. Kicked it, yelled at it, shook it—like a guy trying to get his quarter back out of a telephone. Went away looking pleased with himself, too."

"Why not?" Thorny muttered gloomily. "People are machines to D'Uccia. And he's *fair* about it. He's willing to treat them all alike."

"But you're not going to stick around two weeks, are you?"

"Why not? It'll give me time to put out some feelers for a job."

Rick grunted doubtfully and turned his attention back to the machine. He removed the upper front panel and set it aside. He opened a metal canister on the floor and lifted out a foot-wide foot-thick roll of plastic tape. He mounted it on a spindle inside the Maestro, and began feeding the end of the tape through several sets of rollers

and guides. The tape appeared wormeaten—covered with thousands of tiny punch-marks and wavy grooves. The janitor paused to watch the process with cold hostility.

"Is that the script-tape for the 'Anarch?'" he asked stiffly.

The technician nodded. "Brand new tape, too. Got to be careful how I feed her in. It's still got fuzz on it from the recording cuts." He stopped the feed mechanism briefly, plucked at a punchmark with his awl, blew on it, then started the feed motor again.

"What happens if the tape gets nicked or scratched?" Thorny grunted curiously. "Actor collapse on stage?"

Rick shook his head. "Naa, it happens all the time. A scratch or a nick'll make a player muff a line or maybe stumble, then the Maestro catches the goof, and compensates. Maestro gets feedback from the stage, continuously directs the show. It can do a lot of compensating, too."

"I thought the whole show came from the tape."

The technician smiled. "It does, in a way. But it's more than a recorded mechanical puppet show, Thorny. The Maestro watches the stage . . . no, more than that . . . the Maestro *is* the stage, an electronic analogue of it." He patted the metal housing. "All the actors' personality patterns are packed in here. It's more than a remote controller, the way most people think of it. It's a creative directing machine. It's even got pickups out in the audience to gauge reactions to—"

He stopped suddenly, staring at the old actor's face. He swallowed nervously. "Thorny *don't* look that way. I'm sorry. Here, have a cigarette."

Thorny accepted it with trembling fingers. He stared down into the gleaming maze of circuitry with narrowed eyes, watched the script-belt climb slowly over the rollers and down into the bowels of the Maestro.

"Art!" he hissed. "Theater! What'd they give you your degree in, Richard? Dramaturgical engineering?"

He shuddered and stalked out of the booth. Rick listened to the angry rattle of his heels on the iron stairs that led down to stage level. He shook his head sadly, shrugged, went back to inspecting the tape for rough cuts.

Thorny came back after a few minutes with a bucket

and a mop. He looked reluctantly repentant. "Sorry, lad," he grunted. "I know you're just trying to make a living, and—"

"Skip it," Rick grunted curtly.

"It's just . . . well . . . this particular show. It gets me."

"This—? 'The Anarch,' you mean? What about it, Thorny? You play in it once?"

"Uh-uh. It hasn't been on the stage since the Nineties, except—well, it was almost revived ten years ago. We rehearsed for weeks. Show folded before opening night. No dough."

"You had a good part in it?"

"I was to play Andreyev," Thornier told him with a faint smile.

Rick whistled between his teeth. "The lead. That's too bad." He hoisted his feet to let Thorny mop under them. "Big disappointment, I guess."

"It's not that. It's just . . . well . . . 'The Anarch' rehearsals were the last time Mela and I were on stage together. That's all."

"Mela?" The technician paused, frowning. "Mela Stone?"

Thornier nodded.

Rick snatched up a copy of the uncoded script, waved it at him. "But she's in *this* version, Thorny! Know that! She's playing Marka."

Thornier's laugh was brief and brittle.

Rick reddened slightly. "Well, I mean her mannequin's playing it."

Thorny eyed the Maestro distastefully. "Your mechanical Svengali's playing its airfoam zombies in *all* roles, you mean."

"Oh, cut it out, Thorny. Be sore at the world if you want to, but don't blame me for what audiences want. And I didn't invent autodrama anyhow."

"I don't blame anybody. I merely detest that . . . that —" He punched at the base of the Maestro with his wet mop.

"You and D'Uccia," Rick grunted disgustedly. "Except —D'Uccia loves it when it's working O.K. It's just a machine, Thorny. Why hate it?"

"Don't need a reason to hate it," he said, snarly-petu-

lant. "I hate air-cabs, too. It's a matter of taste, that's all."

"All right, but the public likes autodrama—whether it's by TV, stereo, or on stage. And they get what they want."

"Why?"

Rick snickered. "Well, it's their dough. Autodrama's portable, predictable, duplicatable. And flexible. You can run 'Macbeth' tonight, the 'Anarch' tomorrow night, and 'King of the Moon' the next night—in the same house. No actor-temperament problems. No union problems. Rent the packaged props, dolls, and tapes from Smithfield. Packaged theater. Systematized, mass-produced. In Coon Creek, Georgia, yet."

"Bah!"

Rick finished feeding in the script tape, closed the panel, and opened an adjacent one. He ripped the lid from a cardboard carton and dumped a heap of smaller tape-spools on the table.

"Are *those* the souls they sold to Smithfield?" Thornier asked, smiling at them rather weirdly.

The technician's stool scraped back and he exploded: "You know what they are!"

Thornier nodded, leaned closer to stare at them as if fascinated. He plucked one of them out of the pile, sighed down at it.

"If you say 'Alas, poor Yorick,' I'll heave you out of here!" Rick grated.

Thornier put it back with a sigh and wiped his hand on his coveralls. Packaged personalities. Actor's egos, analogized on tape. Real actors, once, whose dolls were now cast in the roles. The tapes contained complex psychophysiological data derived from months of psychic and somatic testing, after the original actors had signed their Smithfield contracts. Data for the Maestro's personality matrices. Abstractions from the human psyche, incarnate in glass, copper, chromium. The souls they rented to Smithfield on a royalty basis, along with their flesh and blood likenesses in the dolls.

Rick loaded a casting spool onto its spindle, started it feeding through the pickups.

"What happens if you leave out a vital ingredient? Such

as Mela Stone's tape, for instance," Thornier wanted to know.

"The doll'd run through its lines like a zombie, that's all," Rick explained. "No zip. No interpretation. Flat, deadpan, like a robot."

"They are robots."

"Not exactly. Remote marionettes for the Maestro, but interpreted. We did a run-through on 'Hamlet' once, without any actor tapes. Everybody talked in flat monotones, no expressions. It was a scream."

"Ha, ha," Thornier said grimly.

Rick slipped another tape on the spindle, clicked a dial to a new setting, started the feed again. "This one's Andreyev, Thornier—played by Peltier." He cursed suddenly, stopped the feed, inspected the tape anxiously, flipped open the pickup mechanism, and inspected it with a magnifier.

"What's wrong?" asked the janitor.

"Take-off's about worn out. Hard to keep its spacing right. I'm nervous about it getting hung up and chewing up the tape."

"No duplicate tapes?"

"Yeah. One set of extras. But the show opens tonight." He cast another suspicious look at the pickup glideway, then closed it and switched the feed again. He was replacing the panel when the feed mechanism stalled. A ripping sound came from inside. He muttered fluent profanity, shut off the drive, jerked away the panel. He held up a shredded ribbon of tape for Thorny to see, then flung it angrily across the booth. "Get out of here! You're a jinx!"

"Not till I finish mopping."

"Thorny, get D'Uccia for me, will you? We'll have to get a new pickup flown in from Smithfield before this afternoon. This is a helluva mess."

"Why not hire a human stand-in?" he asked nastily, then added: "Forgive me. That would be a perversion of your art, wouldn't it? Shall I get D'Uccia?"

Rick threw the Peltier spool at him. He ducked out with a chuckle and went to find the theater manager. Halfway down the iron stairs, he paused to look at the wide stage that spread away just beyond the folded curtains. The footlights were burning, and the gray-green

floor looked clean and shimmering, with its checkerboard pattern of imbedded copper strips. The strips were electrified during the performance, and they fed the mannequins' energy-storage packs. The dolls had metallic disks in their soles, and rectifiers in their insteps. When batteries drained low, the Maestro moved the actor's foot an inch or so to contact the floor electrodes for periodic recharging during the play, since a doll would grow wobbly and its voice indistinct after a dozen minutes on internal power alone.

Thorny stared at the broad expanse of stage where no humans walked on performance night. D'Uccia's Siamese tomcat sat licking itself in the center of the stage. It glanced up at him haughtily, seemed to sniff, began licking itself again. He watched it for a moment, then called back upstairs to Rick.

"Energize the floor a minute, will you, Rick?"

"Huh? Why?"—a busy grunt.

"Want to check something."

"O.K., but then fetch D'Uccia."

He heard the technician snap a switch. The cat's calm hauteur exploded. The cat screamed, scrambled, barrel-rolled, amid a faint sputter of sparks. The cat did an Immelmann turn over the footlights, landed in the pit with a clawing crash, then scampered up the aisle with fur erect toward its haven beneath Imperio's desk.

"Whatthehell?" Rick growled, and thrust his head out of the booth.

"Shut it off now," said the janitor. "D'Uccia'll be here in a minute."

"With fangs showing!"

Thornier went to finish his routine clean-up. Gloom had begun to gather about him. He was leaving—leaving even this last humble role in connection with the stage. A fleeting realization of his own impotence came to him. Helpless. Helpless enough to seek petty revenges like vandalizing D'Uccia's window box and tormenting D'Uccia's cat, because there was not any real enemy at which he could strike out.

He put the realization down firmly, and stamped on it. *He* was Ryan Thornier, and never helpless, unless he willed it so. I'll make them know who I am just *once*, he

thought, before I go. I'll make them remember, and they won't ever forget.

But that line of thought about playing one last great role, one last masterful interpretation, he knew was no good. "Thorny, if you ever played a one-last-great," Rick had said to him once, "there wouldn't be a thing left to live for, would there?" Rick had said it cynically, but it was true anyhow. And the pleasant fantasy was somehow alarming as well as pleasant.

The chic little woman in the white-plumed hat was explaining things carefully—with round vowels and precise enunciation—to the Playwright of the Moment, up-and-coming, with awed worshipfulness in his gaze as he listened to the pert little producer. "Stark realism, you see, is the milieu of autodrama," she said. "Always remember, Bernie, that consideration for the actors is a thing of the past. Study the drama of Rome—ancient Rome. If a play had a crucifixion scene, they got a slave for the part and crucified him. On stage, but *really!*"

The Playwright of the Moment laughed dutifully around his long cigarette holder. "So that's where they got the line: 'It's superb, but it's hell on the actors.' I must rewrite the murder scene in my 'George's Wake.' Do it with a hatchet, this time."

"Oh, now, *Bernie!* Mannequins don't bleed."

They both laughed heartily. "And they *are* expensive. Not hell on the actors, but hell on the budget."

"The Romans probably had the same problem. I'll bear it in mind."

Thornier saw them—the producer and the Playwright of the Moment—standing there in the orchestra when he came from backstage and across toward the center aisle. They lounged on the arms of their seats, and a crowd of production personnel and technicians milled about them. The time for the first run-through was approaching.

The small woman waved demurely to Thorny when she saw him making his way slowly through the throng, then turned to the playwright again. "Bernie, be a lamb and get me a drink, will you? I've got a butterfly."

"Surely. Hard, or soft?"

"Oh, hard. Scotch mist in a paper cup, please. There's a bar next door."

The playwright nodded a nod that was nearly a bow and shuffled away up the aisle. The woman caught at the janitor's sleeve as he passed.

"Going to snub me, Thorny?"

"Oh, hello, Miss Ferne," he said politely.

She leaned close and muttered: "Call me 'Miss Ferne' again and I'll claw you." The round vowels had vanished.

"O.K., Jade, but—" He glanced around nervously. Technicians milled about them. Ian Feria, the producer, watched them curiously from the wings.

"What's been doing with you, Thorny? Why haven't I seen you?" she complained.

He gestured with the broom handle, shrugged. Jade Ferne studied his face a moment and frowned. "Why the agonized look, Thorny? Mad at me?"

He shook his head. "This play, Jade—" "The Anarch," well—" He glanced miserably toward the stage.

Memory struck her suddenly. She breathed a compassionate *ummm*. "The attempted revival, ten years ago—you were to be Andreyev. Oh, Thorny, I'd forgotten."

"It's all right." He wore a carefully tailored martyr's smile.

She gave his arm a quick pat. "I'll see you after the run-through, Thorny. We'll have a drink and talk old times."

He glanced around again and shook his head. "You've got new friends now, Jade. They wouldn't like it."

"The crew? Nonsense! They're not snobs."

"No, but they want your attention. Feria's trying to catch your eye right now. No use making them sore."

"All right, but after the run-through I'll see you in the mannequin room. I'll just slip away."

"If you want to."

"I do, Thorny. It's been so long."

The playwright returned with her Scotch mist and gave Thornier a hostilely curious glance.

"Bless your heart, Bernie," she said, the round vowels returning, then to Thornier: "Thorny, would you do me a favor? I've been trying to corner D'Uccia, but he's tied up with a servo salesman somewhere. Somebody's got to run and pick up a mannequin from the depot. The shipment was delivered, but the trucker missed a doll crate. We'll need it for the runthrough. Could you—"

"Sure, Miss Ferne. Do I need a requisition order?"

"No, just sign the delivery ticket. And Thorny, see if the new part for the Maestro's been flown in yet. Oh, and one other thing—the Maestro chewed up the Peltier tape. We've got a duplicate, but we should have two, just to be safe."

"I'll see if they have one in stock," he murmured, and turned to go.

D'Uccia stood in the lobby with the salesman when he passed through. The theater manager saw him and smirked happily.

". . . Certain special features, of course," the salesman was saying. "It's an old building, and it wasn't designed with autojanitor systems in mind, like buildings are now. But we'll tailor the installation to fit your place, Mr. D'Uccia. We want to do the job *right*, and a packaged unit wouldn't do it."

"Yah, you gimme da price, hah?"

"We'll have an estimate for you by tomorrow. I'll have an engineer over this afternoon to make the survey, and he'll work up a layout tonight."

"Whatsa 'bout the demonstration, uh? Whatsa 'bout you show how da swhip-op machine go?"

The salesman hesitated, eying the janitor who waited nearby. "Well, the floor-cleaning robot is only a small part of the complete service, but . . . I tell you what I'll do. I'll bring a packaged char-all over this afternoon, and let you have a look at it."

"Fine. Datsa fine. You bring her, den we see."

They shook hands. Thornier stood with his arms folded, haughtily inspecting a bug that crawled across the frond of a potted palm, and waiting for a chance to ask D'Uccia for the keys to the truck. He felt the theater manager's triumphant gaze, but gave no indication that he heard.

"We can do the job for you all right, Mr. D'Uccia. Cut your worries in half. And that'll cut your doctor bills in half, too, like you say. Yes, sir! A man in your position gets ground down with just plain human inefficiency—other people's inefficiency. You'll never have to worry about that, once you get the building autojanitored, no sir!"

"T'ank you kindly."

"Thank you, Mr. D'Uccia, and I'll see you later this afternoon."

The salesman left.

"Well, bom?" D'Uccia grunted to the janitor.

"The keys to the truck. Miss Ferne wants a pickup from the depot."

D'Uccia tossed them to him. "You hear what the man say? Letsa machines do alla work, hah? Always you wantsa day off. O.K., you takka da day off, ever'day pretty soon. Nice for you, hah, ragazzo?"

Thornier turned away quickly to avoid displaying the surge of unwanted anger. "Be back in an hour," he grunted, and hurried away on his errand, his jaw working in sullen resentment. Why wait around for two humiliating weeks? Why not just walk out? Let D'Uccia do his own chores until the autojan was installed. He'd never be able to get another job around the theater anyhow, so D'Uccia's reaction wouldn't matter.

I'll walk out now, he thought—and immediately knew that he wouldn't. It was hard to explain to himself, but—when he thought of the final moment when he would be free to look for a decent job and a comfortable living—he felt a twinge of fear that was hard to understand.

The janitor's job had paid him only enough to keep him alive in a fourth floor room where he cooked his own meager meals and wrote memoirs of the old days, but it had kept him close to the lingering remnants of something he loved.

"Theater," they called it. Not *the* theater—as it was to the scalper's victim, the matinée housewife, or the awestruck hick—but just "theater." It wasn't a place, wasn't a business, wasn't the name of an art. "Theater" was a condition of the human heart and soul. Jade Ferne was theater. So was Ian Feria. So was Mela, poor kid, before her deal with Smithfield. Some had it, others didn't. In the old days, the ones that didn't have it soon got out. But the ones that had it, still had it, even after *the* theater was gobbled up by technological change. And they hung around. Some of them, like Jade and Ian and Mela, adapted to the change, profited by the prostitution of the stage, and developed ulcers and a guilty conscience. Still, they were theater, and because they were, he, Thornier,

hung around, too, scrubbing the floors they walked on, and feeling somehow that he was still in theater. Now he was leaving. And now he felt the old bitterness boiling up inside again. The bitterness had been chronic and passive, and now it threatened to become active and acute.

If I could only give them one last performance! he thought. One last great role—

But *that* thought led to the fantasy-plan for revenge, the plan that came to him often as he wandered about the empty theater. Revenge was no good. And the plan was only a daydream. And yet—he wasn't going to get another chance.

He set his jaw grimly and drove on to the Smithfield depot.

The depot clerk had hauled the crated mannequin to the fore, and it was waiting for Thornier when he entered the stockroom. He rolled it out from the wall on a dolly, and the janitor helped him wrestle the coffin-sized packing case onto the counter.

"Don't take it to the truck yet," the clerk grunted around the fat stub of a cigar. "It ain't a new doll, and you gotta sign a release."

"What kind of a release?"

"Liability for malfunction. If the doll breaks down during the show, you can't sue Smithfield. It's standard prack for used-doll rentals."

"Why didn't they send a new one, then?"

"Discontinued production on this model. You want it, you take a used one, and sign the release."

"Suppose I don't sign?"

"No siggy, no dolly."

"Oh." He thought for a moment. Obviously, the clerk had mistaken him for production personnel. His signature wouldn't mean anything—but it was getting late, and Jade was rushed. Since the release wouldn't be valid anyhow he reached for the form.

"Wait," said the clerk. "You better look at what you're signing for." He reached for a wrecking claw and slipped it under a metal binding strap. The strap broke with a screechy snap. "It's been overhauled," the clerk continued. "New solenoid fluid injected, new cosmetic

job. Nothing really wrong. A few fatigue spots in the padding, and one toe missing. But you oughta have a look, anyhow."

He finished breaking the lid-fastenings loose and turned to a wall-control board. "We don't have a complete Maestro here," he said as he closed a knife switch, "but we got the control transmitters, and some taped sequences. It's enough to pre-flight a doll."

Equipment hummed to life somewhere behind the panel. The clerk adjusted several dials while Thornier waited impatiently.

"Let's see—" muttered the clerk. "Guess we'll start off with the Frankenstein sequence." He flipped a switch.

A purring sound came faintly from within the coffin-like box. Thornier watched nervously. The lid stirred, began to rise. A woman's hands came into view, pushing the lid up from within. The purring increased. The lid clattered aside to hang by the metal straps.

The woman sat up and smiled at the janitor.

Thornier went white. "Mela!" he hissed.

"Ain't that a chiller?" chuckled the clerk. "Now for the hoochy-coochy sequence—"

"No—"

The clerk flipped another switch. The doll stood up slowly, chastely nude as a window-dummy. Still smiling at Thorny, the doll did a bump and a grind.

"Stop it!" he yelled hoarsely.

"Whassa matter, buddy?"

Thorny heard another switch snap. The doll stretched gracefully and yawned. It stretched out in its packing case again, closed its eyes and folded its hands over its bosom. The purring stopped.

"What's eating you?" the clerk grumbled, slapping the lid back over the case again. "You sick or something?"

"I . . . I knew her," Ryan Thornier wheezed. "I used to work—" He shook himself angrily and seized the crate.

"Wait, I'll give you a hand."

Fury awakened new muscles. He hauled the crate out on the loading dock without assistance and dumped it in the back of the truck, then came back to slash his name across the release forms.

"You sure get sore easy," the clerk mumbled. "You better take it easy. You sure better take it easy."

Thorny was cursing softly as he nosed the truck out into the river of traffic. Maybe Jade thought it was funny, sending him after Mela's doll. Jade remembered how it had been between them—if she bothered to think about it. Thornier and Stone—a team that had gotten constant attention from the gossip columnists in the old days. Rumors of engagement, rumors of secret marriage, rumors of squabbles and reunions, break-ups and patch-ups, and some of the rumors were almost true. Maybe Jade thought it was a howl, sending him to fetch the mannequin.

But no—his anger faded as he drove along the boulevard—she hadn't thought about it. Probably she tried hard not to think of old times any more.

Gloom settled over him again, replacing rage. Still it haunted him—the horrified shock of seeing her sit up like an awakened corpse to smile at him. *Mela . . . Mela*—

They'd had it good together and bad together. Bit parts and beans in a cold-water flat. Starring roles and steaks at Sardi's. And—love? Was that what it was? He thought of it uneasily. Hypnotic absorption in each other, perhaps, and in the mutual intoxication of their success—but it wasn't necessarily love. Love was calm and even and lasting, and you paid for it with a dedicated lifetime, and Mela wouldn't pay. She'd walked out on them. She'd walked to Smithfield and bought security with sacrifice of principle. There'd been a name for what she'd done. "Scab," they used to say.

He shook himself. It was no good, thinking about those times. Times died with each passing minute. Now they paid \$8.80 to watch Mela's figurine move in her stead, wearing Mela's face, moving with Mela's gestures, walking with the same lilting walk. And the doll was still young, while Mela had aged ten years, years of collecting quarterly royalties from her dolls and living comfortably.

Great Actors Immortalized—that was one of Smithfield's little slogans. But they had discontinued production on Mela Stone, the depot clerk had said. Overstocked.

The promise of relative immortality had been quite a bait. Actors unions had resisted autodrama, for obviously the bit players and the lesser-knowns would not be in demand. By making dozens—even hundreds—of copies of

the same leading star, top talent could be had for every role, and the same actor-mannequin could be playing simultaneously in dozens of shows all over the country. The unions had resisted—but only a few were wanted by Smithfield anyhow, and the lure was great. The promise of fantastic royalties was enticing enough, but in addition—immortality for the actor, through duplication of mannequins. Authors, artists, playwrights had always been able to outlive the centuries, but actors were remembered only by professionals, and their names briefly recorded in the annals of the stage. Shakespeare would live another thousand years, but who remembered Dick Burbage who trouped in the day of the bard's premiers? Flesh and bone, heart and brain, these were the trouper's media, and his art could not outlive them.

Thorny knew the yearnings after lastingness, and he could no longer hate the ones who had gone over. As for himself, the autodrama industry had made him a tentative offer, and he had resisted—partly because he was reasonably certain that the offer would have been withdrawn during testing procedures. Some actors were not "cybergenic"—could not be adequately sculptured into electronic-robotic analogues. These were the portrayers, whose art was inward, whose roles had to be lived rather than played. No polygraphic analogue could duplicate their talents, and Thornier knew he was one of them. It had been easy for him to resist.

At the corner of Eighth Street, he remembered the spare tape and the replacement pickup for the Maestro. But if he turned back now, he'd hold up the run-through, and Jade would be furious. Mentally he kicked himself, and drove on to the delivery entrance of the theater. There he left the crated mannequin with the stage crew, and headed back for the depot without seeing the producer.

"Hey, bud," said the clerk, "your boss was on the phone. Sounded pretty unhappy."

"Who . . . D'Uccia?"

"No . . . well, yeah, D'Uccia, too. He wasn't unhappy, just having fits. I meant Miss Ferne."

"Oh . . . where's your phone?"

"Over there. The lady was near hysterical."

Thorny swallowed hard and headed for the booth. Jade Ferne was a good friend, and if his absent-mindedness had goofed up her production—

"I've got the pickup and the tape ready to go," the clerk called after him. "She told me about it on the phone. Boy, you're sure on the ball today, ain't ya—the greasy eight ball."

Thorny reddened and dialed nervously.

"Thank God!" she groaned. "Thorny, we did the run-through with Andreyev a walking zombie. The Maestro chewed up our duplicate Peltier tape, and we're running without an actor-analogue in the starring role. Baby, I could murder you!"

"Sorry, Jade. I slipped a cog, I guess."

"Never mind! Just get the new pickup mechanism over here for Thomas. And the Peltier tape. And don't have a wreck. It's two o'clock, and tonight's opening, and we're still short our leading man. And there's no time to get anything else flown in from Smithfield."

"In some ways, nothing's changed, has it, Jade?" he grunted, thinking of the eternal backstage hysteria that lasted until the lights went low and beauty and calm order somehow emerged miraculously out of the prevailing chaos.

"Don't philosophize, just *get* here!" she snapped, and hung up.

The clerk had the cartons ready for him as he emerged. "Look, chum, better take care of that Peltier tape," the clerk advised. "It's the last one in the place. I've got more on order, but they won't be here for a couple of days."

Thornier stared at the smaller package thoughtfully. The last Peltier?

The plan, he remembered the plan. *This* would make it easy. Of course, the plan was only a fantasy, a vengeful dream. He couldn't go through with it. To wreck the show would be a stab at Jade—

He heard his own voice like a stranger's, saying; "Miss Ferne also asked me to pick up a Wilson Granger tape, and a couple of three-inch splices."

The clerk looked surprised. "Granger? He's not in 'The Anarch,' is he?"

Thornier shook his head. "No—guess she wants it for a trial casting. Next show, maybe."

The clerk shrugged and went to get the tape and the splices. Thornier stood clenching and unclenching his fists. He wasn't going to go through with it, of course. Only a silly fantasy.

"I'll have to make a separate ticket on these," said the clerk, returning.

He signed the delivery slips in a daze, then headed for the truck. He drove three blocks from the depot, then parked in a loading zone. He opened the tape cartons carefully with his penknife, peeling back the glued flaps so that they could be sealed again. He removed the two rolls of pattern perforated tape from their small metal canisters, carefully plucked off the masking-tape seals and stuck them temporarily to the dashboard. He unrolled the first half-yard of the Peltier tape; it was unperforated, and printed with identifying codes and manufacturer's data. Fortunately, it was not a brand-new tape; it had been used before, and he could see the wear-marks. A splice would not arouse suspicion.

He cut off the identifying tongue with his knife, laid it aside. Then he did the same to the Granger tape.

Granger was fat, jovial, fiftyish. His mannequin played comic supporting roles.

Peltier was young, gaunt, gloomy—the intellectual villain, the dedicated fanatic. A fair choice for the part of Andreyev.

Thornier's hands seemed to move of their own volition, playing reflexively in long-rehearsed roles. He cut the tapes. He took out one of the hot-splice packs and jerked the tab that started the chemical action. He clocked off fifteen seconds by his watch, then opened the pack and fitted into it the cut ends of the Granger tape and the Peltier identifying tongue, butted them carefully end to end, and closed the pack. When it stopped smoking, he opened it to inspect the splice. A neat patch, scarcely visible on the slick plastic tape. Granger's analogue, labeled as Peltier's. And the body of the mannequin was Peltier's. He resealed it in its canister.

He wadded the Peltier tape and the Granger label and the extra delivery receipt copy into the other box. Then he pulled the truck out of the loading zone and drove through the heavy traffic like a racing jockey, trusting the anti-crash radar to see him safely through. As he

crossed the bridge, he threw the Peltier tape out the window into the river. And then there was no retreat from what he had done.

Jade and Feria sat in the orchestra, watching the final act of the run-through with a dud Andreyev. When Thorny slipped in beside them, Jade wiped mock sweat from her brow.

"Thank God you're back!" she whispered as he displayed the delayed packages. "Sneak backstage and run them up to Rick in the booth, will you? Thorny, I'm out of my mind!"

"Sorry, Miss Ferne." Fearing that his guilty nervousness hung about him like a ragged cloak, he slipped quickly backstage and delivered the cartons to Thomas in the booth. The technician hovered over the Maestro as the play went on, and he gave Thornier only a quick nod and a wave.

Thorny retreated into misty old corridors and unused dressing rooms, now heaped with junk and remnants of other days. He had to get a grip on himself, had to quit quaking inside. He wandered alone in the deserted sections of the building, opening old doors to peer into dark cubicles where great stars had preened in other days, other nights. Now full of trunks and cracked mirrors and tarpaulins and junked mannequins. Faint odors lingered—nervous smells—perspiration, make-up, dim perfume that pervaded the walls. Mildew and dust—the aroma of time. His footsteps sounded hollowly through the unpeopled rooms, while muffled sounds from the play came faintly through the walls—the hysterical pleading of Marka, the harsh laughter of Piotr, the marching boots of the revolutionist guards, a burst of music toward the end of the scene.

He turned abruptly and started back toward the stage. It was no good, hiding away like this. He must behave normally, must do what he usually did. The falsified Peltier tape would not wreak its havoc until after the first run-through, when Thomas fed it into the Maestro, reset the machine, and prepared to start the second trial run. Until then, he must remain casually himself, and afterwards—?

Afterwards, things would have to go as he had planned.

Afterwards, Jade would have to come to him, as he believed she would. If she didn't, then he had bungled, he had clumsily wrecked, and to no avail.

He slipped through the power-room where converters hummed softly, supplying power to the stage. He stood close to the entrance, watching the beginnings of scene *iii*, of the third act. Andreyev—the Peltier doll—was on alone, pacing grimly in his apartment while the low grumble of a street mob and the distant rattle of machine-gun fire issued from the Maestro-managed sound effect system. After a moment's watching, he saw that Andreyev's movements were not "grim" but merely methodical and lifeless. The tapeless mannequin, going through the required motions, robotlike, without interpretation of meaning. He heard a brief burst of laughter from someone in the production row, and after watching the zombie-like rendering of Andreyev in a suspenseful scene, he, too, found himself grinning faintly.

The pacing mannequin looked toward him suddenly with a dead-pan face. It raised both fists toward its face.

"Help," it said in a conversational monotone. "Ivan, where are you? Where? Surely they've come; they must come." It spoke quietly, without inflection. It ground its fists casually against its temples, paced mechanically again.

A few feet away, two mannequins that had been standing frozen in the off-stage lineup, clicked suddenly to life. As ghostly calm as display window dummies, they galvanized suddenly at a signal pulse command from the Maestro. Muscles—plastic sacs filled with oil-suspended magnetic powder and wrapped with elastic coils of wire, like flexible solenoids—tightened and strained beneath the airfoam flesh, working spasmodically to the pulsing rhythms of the polychromatic u.h.f. commands of the Maestro. Expressions of fear and urgency leaped to their faces. They crouched, tensed, looked around, then burst on stage, panting wildly.

"Comrade, she's come, she's come!" one of them screamed. "She's come with *him*, with Boris!"

"What? She has him prisoner?" came the casual reply.

"No, no, comrade. We've been betrayed. She's with him. She's a traitor, she's sold out to them."

There was no feeling in the uninterpreted Andreyev's

responses, even when he shot the bearer of bad tidings through the heart.

Thornier grew fascinated with watching as the scene progressed. The mannequins moved gracefully, their movements sinuous and more evenly flowing than human, they seemed boneless. The ratio of mass-to-muscle power of their members was carefully chosen to yield the flow of a dance with their every movement. Not clanking mechanical robots, not stumbling puppets, the dolls sustained patterns of movement and expression that would have quickly brought fatigue to a human actor, and the Maestro coördinated the events on stage in a way that would be impossible to a group of humans, each an individual and thinking independently.

It was as always. First, he looked with a shudder at the Machine moving in the stead of flesh and blood, at Mechanism sitting in the seat of artistry. But gradually his chill melted away, and the play caught him, and the actors were no longer machines. He lived in the role of Andreyev, and breathed the lines off-stage, and he knew the rest of them: Mela and Peltier, Sam Dion and Peter Repplewaite. He tensed with them, gritted his teeth in anticipation of difficult lines, cursed softly at the dud Andreyev, and forgot to listen for the faint crackle of sparks as the mannequins' feet stepped across the copper-studded floor, drinking energy in random bites to keep their storage packs near full charge.

Thus entranced, he scarcely noticed the purring and brushing and swishing sounds that came from behind him, and grew louder. He heard a quiet mutter of voices nearby, but only frowned at the distraction, kept his attention rooted to the stage.

Then a thin spray of water tickled his ankles. Something soggy and spongelike slapped against his foot. He whirled.

A gleaming metal spider, three feet high came at him slowly on six legs, with two grasping claws extended. It clicked its way toward him across the floor, throwing out a thin spray of liquid which it promptly sucked up with the spongelike proboscis. With one grasping claw, it lifted a ten-gallon can near his leg, sprayed under it, swabbed, and set the can down again.

Thornier came unfrozen with a howl, leaped over the thing, hit the wet-soapy deck off balance. He skidded and sprawled. The spider scrubbed at the floor toward the edge of the stage, then reversed directions and came back toward him.

Groaning, he pulled himself together, on hands and knees. D'Uccia's cackling laughter spilled over him. He glanced up. The chubby manager and the servo salesman stood over him, the salesman grinning, D'Uccia chortling.

"Datsa ma boy, datsa ma boy! Always, he watcha the show, then he don't swip-op around, then he wantsa day off. Thatsa ma boy, for sure." D'Uccia reached down to pat the metal spider's chassis. "Hey, *ragazzo*," he said again to Thornier, "want you should meet my new *boy* here. This one, he don't watcha the show like you."

He got to his feet, ghost-white and muttering. D'Uccia took closer note of his face, and his grin went sick. He inched back a step. Thornier glared at him briefly, then whirled to stalk away. He whirled into near collision with the Mela Stone mannequin, recovered, and started to pass in back of it.

Then he froze.

The Mela Stone mannequin was on stage, in the final scene. And this one looked older, and a little haggard. It wore an expression of shocked surprise as it looked him up and down. One hand darted to its mouth.

"Thorny—!" A frightened whisper.

"*Mela!*" Despite the play, he shouted it, opening his arms to her. "*Mela, how wonderful!*"

And then, he noticed she winced away from his sodden coveralls. And she wasn't glad to see him at all.

"Thorny, how nice," she managed to murmur, extending her hand gingerly. The hand flashed with jewelry.

He took it for an empty second, stared at her, then walked hurriedly away, knots twisting up inside him. Now he could play it through. Now he could go on with it, and even enjoy executing his plan against all of them.

Mela had come to watch opening night for her doll in "The Anarch," as if its performance were her own. *I'll arrange*, he thought, *for it not to be a dull show.*

"No, no, *nooo!*" came the monotone protest of the dud Andreyev, in the next-to-the-last scene. The bark of Marka's gun, and the Peltier mannequin crumpled to the

stage; and except for a brief triumphant denouement, the play was over.

At the sound of the gunshot, Thornier paused to smile tightly over his shoulder, eyes burning from his hawklike face. Then he vanished into the wings.

She got away from them as soon as she could, and she wandered around backstage until she found him in the storage room of the costuming section. Alone, he was sorting through the contents of an old locker and muttering nostalgically to himself. She smiled and closed the door with a thud. Startled, he dropped an old collapsible top-hat and a box of blank cartridges back into the trunk. His hand dived into his pocket as he straightened.

"Jade! I didn't expect—"

"Me to come?" She flopped on a dusty old chaise lounge with a weary sigh and fanned herself with a program, closing her eyes. She kicked off her shoes and muttered: "Infuriating bunch. I hate 'em!"—made a retching face, and relaxed into little-girlhood. A little girl who had trouped with Thornier and the rest of them—the actress Jade Ferne, who had begged for bit parts and haunted the agencies and won the roles through endless rehearsals and shuddered with fright before opening curtain like the rest of them. Now she was a pert little woman with shrewd eyes, streaks of gray at the temples, and hard lines around her mouth. As she let the executive cloak slip away, the shrewdness and the hard lines melted into weariness.

"Fifteen minutes to get my sanity back, Thorny," she muttered, glancing at her watch as if to time it.

He sat on the trunk and tried to relax. She hadn't seemed to notice his uneasiness, or else she was just too tired to attach any significance to it. If she found him out, she'd have him flayed and pitched out of the building on his ear, and maybe call the police. She came in a small package, but so did an incendiary grenade. *It won't hurt you, Jade, what I'm doing*, he told himself. *It'll cause a big splash, and you won't like it, but it won't hurt you, nor even wreck the show.*

He was doing it for show business, the old kind, the kind they'd both known and loved. And in that sense, he

told himself further, he was doing it as much for her as he was for himself.

"How was the run-through, Jade?" he asked casually. "Except for Andreyev, I mean."

"Superb, simply superb," she said mechanically.

"I mean *really*."

She opened her eyes, made a sick mouth. "Like always, Thorny, like always. Nauseating, overplayed, perfectly directed for a gum-chewing bag-rattling crowd. A crowd that wants it overplayed so that it won't have to think about what's going on. A crowd that doesn't want to reach *out* for a feeling or a meaning. It wants to be clubbed on the head with the meaning, so it doesn't have to reach. I'm sick of it."

He looked briefly surprised. "That figures," he grunted wryly.

She hooked her bare heels on the edge of the lounge, hugged her shins, rested her chin on her knees, and blinked at him. "Hate me for producing the stuff, Thorny?"

He thought about it for a moment, shook his head. "I get sore at the setup sometimes, but I don't blame you for it."

"That's good. Sometimes I'd trade places with you. Sometimes I'd rather be a charwoman and scrub D'Uccia's floors instead."

"Not a chance," he said sourly. "The Maestro's relatives are taking *that* over, too."

"I know. I heard. You're out of a job, thank God. Now you can get somewhere."

He shook his head. "I don't know where. I can't do anything but act."

"Nonsense. I can get you a job tomorrow."

"Where?"

"With Smithfield. Sales promotion. They're hiring a number of old actors in the department."

"No." He said it flat and cold.

"Not so fast. This is something new. The company's expanding."

"Ha."

"Autodrama for the home. A four-foot stage in every living room. Miniature mannequins, six inches high. Centralized Maestro service. Great plays piped to your home

by concentric cable. Just dial Smithfield, make your request. Sound good?"

He stared at her icily. "Greatest thing in show business since Sarah Bernhardt," he offered tonelessly.

"Thorny! Don't get nasty with me!"

"Sorry. But what's so new about having it in the home? Autodrama took over TV years ago."

"I know, but this is different. Real miniature theater. Kids go wild for it. But it'll take good promotion to make it catch on."

"Sorry, but you know me better than that."

She shrugged, sighed wearily, closed her eyes again. "Yes, I do. You've got portrayer's integrity. You're a darfsteller. A director's ulcer. You can't play a role without living it, and you won't live it unless you believe it. So go ahead and starve." She spoke crossly, but he knew there was grudging admiration behind it.

"I'll be O.K.," he grunted, adding to himself: *after to-night's performance.*

"Nothing I can do for you?"

"Sure. Cast me. I'll stand in for dud mannequins."

She gave him a sharp glance, hesitated. "You know, I believe you *would!*"

He shrugged. "Why not?"

She stared thoughtfully at a row of packing cases, waggled her dark head. "Hmmp! What a spectacle that'd be—a human actor, incognito, playing in an autodrama."

"It's been done—in the sticks."

"Yes, but the audience knew it was being done, and that always spoils the show. It creates contrasts that don't exist or wouldn't be noticed otherwise. Makes the dolls seem snaky, birdlike, too rubbery quick. With no humans on stage for contrast, the dolls just seem wistfully graceful, ethereal."

"But if the audience didn't know—"

Jade was smiling faintly. "I wonder," she mused. "I wonder if they'd guess. They'd notice a difference, of course—in one mannequin."

"But they'd think it was just the Maestro's interpretation of the part."

"Maybe—if the human actor were careful."

He chuckled sourly. "If it fooled the critics—"

"Some ass would call it 'an abysmally unrealistic in-

terpretation' or 'too obviously mechanical.' " She glanced at her watch, shook herself, stretched wearily, and slipped into her shoes again. "Anyway," she added, "there's no reason to do it, since the Maestro's *really* capable of rendering a better-than-human performance anyhow."

The statement brought an agonized gasp from the janitor. She looked at him and giggled. "Don't be shocked, Thorny. I said '*capable* of'—not 'in the habit of.' Auto-drama entertains audiences on the level they *want* to be entertained on."

"But—"

"*Just*," she added firmly, "as show business has always done."

"But—"

"Oh, retract your eyeballs, Thorny. I didn't mean to blaspheme." She preened, began slipping back into her producer's mold as she prepared to return to her crowd. "The only thing wrong with autodrama is that it's scaled down to the moron-level—but show business always has been, and probably should be. Even if it gives us kids a pain." She smiled and patted his cheek. "Sorry I shocked you. Au 'voir, Thorny. And luck."

When she was gone, he sat fingering the cartridges in his pocket and staring at nothing. Didn't any of them have any sensibilities? Jade too, a seller of principle. And he had always thought of her as having merely compromised with necessity, against her real wishes. The idea that she could really believe autodrama capable of rendering a better-than-human performance—

But she didn't. Of course she needed to rationalize, to excuse what she was doing—

He sighed and went to lock the door, then to recover the old "Anarch" script from the trunk. His hands were trembling slightly. Had he planted enough of an idea in Jade's mind; would she remember it later? Or perhaps remember it too clearly, and suspect it?

He shook himself sternly. No apprehensions allowed. When Rick rang the bell for the second run-through, it would be his entrance-cue, and he must be in-character by then. Too bad he was no schauspieler, too bad he couldn't switch himself on-and-off the way Jade could do, but the necessity for much inward preparation was

the burden of the darfsteller. He could not change into a role without first changing himself, and letting the revision seep surfaceward as it might, reflecting the inner state of the man.

Strains of Moussorgsky pervaded the walls. He closed his eyes to listen and feel. Music for empire. Music at once brutal and majestic. It was the time of upheaval, of vengeance, of overthrow. Two times, superimposed. It was the time of opening night, with Ryan Thornier—ten years ago—cast in the starring role.

He fell into a kind of trance as he listened and clocked the pulse of his psyche and remembered. He scarcely noticed when the music stopped, and the first few lines of the play came through the walls.

"Cut! Cut!" A worried shout. Feria's.

It had begun.

Thornier took a deep breath and seemed to come awake. When he opened his eyes and stood up, the janitor was gone. The janitor had been a nightmare role, nothing more.

And Ryan Thornier, star of "Walkaway," favored of the critics, confident of a bright future, walked out of the storage room with a strange lightness in his step. He carried a broom, he still wore the dirty coveralls, but now as if to a masquerade.

The Peltier mannequin lay sprawled on the stage in a grotesque heap. Ryan Thornier stared at it calmly from behind the set and listened intently to the babble of stage hands and technicians that milled about him:

"Don't know. Can't tell yet. It came out staggering and gibbering—like it was drunk. It reached for a table, then it fell on its face—"

"Acted like the trouble might be a mismatched tape, but Rick rechecked it. Really Peltier's tape—"

"Can't figure it out. Miss Ferne's having kittens."

Thornier paused to size up his audience. Jade, Ian, and their staff milled about in the orchestra section. The stage was empty, except for the sprawled mannequin. Too much frantic conversation, all around. His entrance would go unnoticed. He walked slowly on-stage and stood over the fallen doll with his hands in his pockets and his face pulled down in a somber expression. After a moment, he

nudged the doll with his toe, paused, nudged it again. A faint giggle came from the orchestra. The corner of his eye caught Jade's quick glance toward the stage. She paused in the middle of a sentence.

Assured that she watched, he played to an imaginary audience-friend standing just off stage. He glanced toward the friend, lifted his brows questioningly. The friend apparently gave him the nod. He looked around warily, then knelt over the fallen doll. He took its pulse, nodded eagerly to the offstage friend. Another giggle came from orchestra. He lifted the doll's head, sniffed its breath, made a face. Then, gingerly, he rolled it.

He reached deep into the mannequin's pocket, having palmed his own pocket watch beforehand. His hand paused there, and he smiled to his offstage accomplice and nodded eagerly. He withdrew the watch and held it up by its chain for his accomplice's approval.

A light burst of laughter came from the production personnel. The laughter frightened the thief. He shot an apprehensive glance around the stage, hastily returned the watch to the fallen dummy, felt its pulse again. He traded a swift glance with his confederate, whispered "Aha!" and smiled mysteriously. Then he helped the doll to its feet and staggered away with it—a friend leading a drunk home to its family. In the doorway, he paused to frame his exit with a wary backward glance that said he was taking it to a dark alley where he could rob it in safety.

Jade was gapping at him.

Three technicians had been watching from just off the set, and they laughed heartily and clapped his shoulder as he passed, providing the offstage audience to which he had seemed to be playing.

Good-natured applause came from Jade's people out front, and as Thorny carried the doll away to storage, he was humming softly to himself.

At five minutes till six, Rick Thomas and a man from the Smithfield depot climbed down out of the booth, and Jade pressed forward through the crowd to question him with her eyes.

"The tape," he said. "Defective."

"But it's too late to get another!" she squawked.

"Well, it's the tape, anyway."

"How do you *know*?"

"Well—trouble's bound to be in one of three places. The doll, the tape, or the analogue tank where the tape-data gets stored. We cleared the tank and tried it with another actor. Worked O.K. And the doll works O.K. on an uninterpreted run. So, by elimination, the tape."

She groaned and slumped into a seat, covering her face with her hands.

"No way at *all* to locate another tape?" Rick asked.

"We called every depot within five hundred miles. They'd have to cut one from a master. Take too long."

"So we call off the show!" Ian Feria called out resignedly, throwing up his hands in disgust. "Refund on tickets, open tomorrow."

"Wait!" snapped the producer, looking up suddenly. "Dooch—the house is sold out, isn't it?"

"Yah," D'Uccia grunted irritably. "She'sa filled op. Wassa matter with you pipples, you don' getsa Maestro fix? Wassa matter? We lose the money, hah?"

"Oh, shut up. Change curtain time to nine, offer refunds if they won't wait. Ian, keep at it. Get things set up for tonight." She spoke with weary determination, glancing around at them. "There may be a slim chance. Keep at it. I'm going to try something." She turned and started away.

"Hey!" Feria called.

"Explain later," she muttered over her shoulder.

She found Thornier replacing burned-out bulbs in the wall fixtures. He smiled down at her while he reset the clamps of an amber glass panel. "Need me for something, Miss Ferne?" he called pleasantly from the stepladder.

"I might," she said tersely. "Did you mean that offer about standing in for dud mannequins?"

A bulb exploded at her feet after it slipped from his hand. He came down slowly, gaping at her.

"You're not serious!"

"Think you could try a run-through as Andreyev?"

He shot a quick glance toward the stage, wet his lips, stared at her dumbly.

"Well—*can* you?"

"It's been ten years, Jade . . . I—"

"You can read over the script, and you can wear an earplug radio—so Rick can prompt you from the booth."

She made the offer crisply and matter-of-factly, and it made Thorny smile inwardly. It was theater—calmly asking the outrageously impossible, gambling on it, and getting it.

"The customers—they're expecting Peltier."

"Right now I'm only asking you to try a runthrough, Thorny. After that, we'll see. But remember it's our only chance of going on tonight."

"Andreyev," he breathed. "The lead."

"Please, Thorny, will you try?"

He looked around the theater, nodded slowly. "I'll go study my lines," he said quietly, inclining his head with what he hoped was just the proper expression of humble bravery.

I've got to make it good, I've got to make it great. The last chance, the last great role—

Glaring footlights, a faint whisper in his ear, and the cold panic of the first entrance. It came and passed quickly. Then the stage was a closed room, and the audience—of technicians and production personnel—was only the fourth wall, somewhere beyond the lights. He was Andreyev, commissioner of police, party whip, loyal servant of the regime, now tottering in the revolutionary storm of the Eighties. The last Bolshevik, no longer a rebel, no longer a radical, but now the loyalist, the conservatist, the defender of the status quo, champion of the Marxist ruling classes. No longer conscious of a self apart from that of the role, he lived the role. And the others, the people he lived it with, the people whose feet crackled faintly as they stepped across the floor, he acted and reacted with them and against them as if they, too, shared life, and while the play progressed he forgot their lifelessness for a little time.

Caught up by the magic, enfolded in scheme of the inevitable, borne along by the tide of the drama, he felt once again the sense of belonging as a part in a whole, a known and predictable whole that moved as surely from scene *i* to the final curtain as man from womb to tomb, and there were no lost years, no lapse or sense of defeated purpose between the rehearsals of those many years ago and this the fulfillment of opening night. Only when at last he muffed a line, and Rick's correction whis-

pered in his ear did the spell that was gathered about him briefly break—and he found himself unaccountably frightened, frightened by the sudden return of realization that all about him was Machine, and frightened, too, that he had forgotten. He had been conforming to the flighty mechanical grace of the others, reflexively imitating the characteristic lightness of the mannequins' movements, the dancelike qualities of their playing. To know suddenly, having forgotten it, that the mouth he had just kissed was not a woman's, but the rubber mouth of a doll, and that dancing patterns of high frequency waves from the Maestro had controlled the solenoid currents that turned her face lovingly up toward his, had lifted the cold soft hands to touch his face. The faint rubbery smell-taste hung about his mouth.

When his first exit came, he went off trembling. He saw Jade coming toward him, and for an instant, he felt a horrifying certainty that she would say, "Thorny, you were almost as good as a mannequin!" Instead, she said nothing, but only held out her hand to him.

"Was it too bad, Jade?"

"Thorny, you're in! Keep it up, and you might have more than a one-night stand. Even Ian's convinced. He squealed at the idea, but now he's sold."

"No kicks? How about the lines with Piotr."

"Wonderful. Keep it up. Darling, you were marvelous."

"It's settled, then?"

"Darling, it's *never* settled until the curtain comes up. You know that." She giggled. "We had one *kick* all right—or maybe I shouldn't tell you."

He stiffened slightly. "Oh? Who from?"

"Mela Stone. She saw you come on, turned white as a sheet, and walked out. I can't imagine!"

He sank slowly on a haggard looking couch and stared at her. "The hell you can't," he grated softly.

"She's here on a personal appearance contract, you know. To give an opening and an intermission commentary on the author and the play." Jade smirked at him gleefully. "Five minutes ago she called back, tried to cancel her appearance. Of course, she can't pull a stunt like that. Not while Smithfield owns her."

Jade winked, patted his arm, tossed an uncoded copy of the script at him, then headed back toward the orches-

tra. Briefly he wondered what Jade had against Mela. Nothing serious, probably. Both had been actresses. Mela got a Smithfield contract; Jade didn't get one. It was enough.

By the time he had reread the scene to follow, his second cue was approaching, and he moved back toward the stage.

Things went smoothly. Only three times during the first act did he stumble over lines he had not rehearsed in ten years. Rick's prompting was in his ear, and the Maestro could compensate to some extent for his minor deviations from the script. This time he avoided losing himself so completely in the play; and this time the weird realization that he had become one with the machine-set pattern did not disturb him. This time he remembered, but when the first break came—

"Not quite so good, Thorny," Ian Feria called. "Whatever you were doing in the first scene, do it again. That was a little wooden. Go through that last bit again, and play it down. Andreyev's no mad bear from the Urals. It's Marka's moment, anyhow. Hold in."

He nodded slowly and looked around at the frozen dolls. He had to forget the machinery. He had to lose himself in it and live it, even if it meant being a replacement link in the mechanism. It disturbed him somehow, even though he was accustomed to subordinating himself to the total gestalt of the scene as in other days. For no apparent reason, he found himself listening for laughter from the production people, but none came.

"All right," Feria called. "Bring 'em alive again."

He went on with it, but the uneasy feeling nagged at him. There was self-mockery in it, and the expectation of ridicule from those who watched. He could not understand why, and yet—

There was an ancient movie—one of the classics—in which a man named Chaplin had been strapped into a seat on a production line where he performed a perfectly mechanical task in a perfectly mechanical fashion, a task that could obviously have been done by a few cams and a linkage or two, and it was one of the funniest comedies of all times—yet tragic. A task that made him a part in an over-all machine.

He sweated through the second and third acts in a state of compromise with himself—overplaying it for purposes of self-preparation, yet trying to convince Feria and Jade that he could handle it and handle it well. Overacting was necessary in spots, as a learning technique. Deliberately ham up the rehearsal to impress lines on memory, then underplay it for the real performance—it was an old trick of troupers who had to do a new show each night and had only a few hours in which to rehearse and learn lines. But would they know why he was doing it?

When it was finished, there was no time for another run-through, and scarcely time for a nap and a bite to eat before dressing for the show.

"It was terrible, Jade," he groaned. "I muffed it. I know I did."

"Nonsense. You'll be in tune tonight, Thorny. I knew what you were doing, and I can see past it."

"Thanks. I'll try to pull in."

"About the final scene, the shooting—"

He shot her a wary glance. "What about it?"

"The gun'll be loaded tonight, blanks, of course. And this time you'll have to fall."

"So?"

"So be careful where you fall. Don't go down on the copper bus-lugs. A hundred and twenty volts mightn't kill you, but we don't want a dying Andreyev bouncing up and spitting blue sparks. The stagehands'll chalk out a safe section for you. And one other thing—"

"Yes?"

"Marka fires from close range. Don't get burned."

"I'll watch it."

She started away, then paused to frown back at him steadily for several seconds. "Thorny, I've got a queer feeling about you. I can't place it exactly."

He stared at her evenly, waiting.

"Thorny, are you going to wreck the show?"

His face showed nothing, but something twisted inside him. She looked beseeching, trusting, but worried. She was counting on him, placing faith in him—

"Why should I botch up the performance, Jade? Why should I do a thing like that?"

"I'm asking you."

"O.K. I promise you—you'll get the best Andreyev I can give you."

She nodded slowly. "I believe you. I didn't doubt *that*, exactly."

"Then what worries you?"

"I don't know. I know how you feel about autodrama. I just got a shuddery feeling that you had something up your sleeve. That's all. I'm sorry. I know you've got too much integrity to wreck your own performance, but—" She stopped and shook her head, her dark eyes searching him. She was still worried.

"Oh, all right. I was going to stop the show in the third act. I was going to show them my appendectomy scar, do a couple of card tricks, and announce that I was on strike. I was going to walk out." He clucked his tongue at her, looked hurt.

She flushed slightly, and laughed. "Oh, I know you wouldn't pull anything shabby. Not that you wouldn't do anything you *could* to take a swat at autodrama generally, but . . . there's nothing you could do tonight that would accomplish anything. Except sending the customers home mad. That doesn't fit you, and I'm sorry I thought of it."

"Thanks. Stop worrying. If you lose dough, it won't be my fault."

"I believe you, but—"

"But what?"

She leaned close to him. "But you look too triumphant, that's what!" she hissed, then patted his cheek.

"Well, it's my last role. I—"

But she had already started away, leaving him with his sandwich and a chance for a nap.

Sleep would not come. He lay fingering the .32 caliber cartridges in his pocket and thinking about the impact of his final exit upon the conscience of the theater. The thoughts were pleasant.

It struck him suddenly as he lay drowsing that they would call it suicide. How silly. Think of the jolting effect, the dramatic punch, the audience reaction. Mannequins don't bleed. And later, the headlines: Robot Player Kills Old Trouper, Victim of Mechanized Stage. Still, they'd call it suicide. How silly.

But maybe that's what the paranoid on the twentieth

story window ledge thought about, too—the audience reaction. Wasn't every self-inflicted wound really aimed at the conscience of the world?

It worried him some, but—

"Fifteen minutes until curtain," the sound system was croaking. *"Fifteen minutes—"*

"Hey, Thorny!" Feria called irritably. "Get back to the costuming room. They've been looking for you."

He got up wearily, glanced around at the backstage bustle, then shuffled away toward the makeup department. One thing was certain: he had to go on.

The house was less than packed. A third of the customers had taken refunds rather than wait for the postponed curtain and a substitute Andreyev, a substitute unknown or ill-remembered at best, with no Smithy index rating beside his name in lights. Nevertheless, the bulk of the audience had planned their evenings and stayed to claim their seats with only suppressed bad humor about the delay. Scalpers' customers who had overpaid and who could not reclaim more than half the bootleg price from the boxoffice were forced to accept the show or lose money and get nothing. They came, and shifted restlessly, and glanced at their watches while an m.c.'s voice made apologies and introduced orchestral numbers, mostly from the Russian composers. Then, finally—

"Ladies and gentlemen, tonight we have with us one of the best loved actresses of stage, screen, and auto-drama, co-star of our play tonight, as young and lovely as she was when first immortalized by Smithfield—Mela Stone!"

Thornier watched tight-lipped from shadows as she stepped gracefully into the glare of the footlights. She seemed abnormally pale, but makeup artistry had done a good job; she looked only slightly older than her doll, still lovely, though less arrogantly beautiful. Her flashing jewelry was gone, and she wore a simple dark gown with a deep-slit neck, and her tawny hair was wrapped high in a turbanlike coiffure that left bare a graceful neck.

"Ten years ago," she began quietly, "I rehearsed for a production of 'The Anarch' which never appeared, rehearsed it with a man named Ryan Thornier in the starring

role, the actor who fills that role tonight. I remember with a special sort of glow the times—”

She faltered, and went on lamely. Thorny winced. Obviously the speech had been written by Jade Ferne and evidently the words were like bits of poisoned apples in Mela's mouth. She gave the impression that she was speaking them only because it wasn't polite to retch them. Mela was being punished for her attempt to back out, and Jade had forced her to appear only by threatening to fit out the Stone mannequin with a gray wig and have the doll read her curtain speeches. The small producer had a vicious streak, and she exercised it when crossed.

Mela's introductory lines were written to convince the audience that it was indeed lucky to have Thornier instead of Peltier, but there was nothing to intimate his flesh-and-blood status. She did not use the words "doll" or "mannequin," but allowed the audience to keep its preconceptions without confirming them. It was short. After a few anecdotes about the show's first presentation more than a generation ago, she was done.

"And with no further delay, my friends, I give you—Pruchev's 'The Anarch.' "

She bowed away and danced behind the curtains and came off crying. A majestic burst of music heralded the opening scene. She saw Thornier and stopped, not yet off stage. The curtain started up. She darted toward him, hesitated, stopped to stare up at him apprehensively. Her eyes were brimming, and she was biting her lip.

On stage, a telephone jangled on the desk of Commissioner Andreyev. His cue was still three minutes away. A lieutenant came on to answer the phone.

"Nicely done, Mela," he whispered, smiling sourly.

She didn't hear him. Her eyes drifted down to his costume—very like the uniform he'd worn for a dress rehearsal ten years ago. Her hand went to her throat. She wanted to run from him, but after a moment she got control of herself. She looked at her own mannequin waiting in the line-up, then at Thornier.

"Aren't you going to say something appropriate?" she hissed.

"I—" His icy smile faded slowly. The first small triumph—triumph over Mela, a sick and hag-ridden Mela who had bought security at the expense of integrity and

was still paying for it in small installments like this, Mela whom he once had loved. The first small "triumph" coiled into a sick knot in his throat.

She started away, but he caught her arm.

"I'm sorry, Mela," he muttered hoarsely. "I'm really sorry."

"It's not your fault."

But it was. She didn't know what he'd done, of course; didn't know he'd switched the tapes and steered his own selection as a replacement for the Peltier doll, so that she'd have to watch him playing opposite the doll-image of a Mela who had ceased to exist ten years ago, watch him relive a mockery of something.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again.

She shook her head, pulled her arm free, hurried away. He watched her go and went sick inside. Their frigid meeting earlier in the day had been the decisive moment, when in a surge of bitterness he'd determined to go through with it and even excuse himself for doing it. Maybe bitterness had fogged his eyesight, he thought. Her reaction to bumping into him that way hadn't been snobbery; it had been horror. An old ghost in dirty coveralls and motley, whose face she'd probably fought to forget, had sprung up to confront her in a place that was too full of memories anyhow. No wonder she seemed cold. Probably he symbolized some of her own self-accusations, for he knew he had affected others that way. The successful ones, the ones who had profited by autodrama—they often saw him with mop and bucket, and if they remembered Ryan Thornier, turned quickly away. And at each turning away, he had felt a small glow of satisfaction as he imagined them thinking: *Thornier wouldn't compromise*—and hating him, because they had compromised and lost something thereby. But being hated by Mela—was different somehow. He didn't want it.

Someone nudged his ribs. "Your cue, Thorny!" hissed a tense voice. "You're on!"

He came awake with a grunt. Feria was shoving him frantically toward his entrance. He made a quick grab for his presence of mind, straightened into character, and strode on.

He muffed the scene badly. He knew that he muffed

it even before he made his exit and saw their faces. He had missed two cues and needed prompting several times from Rick in the booth. His acting was wooden—he felt it.

“You’re doing fine, Thorny, just fine!” Jade told him, because there was nothing else she *dared* tell him during a performance. Shock an actor’s ego during rehearsal, and he had time to recover; shock it during a performance, and he might go sour for the night. He knew, though, without being told, the worry that seethed behind her mechanical little smile. “But just calm down a little, eh?” she advised. “It’s going fine.”

She left him to seethe in solitude. He leaned against the wall and glowered at his feet and flagellated himself. *You failure, you miserable crumb, you janitor-at-heart, you stage-struck charwoman—*

He had to straighten out. If he ruined this one, there’d never be another chance. But he kept thinking of Mela, and how he had wanted to hurt her, and how now that she was being hurt he wanted to stop.

“Your cue, Thorny—wake up!”

And he was on again, stumbling over lines, being terrified of the sea of dim faces where a fourth wall should be.

She was waiting for him after his second exit. He came off pale and shaking, perspiration soaking his collar. He leaned back and lit a cigarette and looked at her bleakly. She couldn’t talk. She took his arm in both hands and kneaded it while she rested her forehead against his shoulder. He gazed down at her in dismay. She’d stopped feeling hurt; she couldn’t feel hurt when she watched him make a fool of himself out there. She might have been vengefully delighted by it, and he almost wished that she were. Instead, she was pitying him. He was numb, sick to the core. He couldn’t go on with it.

“Mela, I’d better tell *you*; I can’t tell Jade what I—”

“Don’t talk, Thorny. Just do your best.” She peered up at him. “Please do your best?”

It startled him. Why should she feel that way?

“Wouldn’t you really rather see me flop?” he asked.

She shook her head quickly, then paused and nodded it. “Part of me would, Thorny. A vengeful part. I’ve got to believe in the automatic stage. I . . . I do believe in it. But I don’t want you to flop, not really.” She put her

hands over her eyes briefly. "You don't know what it's like seeing you out there . . . in the middle of all that . . . that—" She shook herself slightly. "It's a mockery, Thorny, you don't belong out there, but—as long as you're there, don't muffle it. Do your best?"

"Yeah, sure."

"It's a precarious thing. The effect, I mean. If the audience starts realizing you're not a doll—" She shook her head slowly.

"What if they do?"

"They'll laugh. They'll laugh you right off the stage."

He was prepared for anything but that. It confirmed the nagging hunch he'd had during the run-through.

"Thorny, that's all I'm really concerned about. I don't care whether you play it well or play it lousy, as long as they don't find out what you are. I don't want them to laugh at you; you've been hurt enough."

"They wouldn't laugh if I gave a good performance."

"But they *would*! Not in the same way, but they would. Don't you see?"

His mouth fell open. He shook his head. It wasn't true. "Human actors have done it before," he protested. "In the sticks, on small stages with undersized Maestros."

"Have you ever seen such a play?"

He shook his head.

"I have. The audience knows about the human part of the cast in advance. So it doesn't strike them as funny. There's no jolt of discovering an incongruity. Listen to me Thorny—do your best, but you don't dare make it *better* than a doll could do."

Bitterness came back in a flood. Was this what he had hoped for? To give as machinelike a performance as possible, to do as good a job as the Maestro, but no better, and above all, *no different*? So that they wouldn't find out?

She saw his distressed expression and felt for his hand. "Thorny, don't you hate me for telling you. I want you to bring it off O.K., and I thought you ought to realize. I think I know what's been wrong. You're afraid—down deep—that they *won't* recognize you for who you are, and that makes your performance un-doll-like. You better start being afraid they will recognize you, Thorny."

As he stared at her, it began to penetrate that she was

still capable of being the woman he'd once known and loved. Worse, she wanted to save him from being laughed at. Why? If she felt motherly, she might conceivably want to shield him against wrath, criticism, or rotten tomatoes, but not against loss of dignity. Motherliness thrived on the demise of male dignity, for it sharpened the image of the child in the man.

"Mela—?"

"Yes, Thorny."

"I guess I never quite got over you." She shook her head quickly, almost angrily.

"Darling, you're living ten years ago. I'm not, and I won't. Maybe I don't like the present very well, but I'm in it, and I can only change it in little ways. I can't make it the past again, and I won't try." She paused a moment, searching his face. "Ten years ago, we weren't living in the present either. We were living in a mythical, magic, wonderful future. Great talent, just starting to bloom. We were living in dream-plans in those days. The future we lived in never happened, and you can't go back and make it happen. And when a dream-plan stops being possible, it turns into a pipe dream. I won't live in a pipe dream. I want to stay sane, even if it hurts."

"Too bad you had to come tonight," he said stiffly.

She wilted. "Oh, Thorny, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. And I wouldn't say it that strongly unless"—she glanced through the soundproof glass toward the stage where her mannequin was on in the scene with Piotr—"unless I had trouble too, with too much wishing."

"I wish you were with me out there," he said softly. "With no dolls and no Maestro. I know how it'd be then."

"Don't! Please, Thorny, don't."

"Mela, I loved you—"

"No!" She got up quickly. "I . . . I want to see you after the show. Meet me. But don't talk that way. Especially not here and not now."

"I can't help it."

"Please! Good-by for now, Thorny, and—do your best."

My best to be a mechanism, he thought bitterly as he watched her go.

He turned to watch the play. Something was wrong out there on the stage. Badly wrong. The Maestro's interpretation of the scene made it seem unfamiliar somehow.

He frowned. Rick had spoken of the Maestro's ability to compensate, to shift interpretations, to redirect. Was that what was happening? The Maestro compensating—for *his* performance?

His cue was approaching. He moved closer to the stage.

Act I had been a flop. Feria, Ferne, and Thomas conferred in an air of tension and a haze of cigarette smoke. He heard heated muttering, but could not distinguish words. Jade called a stagehand, spoke to him briefly, and sent him away. The stagehand wandered through the group until he found Mela Stone, spoke to her quickly and pointed. Thorny watched her go to join the production group, then turned away. He slipped out of their line of sight and stood behind some folded backdrops, waiting for the end of a brief intermission and trying not to think.

"Great act, Thorny," a costumer said mechanically, and clapped his shoulder in passing.

He suppressed an impulse to kick the costumer. He got out a copy of the script and pretended to read his lines. A hand tugged at his sleeve.

"Jade!" He looked at her bleakly, started to apologize.

"Don't," she said. "We've talked it over. Rick, you tell him."

Rick Thomas who stood beside her grinned ruefully and wagged his head. "It's not altogether your fault, Thorny. Or haven't you noticed?"

"What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously.

"Take scene five, for example," Jade put in. "Suppose the cast had been entirely human. How would you feel about what happened?"

He closed his eyes for a moment and relived it. "I'd probably be sore," he said slowly. "I'd probably accuse Kovrin of jamming my lines and Aksinya of killing my exit—as an excuse," he added with a lame grin. "But I can't accuse the dolls. They can't steal."

"As a matter of fact, old man, they *can*," said the technician. "And your excuse is exactly right."

"Whh—what?"

"Sure. You *did* muff the first scene or two. The audience reacted to it. And the Maestro reacts to audience-reaction—by compensating through shifts in interpretation.

It sees the stage as a whole, you included. As far as the Maestro's concerned, you're an untaped dud—like the Peltier doll we used in the first run-through. It sends you only the script-tape signals, uninterpreted. Because it's got no analogue tape on you. Now without an audience, that'd be O.K. But with an audience reaction to go by, it starts compensating, and since it can't compensate through *you*, it works on the others."

"I don't understand."

"Bluntly, Thorny, the first scene or two stunk. The audience didn't like you. The Maestro started compensating by emphasizing other roles—and recharacterizing *you*, through the others."

"Recharacterize? How can it do that."

"Easily, darling," Jade told him. "When Marka says 'I hate him; he's a beast'—for example—she can say it like it's true, or she can say it like she's just temporarily furious with Andreyev. And it affects the light in which the audience see you. Other actors affect *your* role. You know that's true of the old stage. Well, it's true of auto-drama, too."

He stared at them in amazement. "Can't you stop it? Readjust the Maestro, I mean?"

"Not without clearing the whole thing out of the machine and starting over. The effect is cumulative. The more it compensates, the tougher it gets for you. The tougher it gets for you, the worse you look to the crowd. And the worse you look to the crowd, the more it tries to compensate."

He stared wildly at the clock. Less than a minute until the first scene of Act II. "What'll I do?"

"Stick it," said Jade. "We've been on the phone to Smithfield. There's a programming engineer in town, and he's on his way over in a heliocab. Then we'll see."

"We may be able to nurse it back in tune," Rick added, "a little at a time—by feeding in a fake set of audience-restlessness factors, and cutting out its feeler circuits out in the crowd. We'll try, that's all."

The light flashed for the beginning of the act.

"Good luck, Thorny."

"I guess I'll need it." Grimly he started toward his entrance.

The thing in the booth was watching him. It watched and measured and judged and found wanting. *Maybe, he thought wildly, it even hated him.* It watched, it planned, it regulated, and it was wrecking him.

The faces of the dolls, the hands, the voices—belonged to *it*. The wizard circuitry in the booth rallied them against him. It saw him, undoubtedly, as one of them, but not answering to its pulsing commands. It saw him, perhaps, as a malfunctioning doll, and it tried to correct the effects of his misbehavior. He thought of the old conflict between director and darfstellar, the self-directed actor—and it was the same conflict, aggravated by an electronic director's inability to understand that such things could be. The darfsteller, the undirectable portrayer whose acting welled from unconscious sources with no external strings—directors were inclined to hate them, even when the portrayal was superb. A mannequin, however, was the perfect schauspieler, the actor that a director could play like an instrument.

It would have been easier for him now had he been a schauspieler, for perhaps he could adapt. But he was Andreyev, *his* Andreyev, as he had prepared himself for the role. Andreyev was incarnate as an *alter anima* within him. He had never "played" a role. He had always become the role. And now he could adapt to the needs of the moment on stage only as Andreyev, in and through his identity with Andreyev, and without changing the feel of his portrayal. To attempt it, to try to fall into conformity with what the Maestro was doing, would mean utter confusion. Yet, the machine was forcing him—through the others.

He stood stonily behind his desk, listening coldly to the denials of the prisoner—a revolutionary, an arsonist associated with Piotr's guerrilla band.

"I tell you, comrade, I had nothing to do with it!" the prisoner shouted. "*Nothing!*"

"Haven't you questioned him thoroughly?" Andreyev growled at the lieutenant who guarded the man. "Hasn't he signed a confession?"

"There was no need, comrade. His accomplice confessed," protested the lieutenant.

Only it wasn't supposed to be a protest. The lieutenant made it sound like a monstrous thing to do—to wring

another confession, by torture perhaps, from the prisoner, when there was already sufficient evidence to convict. The words were right, but their meaning was wrenched. It should have been a crisp statement of fact: No need, comrade; his accomplice confessed.

Thorny paused, reddening angrily. His next line was, "See that this one confesses, too." But he wasn't going to speak it. It would augment the effect of the lieutenant's tone of shocked protest. He thought rapidly. The lieutenant was a bit-player, and didn't come back on until the third act. It wouldn't hurt to jam him.

He glowered at the doll, demanded icily: "And what have you done with the accomplice?"

The Maestro could not invent lines, nor comprehend an ad lib. The Maestro could only interpret a deviation as a malfunction, and try to compensate. The Maestro backed up a line, had the lieutenant repeat his cue.

"I told you—he *confessed*."

"*Sol!*" roared Andreyev. "You killed him, eh? Couldn't survive the questioning, eh? And you killed him."

Thorny, what are you doing? came Rick's frantic whisper in his earplug.

"He confessed," repeated the lieutenant.

"You're under arrest, Nichol!" Thorny barked. "Report to Major Malin for discipline. Return the prisoner to his cell." He paused. The Maestro couldn't go on until he cued it, but now there was no harm in speaking the line. "Now—see that this one confesses, too."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant replied stonily, and started off-stage with the prisoner.

Thorny took glee in killing his exit by calling after him: "And see that he lives through it!"

The Maestro marched them out without looking back, and Thorny was briefly pleased with himself. He caught a glimpse of Jade with her hands clasped over her head, giving him a "the-winnah" signal from concealment. But he couldn't keep ad libbing his way out of it every time.

Most of all, he dreaded the entrance of Marka, Mela's doll. The Maestro was playing her up, ennobling her, subtly justifying her treachery, at the expense of Andreyev's character. He didn't want to fight back. Marka's role was too important for tampering, and besides, it

would be like slapping at Mela to confuse the performance of her doll.

The curtain dipped. The furniture revolved. The stage became a living room. And the curtain rose again.

He barked: "No more arrests; after curfew, shoot on sight!" at the telephone, and hung up.

When he turned, she stood in the doorway, listening. She shrugged and entered with a casual walk while he watched her in suspicious silence. It was the consummation of her treachery. She had come back to him, but as a spy for Piotr. He suspected her only of infidelity and not of treason. It was a crucial scene, and the Maestro could play her either as a treacherous wench, or a reluctant traitor with Andreyev seeming a brute. He watched her warily.

"Well—hello," she said petulantly, after walking around the room.

He grunted coldly. She stayed flippant and aloof. So far, it was as it should be. But the vicious argument was yet to come.

She went to a mirror and began straightening her wind-blown hair. She spoke nervously, compulsively, rattling about trivia, concealing her anxiety in his presence after her betrayal. She looked furtive, haggard, somehow more like the real Mela of today; the Maestro's control of expression was masterful.

"What are you doing here?" he exploded suddenly, interrupting her disjointed spiel.

"I still live here, don't I?"

"You got out."

"Only because you ordered me out."

"You made it clear you wanted to leave."

"Liar!"

"Cheat!"

It went on that way for a while; then he began dumping the contents of several drawers into a suitcase.

"I live here, and I'm staying," she raged.

"Suit yourself, comrade."

"What're you doing?"

"Moving out, of course."

The battle continued. Still there was no attempt by the Maestro to revise the scene. Had the trouble been corrected? Had his exchange with the lieutenant somehow

affected the machine? Something was different. It was becoming a good scene, his best so far.

She was still raving at him when he started for the door. She stopped in mid-sentence, breathless—then shrieked his name and flung herself down on the sofa, sobbing violently. He stopped. He turned and stood with his fists on his hips staring at her. Gradually, he melted. He put the suitcase down and walked back to stand over her, still gruff and glowering.

Her sobbing subsided. She peered up at him, saw his inability to escape, began to smile. She came up slowly, arms sliding around his neck.

"Sasha . . . oh, my Sasha—"

The arms were warm, the lips moist, the woman alive in his embrace. For a moment he doubted his senses. She giggled at him and whispered, "You'll break a rib."

"Mela—"

"Let go, you fool—the scene!" Then, aloud: "Can I stay, darling?"

"Always," he said hoarsely.

"And you won't be jealous again?"

"Never."

"Or question me every time I'm gone an hour or two?"

"Or sixteen. It *was* sixteen hours."

"I'm sorry." She kissed him. The music rose. The scene ended.

"How did you swing it?" he whispered in the clinch. "And why?"

"They asked me to. Because of the Maestro." She giggled. "You looked devastated. Hey, you can let go now. The curtain's down."

The mobile furniture had begun to rearrange itself. They scurried offstage, side-stepping a couch as it rolled past. Jade was waiting for them.

"Great!" she whispered, taking their hands. "That was just great."

"Thanks . . . thanks for sliding me in," Mela answered.

"Take it from here out, Mela—the scenes with Thorny, at least."

"I don't know," she muttered. "It's been so long. Anybody could have ad libbed through that fight scene."

"You can do it. Rick'll keep you cued and prompted."

The engineer's here, and they're fussing around with the Maestro. But it'll straighten *itself* out, if you give it a couple more scenes like that to watch."

The second act had been rescued. The supporting cast was still a hazard, and the Maestro still tried to compensate according to audience reaction during Act I, but with a human Marka, the compensatory attempts had less effect, and the interpretive distortions seemed to diminish slightly. The Maestro was piling up new data as the play continued, and reinterpreting.

"It wasn't great," he sighed as they stretched out to relax between acts. "But it was passable."

"Act Three'll be better, Thorny," Mela promised. "We'll rescue it yet. It's just too bad about the first act."

"I wanted it to be tops," he breathed. "I wanted to give them something to think about, something to remember. But now we're fighting to rescue it from being a total flop."

"Wasn't it always like that? You get steamed up to make history, but then you wind up working like crazy just to keep it passable."

"Or to keep from ducking flying groceries sometimes."

She giggled. "Jiggie used to say, 'I went on like the main dish and came off like the toss salad.'" She paused, then added moodily: "The *tough* part of it is—you've *got* to aim high just to hit anywhere at all. It can get to be heartbreaking, too—trying for the sublime every time, and just escaping the ridiculous, or the mediocre."

"No matter how high you aim, you can't hit escape velocity. Ambition is a trajectory with its impact point in oblivion, no matter how high the throw."

"Sounds like a quote."

"It is. From the Satyricon of an ex-Janitor."

"Thorny—?"

"What?"

"I'm going to be sorry tomorrow—but I *am* enjoying it tonight—going through it all again I mean. Living it like a pipe dream. It's no good though. It's opium."

He stared at her for a moment in surprise, said nothing. Maybe it was opium for Mela, but she hadn't started out with a crazy hope that tonight would be the climax and the highpoint of a lifetime on the stage. She was

filling in to save the show, and it meant nothing to her in terms of a career she had deliberately abandoned. He, however, had hoped for a great portrayal. It *wasn't* great, though. If he worked hard at Act III, it might—as a whole—stand up to his performances of the past. Unless—

“Think anybody in the audience has guessed yet? About us, I mean?”

She shook her head. “Haven’t seen any signs of it,” she murmured drowsily. “People see what they expect to see. But it’ll leak out tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Your scene with the lieutenant. When you ad libbed out of a jam. There’s bound to be a drama critic or maybe a professor out there who read the play ahead of time, and started frowning when you pulled that off. He’ll go home and look up his copy of the script just to make sure, and then the cat’s out.”

“It won’t matter by then.”

“No.”

She wanted a nap or a drowse, and he fell silent. As he watched her relax, some of his bitter disappointment slipped away. It was good just to be acting again, even for one opiate evening. And maybe it was best that he wasn’t getting what he wanted. He was even ready to admit to a certain insanity in setting out on such a course.

Perfection and immolation. Now that the perfection wasn’t possible, the whole scheme looked like a sick fanatic’s nightmare, and he was ashamed. Why had he done it—given in to what he had always been only a petulant fantasy, a childish dream? The wish, plus the opportunity, plus the impulse, in a framework of bitterness and in a time of personal transition—it had been enough to bring the crazy yearning out of its cortical wrinkle and start him acting on a dream. A child’s dream.

And then the momentum had carried him along. The juggled tapes, the loaded gun, the dirty trick on Jade—and now fighting to keep the show from dying. He had gone down to the river and climbed up on the bridge rail and looked down at the black and swirling tide—and finally climbed down again because the wind would spoil his swan dive.

He shivered. It scared him a little, to know he could lose himself so easily. What had the years done to him, or what had he done to himself?

He had kept his integrity maybe, but what good was integrity in a vacuum? He had the soul of an actor, and he'd hung onto it when the others were selling theirs, but the years had wiped out the market and he was stuck with it. He had stood firm on principle, and the years had melted the cold glacier of reality from under the principle; still, he stood on it, while the reality ran on down to the sea. He had dedicated himself to the living stage, and carefully tended its grave, awaiting the resurrection.

Old ham, he thought, you've been flickering into mad warps and staggering into dimensions of infrasanity. You took unreality by the hand and led her gallantly through peril and confusion and finally married her before you noticed that she was dead. Now the only decent thing to do was bury her, but her interment would do nothing to get him back through the peril and confusion and on the road again. He'd have to hike. Maybe it was too late to do anything with the rest of a lifetime. But there was only one way to find out. And the first step was to put some mileage between himself and the stage.

If a little black box took over my job, Rick had said, I'd go to work making little black boxes.

Thorny realized with a slight start that the technician had meant it. Mela had done it, in a sense. So had Jade. Especially Jade. But that wasn't the answer for him, not now. He'd hung around too long mourning the dead, and he needed a clean, sharp break. Tomorrow he'd fade out of sight, move away, pretend he was twenty-one again, and start groping for something to do with a lifetime. How to keep eating until he found it—that would be the pressing problem. Unskilled laborers were hard to find these days, but so were unskilled jobs. Selling his acting talent for commercial purposes would work only if he could find a commercial purpose he could believe in and live for, since his talent was not the surface talent of a schauspieler. It would be a grueling search, for he had never bothered to believe in anything but theater.

Mela stirred suddenly. "Did I hear somebody call me?" she muttered. "This racket—!" She sat up to look around.

He grunted doubtfully. "How long till curtain?" he asked.

She arose suddenly and said, "Jade's waving me over. See you in the act, Thorny."

He watched Mela hurry away, he glanced across the floor at Jade who waited for her in the midst of a small conference, he felt a guilty twinge. He'd cost them money, trouble, and nervous sweat, and maybe the performance endangered the run of the show. It was a rotten thing to do, and he was sorry, but it couldn't be undone, and the only possible compensation was to deliver a best-possible Act III and then get out. Fast. Before Jade found him out and organized a lynch mob.

After staring absently at the small conference for a few moments, he closed his eyes and drowsed again.

Suddenly he opened them. Something about the conference group—something peculiar. He sat up and frowned at them again. Jade, Mela, Rick, and Fera, and three strangers. Nothing peculiar about that. Except . . . let's see . . . the thin one with the scholarly look—that would be the programming engineer, probably. The beefy, healthy fellow with the dark business suit and the wandering glance—Thorny couldn't place him—he looked out of place backstage. The third one seemed familiar somehow, but he, too, looked out of place—a chubby little man with no necktie and a fat cigar, he seemed more interested in the backstage rush than in the proceedings of the group. The beefy gent kept asking him questions, and he muttered brief answers around his cigar while watching the stagehands' parade.

Once when answering he took his cigar out of his mouth and glanced quickly across the floor in Thorny's direction. Thorny stiffened, felt bristles rise along his spine. The chubby little gent was—

—The depot clerk!

Who had issued him the extra tape and the splices. Who could put the finger on the trouble right away, and was undoubtedly doing it.

Got to get out. Got to get out fast. The beefy fellow was either a cop or a private investigator, one of several hired by Smithfield. Got to run, got to hide, got to—Lynch mob.

"Not through that door, buddy, that's the stage; what're you— Oh, Thorny! It's not time to go on."

"Sorry," he grunted at the prop man and turned away. The light flashed, the buzzer sounded faintly.

"Now it's time," the prop man called after him.

Where was he going? And what good would it do?

"Hey, Thorny! The buzzer. Come back. It's line-up. You're on when the curtain lifts . . . hey!"

He paused, then turned around and went back. He went on-stage and took his place. She was already there, staring at him strangely as he approached.

"You didn't do it, did you, Thorny?" she whispered.

He gazed at her in tight-lipped silence, then nodded.

She looked puzzled. She looked at him as if he were no longer a person, but a peculiar object to be studied. Not scornful, nor angry, nor righteous—just puzzled.

"Guess I was nuts," he said lamely.

"Guess you were."

"Not too much harm done, though," he said hopefully.

"The wrong people saw the first act, Thorny. They walked out."

"Wrong people?"

"Two backers and a critic."

"Oh?"

He stood stunned. She stopped looking at him then and just stood waiting for the curtain to rise, her face showing nothing but a puzzled sadness. It wasn't her show, and she had nothing in it but a doll that would bring a royalty check or two, and now herself as a temporary substitute for the doll. The sadness was for him. Contempt he could have understood.

The curtain lifted. A sea of dim faces beyond the footlights. And he was Andreyev, chief of a Soviet police garrison, loyalist servant of a dying cause. It was easy to stay in the role this time, to embed his ego firmly in the person of the Russian cop and live a little of the last century. For the ego was more comfortable there than in the skin of Ryan Thornier—a skin that might soon be sent to the tannery, judging the furtive glances that were coming from backstage. It might even be comfortable to remain Andreyev after the performance, but

that was a sure way to get Napoleon Bonaparte for a roommate.

There was no change of setting between scenes *i* and *ii*, but only a dip of the curtain to indicate a time-lapse and permit a change of cast. He stayed on-stage, and it gave him a moment to think. The thoughts weren't pleasant.

Backers had walked out. Tomorrow the show would close unless the morning teleprint of the *Times* carried a rave review. Which seemed wildly improbable. Critics were jaded. Jaded tastes were apt to be impatient. They would not be eager to forgive the first act. He had wrecked it, and he couldn't rescue it.

Revenge wasn't sweet. It tasted like rot and a sour stomach.

Give them a good third act. There's nothing more you can do. But even that wouldn't take away the rotten taste.

Why did you do it, Thorny? Rick's voice, whispering from the booth and in his earplug prompter.

He glanced up and saw the technician watching him from the small window of the booth. He spread his hands in a wide shrugging gesture, as if to ask: How can I tell you, what can I do?

Go on with it, what else? Rick whispered, and withdrew from the window.

The incident seemed to confirm that Jade intended for him to finish it, anyhow. She could scarcely intend otherwise. She was in it with him, in a sense. If the audience found out the play had a human stand-in, and if the critics didn't like the show, they might pounce on the producer who "perpetrated such an impossible substitution"—even harder than they'd pounce on him. She had gambled on him, and in spite of his plot to force her into such a gamble, it was her show, and her responsibility, and she'd catch the brunt of it. Critics, owners, backers, and public—they didn't care about "blame," didn't care about excuses or reasons. They cared about the finished product, and if they didn't like it, the responsibility for it was clear.

As for himself? A cop waiting backstage. Why? He hadn't studied the criminal code, but he couldn't think of any neat little felonious label that could be pinned on what he'd done. Fraud? Not without an exchange of

money or property, he thought. He'd been after intangibles, and the law was an earthy thing; it became confused when motives carried men beyond assaults on property or person, into assaults on ideas or principles. Then it passed the buck to psychiatry.

Maybe the beefy gent wasn't a cop at all. Maybe he was a collector of maniacs.

Thorny didn't much care. The dream had tumbled down, and he'd just have to let the debris keep falling about him until he got a chance to start climbing out of the wreckage. It was the end of something that should have ended years ago, and he couldn't get out until it finished collapsing.

The curtain lifted. Scene *ii* was good. Not brilliant, but good enough to make them stop snapping their gum and hold them locked in their seats, absorbed in their identity with Andreyev.

Scene *iii* was his Gethsemane—when the mob besieged the public offices while he waited for word of Marka and an answer to his offer of a truce with the guerrilla forces. The answer came in one word.

"*Nyet.*"

His death sentence. The word that bound him over to the jackals in the streets, the word that cast him to the ravening mob. The mob had a way: the mob was collecting officials and mounting them. He could see their collection from the window, looking across the square, and he discussed it with an aide. Nine men impaled on the steel spikes of the heavy grillwork fence in front of the Regional Soviet offices. The mob seized another specimen with its thousand hands and mounted it carefully. It lifted the specimen into a sitting position over a two-foot spike, then dropped him on it. Two specimens still squirmed.

He'd cheat the mob, of course. There were the barricades in the building below, and there would be plenty of time to meet death privately and chastely before the mob tore its way inside. But he delayed. He waited for word from Marka.

Word came. Two guards burst in.

"She's here, comrade, she's come!"

Come with the enemy, they said. Come betraying him, betraying the state. *Impossible!* But the guard insisted.

Berserk fury, and refusal to believe. With a low snarl, he drew the automatic, shot the bearer of bad tidings through the heart.

With the crash of the gunshot, the mannequin crumpled. The explosion startled a sudden memory out of hiding, and he remembered: the second cartridge in the clip—*not a blank!* He had forgotten to unload the deadly round.

For an instant he debated firing it into the fallen mannequin as a way to get rid of it, then dismissed the notion and obeyed the script. He stared at his victim and wilted, letting the gun slip from his fingers and fall to the floor. He staggered to the window to stare out across the square. He covered his face with his hands, awaited the transition curtain.

The curtain came. He whirled and started for the gun.

No, Thorny, no! came Rick's frantic whisper from the booth. *To the ikon . . . the ikon!*

He stopped in mid-stage. No time to retrieve the gun and unload. The curtain had only dipped and was starting up again. Let Mela get rid of the round, he thought. He crossed to the shrine, tearing open his collar, rumpling his hair. He fell to his knees before the ancient ikon, in dereliction before the God of an older Russia, a Russia that survived as firmly in fierce negation as it had survived in fierce affirmation. The cultural soul was a living thing, and it survived as well in downfall as in victory; it could never be excised, but only eaten away or slowly transmuted by time and gentle pressures of rain wearing the rock.

There was a bust of Lenin beneath the ikon. And there was a bust of Harvey Smithfield beneath the Greek players' masks on the wall of D'Uccia's office. The signs of the times, and the signs of the timeless, and the cultural heartbeat pulsed to the rhythm of centuries. He had resisted the times as they took a sharp turn in direction, but no man could swim long against the tide as it plodded its zigzag course into timelessness. And the sharp deflections in the course were deceptive—for all of them really wound their way downstream. No man ever added his bit to the flow by spending all his effort to resist the

current. The tide would tire him and take him into oblivion while the world flowed on.

Marka, Boris, Piotr had entered, and he had turned to start at them without understanding. The mockery followed and the harsh laughter, as they pushed the once haughty but now broken chieftain about the stage like a dazed animal unable to respond. He rebounded from one to another of them, as they prodded him to dispel the trancelike daze.

"Finish your prayer, comrade," said Mela, picking up the gun he'd dropped.

As he staggered close to Mela, he found his chance, and whispered quickly: "The gun, Mela—eject the first cartridge. Eject it, quickly."

He was certain she heard him, although she showed no reaction—unless the slight flicker of her eyes had been a quick glance at the gun. Had she understood? A moment later, another chance to whisper.

"The next bullet's real. Work the slide. Eject it."

He stumbled as Piotr pushed him, fell against a heavy couch, slid down, and stared at them. Piotr went to open the window and shout an offer to the mob below. A bull-roar arose from the herd outside. They hauled him to the window as a triumphal display.

"See, comrade?" growled the guerrilla. "Your faithful congregation awaits you."

Marka closed the windows. "I can't stand that sight!" she cried.

"Take him to his people," the leader ordered.

"No—" Marka brought up the gun, shook her head fiercely. "I won't let you do that. Not to the mob."

Piotr growled a curse. "They'll have him anyway. They'll be coming up here to search."

Thorny stared at the actress with a puzzled frown. Still she hadn't ejected the cartridge. And the moment was approaching—a quick bullet to keep him from the mob, a bit of hot mercy flung hastily to him by the woman who had enthralled him and used him and betrayed him.

She turned toward him with the gun, and he began to back away.

"All right, Piotr—if they'll get him anyway—"

She moved a few steps toward him as he backed to a corner. *The live round, Mela, eject it!*

Then her foot brushed a copper bus-lug, and he saw the faint little jet of sparks. Eyes of glass, flesh of airfoam plastic, nerves of twitching electron streams.

Mela was gone. This was her doll. Maybe the real Mela couldn't stomach it after she'd found what he'd done, or maybe Jade had called her off after the first scene of the third act. A plastic hand held the gun, and a tiny flexible solenoid awaited the pulse that would tighten the finger on the trigger. Terror lanced through him.

Cue, Thorny, cue! whispered his earplug.

The doll had to wait for his protest before it could fire. It had to be cued. His eyes danced about the stage, looking for a way out. Only an instant to decide.

He could walk over and take the gun out of the doll's hand without giving it a cue—betraying himself to the audience and wrecking the final moment of the show.

He could run for it, cue her, and hope she missed, falling after the shot. But he'd fall on the lugs that way, and come up shrieking.

For God's sake, Thorny! Rick was howling. *The cue, the cue!*

He stared at the gun and swayed slightly from side to side. The gun swayed with him—slightly out of phase. A second's delay, no more—

"Please, Marka—" he called, swaying faster.

The finger tensed on the trigger. The gun moved in a search pattern, as he shifted to and fro. It was risky. It had to be precisely timed. It was like dancing with a cobra. He wanted to flee.

You faked the tape, you botched the show, you came out second best to a system you hated, he reminded himself. And you even loaded the gun. Now if you can't risk it—

He gritted his teeth, kept up the irregular weaving motion, then—

"Please, Marka . . . no, no, nooo!"

A spiked fist hit him somewhere around the belt, spun him around, and dropped him. The sharp cough of the gun was only a part of the blow. Then he was lying crumpled on his side in the chalked safety area, bleeding and cursing softly. The scene continued. He started to cry out, but checked the shout in his throat. Through a

haze, he watched the others move on toward the finale, saw the dim sea of faces beyond the lights. Bullet punched through his side somewhere.

Got to stop squirming. Can't have a dead Andreyev floundering about like a speared fish on the stage. Wait a minute—just another minute—hang on.

But he couldn't. He clutched at his side and felt for the wound. Hard to feel through all the stickiness. He wanted to tear his clothes free to get at it and stop the bleeding, but that was no good either. They'd accept a mannequin fumbling slightly in a death agony, but the blood wouldn't go over so well. Mannequins didn't bleed. Didn't they see it anyway? They had to see it. Clever gimmick, they'd think. Tube of red ink, maybe. Realism is the milieu of—

He twisted his hand in his belt, drew it up strangle-tight around his waist. The pain got worse for a moment, but it seemed to slow the flow of blood. He hung onto it, gritting his teeth, waiting.

He knew about where it hit him, but it was harder to tell where it had come out. And what it had taken with it on the way. Thank God for the bleeding. Maybe he wasn't doing much of it inside.

He tried to focus on the rest of the stage. Music was rising somewhere. Had they all walked off and left him? But no—there was Piotr, through the haze. Piotr approached his chair of office—heavy, ornate, antique. Once it had belonged to a noble of the czar. Piotr, perfectly cold young machine, in his triumph—inspecting the chair.

A low shriek came from backstage somewhere. Mela. Couldn't she keep her mouth shut for half a minute? Probably spotted the blood. Maybe the music drowned the squeal.

Piotr mounted the single step and turned. He sat down gingerly in the chair of empire, testing it, and smiling victory. He seemed to find the chair comfortable.

"I must keep this, Marka," he said.

Thorny wheezed a low curse at him. He'd keep it all right, until the times went around another twist in the long old river. And welcome to it—judging by the thundering applause.

And the curtain fell slowly to cover the window of the stage.

Feet tramped past him, and he croaked "Help!" a

couple of times, but the feet kept going. The mannequins, marching off to their packing cases.

He got to his feet alone, and went black. But when the blackness dissolved, he was still standing there, so he staggered toward the exit. They were rushing toward him—Mela and Rick and a couple of the crew. Hands grabbed for him, but he fought them off.

"I'll walk by myself now!" he growled.

But the hands took him anyway. He saw Jade and the beefy gent, tried to lurch toward them and explain everything, but she went even whiter and backed away. *I must look a bloody mess*, he thought.

"I was trying to duck. I didn't want to—"

"Save your breath," Rick told him. "I saw you. Just hang on."

They got him onto a doll packing case, and he heard somebody yelling for a doctor from the departing audience, and then a lot of hands started scraping at his side and tugging at him.

"Mela—"

"Right here, Thorny. I'm here."

And after a while she was still there, but sunlight was spilling across the bed, and he smelled faint hospital odors. He blinked at her for several seconds before he found a voice.

"The show?" he croaked.

"They panned it," she said softly.

He closed his eyes again and groaned.

"But it'll make dough."

He blinked at her and gaped.

"Publicity. Terrific. Shall I read you the reviews?"

He nodded, and she reached for the papers. All about the madman who bled all over the stage. He stopped her halfway through the first article. It was enough. The audience had begun to catch on toward the last lines of the play, and the paging of a surgeon had confirmed the suspicion.

"You missed the bedlam backstage," she told him. "It was quite a mess."

"But the show won't close?"

"How can it? With all the morbidity for pulling power. If it closes, it'll be with the Peltier performance to blame."

"And Jade—?"

"Sore. Plenty sore. Can you blame her?"

He shook his head. "I didn't want to hurt anybody. I'm sorry."

She watched him in silence for a moment, then: "You can't flounder around like you've been doing, Thorny without somebody getting hurt, without somebody hating your guts, getting trampled on. You just can't."

It was true. When you hung onto a piece of the past, and just hung onto it quietly, you only hurt yourself. But when you started trying to bludgeon a place for it in the present, you began knocking over the bystanders.

"Theater's dead, Thorny. Can't you believe that now?"

He thought about it a little, and shook his head. It wasn't dead. Only the form was changed, and maybe not permanently at that. He'd thought of it first last night, before the ikon. There were things of the times, and a few things that were timeless. The times came as a result of a particular human culture. The timeless came as a result of any human culture at all. And Cultural Man was a showman. He created display windows of culture for an audience of men, and paraded his aspirations and ideals and purposes thereon, and the displays were necessary to the continuity of the culture, to the purposeful orientation of the species.

Beyond one such window, he erected an altar, and placed a priest before it to chant a liturgical description of the heart-reasoning of his times. And beyond another window, he built a stage and set his talking dolls upon it to live a dramaturgical sequence of wishes and woes of his times.

True, the priests would change, the liturgy would change, and the dolls, the dramas, the displays—but the windows would never—no never—be closed as long as Man outlived his members, for only through such windows could transient men see themselves against the background of a broader sweep, see man encompassed by Man. A perspective not possible without the windows.

Dramaturgy. Old as civilized Man. Outlasting forms and techniques and applications. Outlasting even current popular worship of the Great God Mechanism, who was temporarily enshrined while still being popularly misun-

derstood. Like the Great God Commerce of an earlier century, and the God Agriculture before him.

Suddenly he laughed aloud. "If they used human actors today, it would be a pretty moldy display. Not even *true*, considering the times."

By the time another figure lounged in his doorway, he had begun to feel rather expansive and heroic about it all. When a small cough caused him to glance up, he stared for a moment, grinned broadly, then called: "Ho, Richard! Come in. Here . . . sit down. Help me decide on a career, eh? Heh heh—" He waved the classified section and chuckled. "What kind of little black boxes can an old ham—"

He paused. Rick's expression was chilly, and he made no move to enter. After a moment he said: "I guess there'll always be a sucker to rerun this particular relay race."

"Race?" Thorny gathered a slow frown.

"Yeah. Last century, it was between a Chinese abacus operator and an IBM machine. They really had a race, you know."

"Now see here—"

"And the century before that, it was between a long-hand secretary and a typewriting machine."

"If you came here to—"

"And before that, the hand-weavers against the automatic looms."

"Nice to have seen you, Richard. On your way out, would you ask the nurse to—"

"Break up the looms, smash the machines, picket the offices with typewriters, keep adding machines out of China! So then what? Try to be a better tool than a tool?"

Thorny rolled his head aside and glowered at the wall. "All right. I was wrong. What do you want to do? Gloat? Moralize?"

"No. I'm just curious. It keeps happening—a specialist trying to compete with a higher-level specialist's tools. Why?"

"*Higher level?*" Thorny sat up with a snarl, groaned, caught at his side and sank back again, panting.

"Easy, old man," Rick said quietly. "Sorry. Higher organizational-level, I meant. Why do you keep on doing it?"

Thorny lay silent for a few moments, then: "Status jealousy. Even hawks try to drive other hawks out of their hunting grounds. Fight off competition."

"But you're no hawk. And a machine isn't competition."

"Cut it out, Rick. What did you come here for?"

Rick glanced at the toe of his shoe, snickered faintly, and came on into the room. "Thought you might need some help finding a job," he said. "When I looked in the door and saw you lying there looking like somebody's King Arthur, I got sore again." He sat restlessly on the edge of a chair and watched the old man with mingled sadness, irritation, and affection.

"You'd help me . . . find a job?"

"Maybe. A job, not a permanent niche."

"It's too late to find a permanent niche."

"It was too late when you were born, old man! There isn't any such thing—hasn't been, for the last century. Whatever you specialize in, another specialty will either gobble you up, or find a way to replace you. If you get what looks like a secure niche, somebody'll come along and wall you up in it and write your epitaph on it. And the more specialized a society gets, the more dangerous it is for the pure specialist. You think an electronic engineer is any safer than an actor? Or a ditch-digger?"

"I don't know. It's not fair. A man's career—"

"You've always got one specialty that's safe."

"What's that?"

"The specialty of creating new specialties. Continuously. Your own."

"But that's—" He started to protest, to say that such a concept belonged to the highly trained few, to the technical elite of the era, and that it wasn't specialization, but generalization. But why to the few? The specialty of creating new specialties—

"But that's—"

"More or less a definition of Man, isn't it?" Rick finished for him. "Now about the job—"

"Yes, about the job—"

So maybe you don't start from the bottom after all, he decided. You start considerably above the lemur, the chimpanzee, the orangutan, the Maestro—if you ever start at all.

DARK BENEDICTION

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Always fearful of being set upon during the night, Paul slept uneasily despite his weariness from the long trek southward. When dawn broke, he rolled out of his blankets and found himself still stiff with fatigue. He kicked dirt over the remains of the campfire and breakfasted on a tough forequarter of cold boiled rabbit which he washed down with a swallow of earthy-tasting ditch-water. Then he buckled the cartridge belt about his waist, leaped the ditch, and climbed the embankment to the trafficless four-lane highway whose pavement was scattered with blown leaves and unsightly debris dropped by a long-departed throng of refugees whose only wish had been to escape from one another. Paul, with characteristic independence, had decided to go where the crowds had been the thickest—to the cities—on the theory that they would now be deserted, and therefore noncontagious.

The fog lay heavy over the silent land, and for a moment he paused groping for cognizance of direction. Then he saw the stalled car on the opposite shoulder of the road—a late model convertible, but rusted, flat-tired, with last year's license plates, and most certainly out of fuel. It obviously had been deserted by its owner during the exodus, and he trusted in its northward heading as he would have trusted the reading of a compass. He

turned right and moved south on the empty highway. Somewhere just ahead in the gray vapor lay the outskirts of Houston. He had seen the high skyline before the setting of yesterday's sun, and knew that his journey would soon be drawing to a close.

Occasionally he passed a deserted cottage or a burned-out roadside tavern, but he did not pause to scrounge for food. The exodus would have stripped such buildings clean. Pickings should be better in the heart of the metropolitan area, he thought—where the hysteria had swept humanity away quickly.

Suddenly Paul froze on the highway, listening to the fog. Footsteps in the distance—footsteps and a voice singing an absent-minded ditty to itself. No other sounds penetrated the sepulchral silence which once had growled with the life of a great city. Anxiety caught him with clammy hands. An old man's voice it was, crackling and tuneless. Paul groped for his holster and brought out the revolver he had taken from a deserted police station.

"Stop where you are, dermie!" he bellowed at the fog. "I'm armed."

The footsteps and the singing stopped. Paul strained his eyes to penetrate the swirling mist-shroud. After a moment, the oldster answered: "Sure foggy, ain't it, sonny? Can't see ya. Better come a little closer. I ain't no dermie."

Loathing choked in Paul's throat. "The hell you're not. Nobody else'd be crazy enough to sing. Get off the road! I'm going south, and if I see you I'll shoot. Now move!"

"Sure, sonny. I'll move. But I'm no dermie. I was just singing to keep myself company. I'm past caring about the plague. I'm heading north, where there's people, and if some dermie hears me a'singing . . . why, I'll tell him t'come jine in. What's the good o' being healthy if yer alone?"

While the old man spoke, Paul heard his sloshing across the ditch and climbing through the brush. Doubt assailed him. Maybe the old crank wasn't a dermie. An ordinary plague victim would have whimpered and pleaded for satisfaction of his strange craving—the laying-on of hands, the feel of healthy skin beneath moist gray palms. Nevertheless, Paul meant to take no chances with the oldster.

"Stay back in the brush while I walk past!" he called.

"Okay, sonny. You go right by. I ain't gonna touch you. You aiming to scrounge in Houston?"

Paul began to advance. "Yeah, I figure people got out so fast that they must have left plenty of canned goods and stuff behind."

"Mmmm, there's a mite here and there," said the cracked voice in a tone that implied understatement. "Course, now, you ain't the first to figure that way, y'know."

Paul slacked his pace, frowning. "You mean . . . a lot of people are coming back?"

"Mmmm, no—not a lot. But you'll bump into people every day or two. Ain't my kind o' folks. Rough characters, mostly—don't take chances, either. They'll shoot first, then look to see if you was a dermie. Don't never come busting out of a doorway without taking a peek at the street first. And if two people come around a corner in opposite directions, somebody's gonna die. The few that's there is trigger happy. Just thought I'd warn ya."

"Thanks."

"D'mention it. Been good t'hear a body's voice again, tho I can't see ye."

Paul moved on until he was fifty paces past the voice. Then he stopped and turned. "Okay, you can get back on the road now. Start walking north. Scuff your feet until you're out of earshot."

"Taking no chances, are ye?" said the old man as he waded the ditch. "All right, sonny." The sound of his footsteps hesitated on the pavement. "A word of advice—your best scrounging'll be around the warehouses. Most of the stores are picked clean. Good luck!"

Paul stood listening to the shuffling feet recede northward. When they became inaudible, he turned to continue his journey. The meeting had depressed him, reminded him of the animal-level to which he and others like him had sunk. The oldster was obviously healthy; but Paul had been chased by three dermies in as many days. And the thought of being trapped by a band of them in the fog left him unnerved. Once he had seen a pair of the grinning, maddened compulsives seize a screaming young child while each of them took turns caressing the

youngster's arms and face with the gray and slippery hands that spelled certain contraction of the disease—if disease it was. The dark pall of neuroderm was unlike any illness that Earth had ever seen.

The victim became the eager ally of the sickness that gripped him. Caught in its demoniac madness, the stricken human searched hungrily for healthy comrades, then set upon them with no other purpose than to paw at the clean skin and praise the virtues of the blind compulsion that drove him to do so. One touch, and infection was insured. It was as if a third of humanity had become night-prowling maniacs, lurking in the shadows to seize the unwary, working in bands to trap the unarmed wanderer. And two-thirds of humanity found itself fleeing in horror from the mania, seeking the frigid northern climates where, according to rumor, the disease was less infectious. The normal functioning of civilization had been dropped like a hot potato within six months after the first alarm. When the man at the next lathe might be hiding gray discolorations beneath his shirt, industrial society was no place for humanity.

Rumor connected the onslaught of the plague with an unpredicted swarm of meteorites which had brightened the sky one October evening two weeks before the first case was discovered. The first case was, in fact, a machinist who had found one of the celestial cannon balls, handled it, weighed it, estimated its volume by fluid-displacement, then cut into it on his lathe because its low density suggested that it might be hollow. He claimed to have found a pocket of frozen jelly, still rigid from deep space, although the outer shell had been heated white-hot by atmospheric friction. He said he let the jelly thaw, then fed it to his cat because it had an unpleasant fishy odor. Shortly thereafter, the cat disappeared.

Other meteorites had been discovered and similarly treated by university staffs before there was any reason to blame them for the plague. Paul, who had been an engineering student at Texas U at the time of the incident, had heard it said that the missiles were purposefully manufactured by parties unknown, that the jelly contained micro-organisms which under the microscope suggested a cross between a sperm-cell (because of a similar tail)

and a Pucini Corpuscle (because of a marked resemblance to nerve tissue in subcellular detail).

When the meteorites were connected with the new and mushrooming disease, some people started a panic by theorizing that the meteor-swarm was a pre-invasion artillery attack by some space-horde lurking beyond telescope range, and waiting for their biological bombardment to wreck civilization before they moved in upon Earth. The government had immediately labeled all investigations "top-secret," and Paul had heard no news since the initial speculations. Indeed, the government might have explained the whole thing and proclaimed it to the country for all he knew. One thing was certain: the country had not heard. It no longer possessed channels of communication.

Paul thought that if any such invaders were coming, they would have already arrived—months ago. Civilization was not truly wrecked; it had simply been discarded during the crazed flight of the individual away from the herd. Industry lay idle and unmanned, but still intact. Man was fleeing from Man. Fear had destroyed the integration of his society, and had left him powerless before any hypothetical invaders. Earth was ripe for plucking, but it remained unplucked and withering. Paul, therefore, discarded the invasion hypothesis, and searched for nothing new to replace it. He accepted the fact of his own existence in the midst of chaos, and sought to protect that existence as best he could. It proved to be a full-time job, with no spare time for theorizing.

Life was a rabbit scurrying over a hill. Life was a warm blanket, and a secluded sleeping place. Life was ditchwater, and an unbloated can of corned beef, and a suit of clothing looted from a deserted cottage. Life, above all else, was an avoidance of other human beings. For no dermie had the grace to cry "unclean!" to the unsuspecting. If the dermie's discolorations were still in the concealable stage, then concealed they would be, while the lost creature deliberately sought to infect his wife, his children, his friends—whoever would not protest an idle touch of the hand. When the grayness touched the face and the backs of the hands, the creature became a feverish night wanderer, subject to strange hallucinations and delusions and desires.

The fog began to part toward midmorning as Paul drove deeper into the outskirts of Houston. The highway was becoming a commercial subcenter, lined with businesses and small shops. The sidewalks were showered with broken glass from windows kicked in by looters. Paul kept to the center of the deserted street, listening and watching cautiously for signs of life. The distant barking of a dog was the only sound in the once-growling metropolis. A flight of sparrows winged down the street, then darted in through a broken window to an inside nesting place.

He searched a small grocery store, looking for a snack, but the shelves were bare. The thoroughfare had served as a main avenue of escape, and the fugitives had looted it thoroughly to obtain provisions. He turned onto a side street, then after several blocks turned again to parallel the highway, moving through an old residential section. Many houses had been left open, but few had been looted. He entered one old frame mansion and found a can of tomatoes in the kitchen. He opened it and sipped the tender delicacy from the container, while curiosity sent him prowling through the rooms.

He wandered up the first flight of stairs, then halted with one foot on the landing. A body lay sprawled across the second flight—the body of a young man, dead quite a while. A well-rusted pistol had fallen from his hand. Paul dropped the tomatoes and bolted for the street. Suicide was a common recourse, when a man learned that he had been touched.

After two blocks, Paul stopped running. He sat panting on a fire hydrant and chided himself for being overly cautious. The man had been dead for months; and infection was achieved only through contact. Nevertheless, his scalp was still tingling. When he had rested briefly, he continued his plodding course toward the heart of the city. Toward noon, he saw another human being.

The man was standing on the loading dock of a warehouse, apparently enjoying the sunlight that came with the dissolving of the fog. He was slowly and solemnly spooning the contents of a can into a red-lipped mouth while his beard bobbed with appreciative chewing. Suddenly he saw Paul who had stopped in the center of the street with his hand on the butt of his pistol. The man

backed away, tossed the can aside, and sprinted the length of the platform. He bounded off the end, snatched a bicycle away from the wall, and pedalled quickly out of sight while he bleated shrill blasts on a police whistle clenched between his teeth.

Paul trotted to the corner, but the man had made another turn. His whistle continued bleating. A signal? A dermie summons to a touching orgy? Paul stood still while he tried to overcome an urge to break into panicked flight. After a minute, the clamor ceased; but the silence was ominous.

If a party of cyclists moved in, he could not escape on foot. He darted toward the nearest warehouse, seeking a place to hide. Inside, he climbed a stack of boxes to a horizontal girder, kicked the stack to topple it, and stretched out belly-down on the steel eye-beam to command a clear shot at the entrances. He lay for an hour, waiting quietly for searchers. None came. At last he slid down a vertical support and returned to the loading platform. The street was empty and silent. With weapon ready, he continued his journey. He passed the next intersection without mishap.

Halfway up the block, a calm voice drawled a command from behind him: "Drop the gun, dermie. Get your hands behind your head."

He halted, motionless. No plague victim would hurl the dermie-charge at another. He dropped the pistol and turned slowly. Three men with drawn revolvers were clambering from the back of a stalled truck. They were all bearded, wore blue jeans, blue neckerchiefs, and green woolen shirts. He suddenly recalled that the man on the loading platform had been similarly dressed. A uniform?

"Turn around again!" barked the speaker.

Paul turned, realizing that the men were probably some sort of self-appointed quarantine patrol. Tow ropes suddenly skidded out from behind and came to a stop near his feet on the pavement—a pair of lariat loops.

"One foot in each loop, dermie!" the speaker snapped.

When Paul obeyed, the ropes were jerked taut about his ankles, and two of the men trotted out to the sides, stood thirty feet apart, and pulled his legs out into a wide

straddle. He quickly saw that any movement would cost him his balance.

"Strip to the skin."

"I'm no dermie," Paul protested as he unbuttoned his shirt.

"We'll see for ourselves, Joe," grunted the leader as he moved around to the front. "Get the top off first. If your chest's okay, we'll let your feet go."

When Paul had undressed, the leader walked around him slowly, making him spread his fingers and display the soles of his feet. He stood shivering and angry in the chilly winter air while the men satisfied themselves that he wore no gray patches of neuroderm.

"You're all right, I guess," the speaker admitted; then as Paul stooped to recover his clothing, the man growled, "Not those! Jim, get him a probie outfit."

Paul caught a bundle of clean clothing, tossed to him from the back of the truck. There were jeans, a woolen shirt, and a kerchief, but the shirt and kerchief were red. He shot an inquiring glance at the leader, while he climbed into the welcome change.

"All newcomers are on two weeks probation," the man explained. "If you decide to stay in Houston, you'll get another exam next time the uniform code changes. Then you can join our outfit, if you don't show up with the plague. In fact, you'll have to join if you stay."

"What is the outfit?" Paul asked suspiciously.

"It just started. Schoolteacher name of Georgelle organized it. We aim to keep dermies out. There's about six hundred of us now. We guard the downtown area, but soon as there's enough of us we'll move out to take in more territory. Set up road blocks and all that. You're welcome, soon as we're sure you're clean . . . and can take orders."

"Whose orders?"

"Georgelle's. We got no room for goof-offs, and no time for argument. Anybody don't like the setup, he's welcome to get out. Jim here'll give you a leaflet on the rules. Better read it before you go anywhere. If you don't, you might make a wrong move. Make a wrong move, and you catch a bullet."

The man called Jim interrupted, "Reckon you better

call off the other patrols, Digger?" he said respectfully to the leader.

Digger nodded curtly and turned to blow three short blasts and a long with his whistle. An answering short-long-short came from several blocks away. Other posts followed suit. Paul realized that he had been surrounded by a ring of similar ambushes.

"Jim, take him to the nearest water barrel, and see that he shaves," Digger ordered, then: "What's your name, probie? Also your job, if you had one."

"Paul Harris Oberlin. I was a mechanical engineering student when the plague struck. Part-time garage mechanic while I was in school."

Digger nodded and jotted down the information on a scratchpad. "Good, I'll turn your name in to the registrar. Georgelle says to watch for college men. You might get a good assignment, later. Report to the Esperson Building on the seventeenth. That's inspection day. If you don't show up, we'll come looking for you. All loose probies'll get shot. Now Jim here's gonna see to it that you shave. Don't shave again until your two-weeker. That way, we can estimate how long you been in town—by looking at your beard. We got other ways that you don't need to know about. Georgelle's got a system worked out for everything, so don't try any tricks."

"Tell me, what do you do with dermies?"

Digger grinned at his men. "You'll find out, probie."

Paul was led to a rain barrel, given a basin, razor, and soap. He scraped his face clean while Jim sat at a safe distance, munching a quid of tobacco and watching the operation with tired boredom. The other men had gone.

"May I have my pistol back?"

"Uh-uh! Read the rules. No weapons for probies."

"Suppose I bump into a dermie?"

"Find yourself a whistle and toot a bunch of short blasts. Then run like hell. We'll take care of the dermies. Read the rules."

"Can I scrounge wherever I want to?"

"Probies have their own assigned areas. There's a map in the rules."

"Who wrote the rules, anyhow?"

"Jeezis!" the guard grunted disgustedly. "Read 'em and find out."

When Paul finished shaving, Jim stood up, stretched, then bounded off the platform and picked up his bicycle. "Where do I go from here?" Paul called.

The man gave him a contemptuous snort, mounted the bike, and pedalled leisurely away. Paul gathered that he was to read the rules. He sat down beside the rain barrel and began studying the mimeographed leaflet.

Everything was cut and dried. As a probie, he was confined to an area six blocks square near the heart of the city. Once he entered it, a blue mark would be stamped on his forehead. At the two-week inspection, the indelible brand would be removed with a special solution. If a branded probie were caught outside his area, he would be forcibly escorted from the city. He was warned against attempting to impersonate permanent personnel, because a system of codes and passwords would ensnare him. One full page of the leaflet was devoted to propaganda. Houston was to become a "Bulwark of health in a stricken world, and the leader of a glorious recovery." The paper was signed by Dr. Georgelle, who had given himself the title of Director.

The pamphlet left Paul with a vague uneasiness. The uniforms—they reminded him of neighborhood boys' gangs in the slums, wearing special sweaters and uttering secret passwords, whipping intruders and amputating the tails of stray cats in darkened garages. And, in another way, it made him think of frustrated little people, gathering at night in brown shirts around a bonfire to sing the *Horst Wessel Lied* and listen to grandiose oratory about glorious destinies. *Their* stray cats had been an unfavored race.

Of course, the dermies were not merely harmless alley prowlers. They were a real menace. And maybe Georgelle's methods were the only ones effective.

While Paul sat with the pamphlet on the platform, he had been gazing absently at the stalled truck from which the men had emerged. Suddenly it broke upon his consciousness that it was a diesel. He bounded off the platform, and went to check its fuel tank, which had been left uncapped.

He knew that it was useless to search for gasoline, but diesel fuel was another matter. The exodus had drained all

existing supplies of high octane fuel for the escaping motorcade, but the evacuation had been too hasty and too fear-crazed to worry with out-of-the-ordinary methods. He sniffed tank. It smelled faintly of gasoline. Some unknowing fugitive had evidently filled it with ordinary fuel, which had later evaporated. But if the cylinders had not been damaged by the trial, the truck might be useful. He checked the engine briefly, and decided that it had not been tried at all. The starting battery had been removed.

He walked across the street and looked back at the warehouse. It bore the sign of a trucking firm. He walked around the block, eyeing the streets cautiously for other patrolmen. There was a fueling platform on the opposite side of the block. A fresh splash of oil on the concrete told him that Georgelle's crew was using the fuel for some purpose—possibly for heating or cooking. He entered the building and found a repair shop, with several dismantled engines lying about. There was a rack of batteries in the corner, but a screwdriver placed across the terminals brought only a weak spark.

The chargers, of course, drew power from the city's electric service, which was dead. After giving the problem some thought, Paul connected five of the batteries in series, then placed a sixth across the total voltage, so that it would collect the charge that the others lost. Then he went to carry buckets of fuel from the pumps to the truck. When the tank was filled, he hoisted each end of the truck with a roll-under jack and inflated the tires with a hand-pump. It was a long and laborious job.

Twilight was gathering by the time he was ready to try it. Several times during the afternoon, he had been forced to hide from cyclists who wandered past, lest they send him on to the probie area and use the truck for their own purposes. Evidently they had long since decided that automotive transportation was a thing of the past.

A series of short whistle-blasts came to his ears just as he was climbing into the cab. The signals were several blocks away, but some of the answering bleats were closer. Evidently another newcomer, he thought. Most new arrivals from the north would pass through the same area on their way downtown. He entered the cab, closed the door softly, and ducked low behind the dashboard as three cyclists raced across the intersection just ahead.

Paul settled down to wait for the all-clear. It came after about ten minutes. Apparently the newcomer had tried to run instead of hiding. When the cyclists returned, they were moving leisurely, and laughing among themselves. After they had passed the intersection, Paul stole quietly out of the cab and moved along the wall to the corner, to assure himself that all the patrolmen had gone. But the sound of shrill pleading came to his ears.

At the end of the building, he clung close to the wall and risked a glance around the corner. A block away, the nude figure of a girl was struggling between taut ropes held by green-shirted guards. She was a pretty girl, with a tousled mop of chestnut hair and clean white limbs—clean except for her forearms, which appeared dipped in dark stain. Then he saw the dark irregular splotch across her flank, like a splash of ink not quite washed clean. She was a dermie.

Paul ducked close to the ground so that his face was hidden by a clump of grass at the corner. A man—the leader of the group—had left the girl, and was advancing up the street toward Paul, who prepared to roll under the building out of sight. But in the middle of the block, the man stopped. He lifted a manhole cover in the pavement, then went back for the girl's clothing, which he dragged at the end of a fishing pole with a wire hook at its tip. He dropped the clothing, one piece at a time into the manhole. A cloud of white dust arose from it, and the man stepped back to avoid the dust. Quicklime, Paul guessed.

Then the leader cupped his hands to his mouth and called back to the others. "Okay, drag her on up here!" He drew his revolver and waited while they tugged the struggling girl toward the manhole.

Paul felt suddenly ill. He had seen dermies shot in self-defense by fugitives from their deathly gray hands, but here was cold and efficient elimination. Here was Dachau and Buchenwald and the nameless camps of Siberia. He turned and bolted for the truck.

The sound of its engine starting brought a halt to the disposal of the pest-girl. The leader appeared at the intersection and stared uncertainly at the truck, as Paul nosed it away from the building. He fidgeted with his revolver doubtfully, and called something over his shoulder

to the others. Then he began walking out into the street and signaling for the truck to stop. Paul let it crawl slowly ahead, and leaned out the window to eye the man questioningly.

"How the hell you get that started?" the leader called excitedly. He was still holding the pistol, but it dangled almost unnoticed in his hand. Paul suddenly fed fuel to the diesel and swerved sharply toward the surprised guardsman.

The leader yelped and dived for safety, but the fender caught his hips, spun him off balance, and smashed him down against the pavement. As the truck thundered around the corner toward the girl and her captors, he glanced in the mirror to see the hurt man weakly trying to crawl out of the street. Paul was certain that he was not mortally wounded.

As the truck lumbered on, the girl threw herself prone before it, since the ropes prevented any escape. Paul swerved erratically, sending the girl's captors scurrying for the alley. Then he aimed the wheels to straddle her body. She glanced up, screamed, then hugged the pavement as the behemoth thundered overhead. A bullet ploughed a furrow across the hood. Paul ducked low in the seat and jammed the brake pedal down, as soon as he thought she was clear.

There were several shots, but apparently they were shooting at the girl. Paul counted three seconds, then gunned the engine again. If she hadn't climbed aboard, it was just tough luck, he thought grimly. He shouldn't have tried to save her anyway. But continued shooting told him that she had managed to get inside. The trailer was heaped with clothing, and he trusted the mound of material to halt the barrage of bullets. He heard the explosion of a blowout as he swung around the next corner, and the trailer lurched dangerously. It swayed from side to side as he gathered speed down the wide and trafficless avenue. But the truck had double wheels, and soon the dangerous lurching ceased.

He roared on through the metropolitan area, staying on the same street and gathering speed. An occasional scrounger or cyclist stopped to stare, but they seemed too surprised to act. And they could not have known what had transpired a few blocks away.

Paul could not stop to see if he had a passenger, or if she was still alive. She was more dangerous than the gunmen. Any gratitude she might feel toward her rescuer would be quickly buried beneath her craving to spread the disease. He wished fervently that he had let the patrolmen kill her. Now he was faced with the problem of getting rid of her. He noticed, however, that mirrors were mounted on both sides of the cab. If he stopped the truck, and if she climbed out, he could see, and move away again before she had a chance to approach him. But he decided to wait until they were out of the city.

Soon he saw a highway marker, then a sign that said "Galveston—58 miles." He bore ahead, thinking that perhaps the island-city would provide good scrounging, without the regimentation of Doctor Georgelle's efficient system with its plans for "glorious recovery."

Twenty miles beyond the city limits, he stopped the truck, let the engine idle, and waited for his passenger to climb out. He locked the doors and laid a jack-handle across the seat as an added precaution. Nothing happened. He rolled down the window and shouted toward the rear.

"All passengers off the bus! Last stop! Everybody out!"

Still the girl did not appear. Then he heard something—a light tap from the trailer, and a murmur . . . or a moan. She was there all right. He called again, but she made no response. It was nearly dark outside.

At last he seized the jack-handle, opened the door, and stepped out of the cab. Wary of a trick, he skirted wide around the trailer and approached it from the rear. One door was closed, while the other swung free. He stopped a few yards away and peered inside. At first he saw nothing.

"Get out, but keep away or I'll kill you."

Then he saw her move. She was sitting on the floor, leaning back against a heap of clothing, a dozen feet from the entrance. He stepped forward cautiously and flung open the other door. She turned her head to look at him peculiarly, but said nothing. He could see that she had donned some of the clothing, but one trouser-leg was rolled up, and she had tied a rag tightly about her ankle.

"Are you hurt?"

She nodded. "Bullet . . ." She rolled her head dizzily and moaned.

Paul went back to the cab to search for a first aid kit. He found one, together with a flashlight and spare batteries in the glove compartment. He made certain that the cells were not corroded and that the light would burn feebly. Then he returned to the trailer, chiding himself for a prize fool. A sensible human would haul the dermie out at the end of a towing chain and leave her sitting by the side of the road.

"If you try to touch me, I'll brain you!" he warned, as he clambered into the trailer.

She looked up again. "Would you feel . . . like enjoying anything . . . if you were bleeding like this?" she muttered weakly. The flashlight beam caught the glitter of pain in her eyes, and accentuated the pallor of her small face. She was a pretty girl—scarcely older than twenty—but Paul was in no mood to appreciate pretty women, especially dermies.

"So that's how you think of it, eh? Enjoying yourself!"

She said nothing. She dropped her forehead against her knee and rolled it slowly.

"Where are you hit? Just the foot?"

"Ankle . . ."

"All right, take the rag off. Let's see."

"The wound's in back."

"All right, lie down on your stomach, and keep your hands under your head."

She stretched out weakly, and he shone the light over her leg, to make certain its skin was clear of neuroderm. Then he looked at the ankle, and said nothing for a time. The bullet had missed the joint, but had neatly severed the Achilles' tendon just above the heel.

"You're a plucky kid," he grunted, wondering how she had endured the self-torture of getting the shoe off and clothing herself.

"It was cold back here—without clothes," she muttered.

Paul opened the first aid packet and found an envelope of sulfa powder. Without touching her, he emptied it into the wound, which was beginning to bleed again. There was nothing else he could do. The tendon had pulled apart and would require surgical stitching to bring it together until it could heal. Such attention was out of the question.

She broke the silence. "I . . . I'm going to be crippled, aren't I?"

"Oh, not crippled," he heard himself telling her. "If we can get you to a doctor, anyway. Tendons can be sutured with wire. He'll probably put your foot in a cast, and you might get a stiff ankle from it."

She lay breathing quietly, denying his hopeful words by her silence.

"Here!" he said. "Here's a gauze pad and some tape. Can you manage it yourself?"

She started to sit up. He placed the first aid pack beside her, and backed to the door. She fumbled in the kit, and whimpered while she taped the pad in place.

"There's a tourniquet in there, too. Use it if the bleeding's worse."

She looked up to watch his silhouette against the darkening evening sky. "Thanks . . . thanks a lot, mister. I'm grateful. I promise not to touch you. Not if you don't want me to."

Shivering, he moved back to the cab. Why did they always get that insane idea that they were doing their victims a favor by giving them the neural plague? *Not if you don't want me to.* He shuddered as he drove away. She felt that way now, while the pain robbed her of the craving, but later—unless he got rid of her quickly—she would come to feel that she owed it to him—as a favor. The disease perpetuated itself by arousing such strange delusions in its bearer. The micro-organisms' methods of survival were indeed highly specialized. Paul felt certain that such animalicules had not evolved on Earth.

A light gleamed here and there along the Alvin-Galveston highway—oil lamps, shining from lonely cottages whose occupants had not felt the pressing urgency of the crowded city. But he had no doubt that to approach one of the farmhouses would bring a rifle bullet as a welcome. Where could he find help for the girl? No one would touch her but another dermie. Perhaps he could unhitch the trailer and leave her in downtown Galveston, with a sign hung on the back—"Wounded dermie inside." The plague victims would care for their own—if they found her.

He chided himself again for worrying about her. Saving her life didn't make him responsible for her . . . did it?

After all, if she lived, and the leg healed, she would only prowl in search of healthy victims again. She would never be rid of the disease, nor would she ever die of it—so far as anyone knew. The death rate was high among dermies, but the cause was usually a bullet.

Paul passed a fork in the highway and knew that the bridge was just ahead. Beyond the channel lay Galveston Island, once brightly lit and laughing in its role as sea-side resort—now immersed in darkness. The wind whipped at the truck from the southwest as the road led up onto the wide causeway. A faint glow in the east spoke of a moon about to rise. He saw the wide structure of the drawbridge just ahead.

Suddenly he clutched at the wheel, smashed furiously down on the brake, and tugged the emergency back. The tires howled ahead on the smooth concrete, and the force threw him forward over the wheel. Dusty water swirled far below where the upward folding gates of the drawbridge had once been. He skidded to a stop ten feet from the end. When he climbed out, the girl was calling weakly from the trailer, but he walked to the edge and looked over. Someone had done a job with dynamite.

Why, he wondered. To keep islanders on the island, or to keep mainlanders off? Had another Doctor Georgelle started his own small nation in Galveston? It seemed more likely that the lower island dwellers had done the demolition.

He looked back at the truck. An experienced truckster might be able to swing it around all right, but Paul was doubtful. Nevertheless, he climbed back in the cab and tried it. Half an hour later he was hopelessly jammed, with the trailer twisted aside and the cab wedged near the sheer drop to the water. He gave it up and went back to inspect his infected cargo.

She was asleep, but moaning faintly. He prodded her awake with the jack-handle. "Can you crawl, kid? If you can, come back to the door."

She nodded, and began dragging herself toward the flashlight. She clenched her lip between her teeth to keep from whimpering, but her breath came as a voiced murmur . . . nnnng . . . nnnng . . .

She sagged weakly when she reached the entrance, and

for a moment he thought she had fainted. Then she looked up. "What next, skipper?" she panted.

"I . . . I don't know. Can you let yourself down to the pavement?"

She glanced over the edge and shook her head. "With a rope, maybe. There's one back there someplace. If you're scared of me, I'll try to crawl and get it."

"Hands to yourself?" he asked suspiciously; then he thanked the darkness for hiding the heat of shame that crawled to his face.

"I won't . . ."

He scrambled into the trailer quickly and brought back the rope. "I'll climb up on top and let it down in front of you. Grab hold and let yourself down."

A few minutes later she was sitting on the concrete causeway looking at the wrecked draw. "Oh!" she muttered as he scrambled down from atop the trailer. "I thought you just wanted to dump me here. We're stuck, huh?"

"Yeah! We might swim it, but doubt if you could make it."

"I'd try . . ." She paused, cocking her head slightly. "There's a boat moored under the bridge. Right over there."

"What makes you think so?"

"Water lapping against wood. Listen." Then she shook her head. "I forgot. You're not hyper."

"I'm not what?" Paul listened. The water sounds seemed homogeneous.

"Hyperacute. Sharp senses. You know, it's one of the symptoms."

He nodded, remembering vaguely that he'd heard something to that effect—but he'd chalked it up as hallucinatory phenomenon. He walked to the rail and shone his light toward the water. The boat was there—tugging its rope taut from the mooring as the tide swirled about it. The bottom was still fairly dry, indicating that a recent rower had crossed from the island to the mainland.

"Think you can hold onto the rope if I let you down?" he called.

She gave him a quick glance, then picked up the end she had previously touched and tied a loop about her

waist. She began crawling toward the rail. Paul fought down a crazy urge to pick her up and carry her; plague be damned. But he had already left himself dangerously open to contagion. Still, he felt the drumming charges of conscience . . . *depart from me, ye accursed, for I was sick and you visited me not . . .*

He turned quickly away, and began knotting the end of the rope about the rail. He reminded himself that any sane person would desert her at once, and swim on to safety. Yet, he could not. In the oversized clothing she looked like a child, hurt and helpless. Paul knew the demanding arrogance that could possess the wounded—*help me, you've got to help me, you damn merciless bastard! . . . No, don't touch me there, damn you!* Too many times, he had heard the sick curse the physician, and the injured curse the rescuer. Blind aggression, trying to strike back at pain.

But the girl made no complaint except the involuntary hurt sounds. She asked nothing, and accepted his aid with a wide-eyed gratitude that left him weak. He thought that it would be easier to leave her if she would only beg, or plead, or demand.

"Can you start me swinging a little?" she called as he lowered her toward the water.

Paul's eyes probed the darkness below, trying to sort the shadows, to make certain which was the boat. He used both hands to feed out the rope, and the light laid on the rail only seemed to blind him. She began swinging herself pendulum-wise somewhere beneath him.

"When I say 'ready,' let me go!" she shrielled.

"You're not going to drop!"

"Have to! Boat's out further. Got to swing for it. I can't swim, really."

"But you'll hurt your—"

"Ready!"

Paul still clung to the rope. "I'll let you down into the water and you can hang onto the rope. I'll dive, and then pull you into the boat."

"Uh-uh! You'd have to touch me. You don't want that, do you? Just a second now . . . one more swing . . . ready!"

He let the rope go. With a clatter and a thud, she hit

the boat. Three sharp cries of pain clawed at him. Then—muffled sobbing.

“Are you all right?”

Sobs. She seemed not to hear him.

“Jeezis!” He sprinted for the brink of the drawbridge and dived out over the deep channel. How far . . . down . . . down. . . . Icy water stung his body with sharp whips, then opened to embrace him. He fought to the surface and swam toward the dark shadow of the boat. The sobbing had subsided. He grasped the prow and hauled himself dripping from the channel. She was lying curled in the bottom of the boat.

“Kid . . . you all right, kid?”

“Sorry . . . I’m such a baby,” she gasped, and dragged herself back to the stern.

Paul found a paddle, but no oars. He cast off and began digging water toward the other side, but the tide tugged them relentlessly away from the bridge. He gave it up and paddled toward the distant shore. “You know anything about Galveston?” he called—mostly to reassure himself that she was not approaching him in the darkness with the death-gray hands.

“I used to come here for the summer, I know a little about it.”

Paul urged her to talk while he plowed toward the island. Her name was Willie, and she insisted that it was for Willow, not for Wilhelmina. She came from Dallas, and claimed she was a salesman’s daughter who was done in by a traveling farmer. The farmer, she explained, was just a wandering dermie who had caught her napping by the roadside. He had stroked her arms until she awoke, then had run away, howling with glee.

“That was three weeks ago,” she said. “If I’d had a gun, I’d have dropped him. Of course, I know better now.”

Paul shuddered and paddled on. “Why did you head south?”

“I was coming here.”

“Here? To Galveston?”

“Uh-huh. I heard someone say that a lot of nuns were coming to the island. I thought maybe they’d take me in.”

The moon was high over the lightless city, and the tide had swept the small boat far east from the bridge by the time Paul’s paddle dug into the mud beneath the shallow

water. He bounded out and dragged the boat through thin marsh grass onto the shore. Fifty yards away, a ramshackle fishing cottage lay sleeping in the moonlight.

"Stay here, Willie," he grunted. "I'll find a couple of boards or something for crutches."

He rummaged about through a shed behind the cottage and brought back a wheelbarrow. Moaning and laughing at once, she struggled into it, and he wheeled her to the house, humming a verse of *Rickshaw Boy*.

"You're a funny guy, Paul. I'm sorry . . ." She jiggled her tousled head in the moonlight, as if she disapproved of her own words.

Paul tried the cottage door, kicked it open, then walked the wheelbarrow up three steps and into a musty room. He struck a match, found an oil lamp with a little kerosene, and lit it. Willie caught her breath.

He looked around. "Company," he grunted.

The company sat in a fragile rocker with a shawl about her shoulders and a shotgun between her knees. She had been dead at least a month. The charge of buckshot had sieved the ceiling and spattered it with bits of gray hair and brown blood.

"Stay here," he told the girl tonelessly. "I'll try to get a dermie somewhere—one who knows how to sew a tendon. Got any ideas?"

She was staring with a sick face at the old woman. "Here? With—"

"She won't bother you," he said as he gently disentangled the gun from the corpse. He moved to a cupboard and found a box of shells behind an orange teapot. "I may not be back, but I'll send somebody."

She buried her face in her plague-stained hands, and he stood for a moment watching her shoulders shiver. "Don't worry . . . I will send somebody." He stepped to the porcelain sink and pocketed a wafer-thin sliver of dry soap.

"What's that for?" she muttered, looking up again.

He thought of a lie, then checked it. "To wash you off of me," he said truthfully. "I might have got too close. Soap won't do much good, but I'll feel better." He looked at the corpse coolly. "Didn't do her much good. Buckshot's the best antiseptic all right."

Willie moaned as he went out the door. He heard her

crying as he walked down to the waterfront. She was still crying when he waded back to shore, after a thorough scrubbing. He was sorry he'd spoken cruelly, but it was such a damned relief to get rid of her . . .

With the shotgun cradled on his arm, he began putting distance between himself and the sobbing. But the sound worried his ears, even after he realized that he was no longer hearing her.

He strode a short distance inland past scattered fishing shanties, then took the highway toward the city whose outskirts he was entering. It would be at least an hour's trek to the end of the island where he would be most likely to encounter someone with medical training. The hospitals were down there, the medical school, the most likely place for any charitable nuns—if Willie's rumor were true. Paul meant to capture a dermle doctor or nurse and force the amorous-handed maniac at gun-point to go to Willie's aid. Then he would be done with her. When she stopped hurting, she would start craving—and he had no doubt that he would be the object of her manual affections.

The bay was wind-chopped in the moonglow, no longer glittering from the lights along 61st Street. The oleanders along Broadway were choked up with weeds. Cats or rabbits rustled in the tousled growth that had been a carefully tended parkway.

Paul wondered why the plague had chosen Man, and not the lower animals. It was true that an occasional dog or cow was seen with the plague, but the focus was upon humanity. And the craving to spread the disease was Man-directed, even in animals. It was as if the neural entity deliberately sought out the species with the most complex nervous system. Was its onslaught really connected with the meteorite swarm? Paul believed that it was.

In the first place, the meteorites had not been predicted. They were not a part of the regular cosmic bombardment. And then there was the strange report that they were *manufactured* projectiles, teeming with frozen micro-organisms which came alive upon thawing. In these days of tumult and confusion, however, it was hard. Nevertheless Paul believed it. Neuroderm had no first cousins among Earth diseases.

What manner of beings, then, had sent such a curse? Potential invaders? If so, they were slow in coming. One thing was generally agreed upon by the scientists: the missiles had not been "sent" from another solar planet. Their direction upon entering the atmosphere was wrong. They could conceivably have been fired from an interplanetary launching ship, but their velocity was about equal to the theoretical velocity which a body would obtain in falling sunward from the near-infinite distance. This seemed to hint the projectiles had come from another star.

Paul was startled suddenly by the flare of a match from the shadow of a building. He stopped dead still in the street. A man was leaning against the wall to light a cigarette. He flicked the match out, and Paul watched the cigarette-glow make an arc as the man waved at him.

"Nice night, isn't it?" said the voice from the darkness.

Paul stood exposed in the moonlight, carrying the shotgun at the ready. The voice sounded like that of an adolescent, not fully changed to its adult timbre. If the youth wasn't a dermie, why wasn't he afraid that Paul might be one? And if he was a dermie, why wasn't he advancing in the hope that Paul might be as yet untouched?

"I said, 'Nice night, isn't it?' Whatcha carrying the gun for? Been shooting rabbits?"

Paul moved a little closer and fumbled for his flashlight. Then he threw its beam on the slouching figure in the shadows. He saw a young man, perhaps sixteen, reclining against the wall. He saw the pearl-gray face that characterized the final and permanent stage of neuroderm! He stood frozen to the spot a dozen feet away from the youth, who blinked perplexedly into the light. The kid was assuming automatically that he was another dermie! Paul tried to keep him blinded while he played along with the fallacy.

"Yeah, it's a nice night. You got any idea where I can find a doctor?"

The boy frowned. "Doctor? You mean you don't know?"

"Know what? I'm new here."

"New? Oh . . ." the boy's nostrils began twitching slightly, as if he were sniffing at the night air. "Well, most of the priests down at Saint Mary's were missionaries. They're all doctors. Why? You sick?"

"No, there's a girl . . . But never mind. How do I get there? And are any of them dermies?"

The boy's eyes wandered peculiarly, and his mouth fell open, as if he had been asked why a circle wasn't square. "You are new, aren't you? They're all dermies, if you want to call them that. Wh—" Again the nostrils were flaring. He flicked the cigarette away suddenly and inhaled a slow draught of the breeze. "I . . . I smell a non-hyper," he muttered.

Paul started to back away. His scalp bristled a warning. The boy advanced a step toward him. A slow beam of anticipation began to glow in his face. He bared his teeth in a wide grain of pleasure.

"You're not a hyper yet," he hissed, moving forward. "I've never had a chance to touch a nonhyper . . ."

"Stay back, or I'll kill you!"

The lad giggled and came on, talking to himself. "The padre says it's wrong, but . . . you smell so . . . so . . . ugh . . ." He flung himself forward with a low throaty cry.

Paul sidestepped the charge and brought the gun barrel down across the boy's head. The dermie sprawled howling in the street. Paul pushed the gun close to his face, but the youth started up again. Paul jabbed viciously with the barrel, and felt it strike and tear. "I don't want to have to blow your head off—"

The boy howled and fell back. He crouched panting on his hands and knees, head hung low, watching a dark puddle of blood gather on the pavement from a deep gash across his cheek. "Whatcha wanta do that for?" he whimpered. "I wasn't gonna hurt you." His tone was that of a wronged and rejected suitor.

"Now, where's Saint Mary's? Is that one of the hospitals? How do I get there?" Paul had backed to a safe distance and was covering the youth with the gun.

"Straight down Broadway . . . to the Boulevard . . . you'll see it down that neighborhood. About the fourth street, I think." The boy looked up, and Paul saw the extent of the gash. It was deep and ragged, and the kid was crying.

"Get up! You're going to lead me there."

Pain had blanketed the call of the craving. The boy struggled to his feet, pressed a handkerchief against the

wound, and with an angry glance at Paul, he set out down the road. Paul followed ten yards behind.

"If you take me through any dermie traps, I'll kill you."

"There aren't any traps," the youth mumbled.

Paul snorted unbelief, but did not repeat the warning. "What made you think I was another dermie?" he snapped.

"Because there's no nonhypers in Galveston. This is a hyper colony. A nonhyper used to drift in occasionally, but the priests had the bridge dynamited. The nonhypers upset the colony. As long as there aren't any around to smell, nobody causes any trouble. During the day, there's a guard out on the causeway, and if any hypers come looking for a place to stay, the guard ferries them across. If nonhypers come, he tells them about the colony, and they go away."

Paul groaned. He had stumbled into a rat's nest. Was there no refuge from the gray curse? Now he would have to move on. It seemed a hopeless quest. Maybe the old man he met on his way to Houston had arrived at the only possible hope for peace: submission to the plague. But the thought sickened him somehow. He would have to find some barren island, find a healthy mate, and go to live a savage existence apart from all traces of civilization.

"Didn't the guard stop you at the bridge?" the boy asked. "He never came back today. He must be still out there."

Paul grunted "no" in a tone that warned against idle conversation. He guessed what had happened. The dermie guard had probably spotted some healthy wanderers; and instead of warning them away, he rowed across the drawbridge and set out to chase them. His body probably lay along the highway somewhere, if the hypothetical wanderers were armed.

When they reached 23rd Street, a few blocks from the heart of the city, Paul hissed at the boy to stop. He heard someone laugh. Footsteps were wandering along the sidewalk, overhung by trees. He whispered to the boy to take refuge behind a hedge. They crouched in the shadows several yards apart while the voices drew nearer.

"Brother James had a nice tenor," someone said softly. "But he sings his Latin with a western drawl. It sounds . . . well . . . peculiar, to say the least. Brother John

is a stickler for pronunciation. He won't let Fra James solo. Says it gives a burlesque effect to the choir. Says it makes the sisters giggle."

The other man chuckled quietly and started to reply. But his voice broke off suddenly. The footsteps stopped a dozen feet from Paul's hiding place. Paul, peering through the hedge, saw a pair of brown-robed monks standing on the sidewalk. They were looking around suspiciously.

"Brother Thomas, do you smell—"

"Aye, I smell it."

Paul changed his position slightly, so as to keep the gun pointed toward the pair of plague-stricken monastics. They stood in embarrassed silence, peering into the darkness, and shuffling their feet uneasily. One of them suddenly pinched his nose between thumb and forefinger. His companion followed suit.

"Blessed be God," quavered one.

"Blessed be His Holy Name," answered the other.

"Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true Man."

"Blessed be . . ."

Gathering their robes high about their shins, the two monks turned and scurried away, muttering the Litany of the Divine Praises as they went. Paul stood up and stared after them in amazement. The sight of dermies running from a potential victim was almost beyond belief. He questioned his young guide. Still holding the handkerchief against his bleeding face, the boy hung his head.

"Bishop made a ruling against touching nonhypers," he explained miserably. "Says it's a sin, unless the non-hyper submits of his own free will. Says even then it's wrong, except in the ordinary ways that people come in contact with each other. Calls it fleshly desire, and all that."

"Then why did you try to do it?"

"I ain't so religious."

"Well, sonny, you better get religious until we come to the hospital. Now, let's go."

They marched on down Broadway encountering no other pedestrians. Twenty minutes later, they were standing in the shadows before a hulking brick building, some of whose windows were yellow with lamplight. Moonlight bathed the statue of a woman standing on a ledge over

the entrance, indicating to Paul that this was the hospital.

"All right, boy. You go in and send out a dermie doctor. Tell him somebody wants to see him, but if you say I'm not a dermie, I'll come in and kill you. Now move. And don't come back. Stay to get your face fixed."

The youth stumbled toward the entrance. Paul sat in the shadow of a tree, where he could see twenty yards in all directions and guard himself against approach. Soon a black-clad priest came out of the emergency entrance, stopped on the sidewalk, and glanced around.

"Over here!" Paul hissed from across the street.

The priest advanced uncertainly. In the center of the road he stopped again, and held his nose. "Y-you're a nonhyper," he said, almost accusingly.

"That's right, and I've got a gun, so don't try anything."

"What's wrong? Are you sick? The lad said—"

"There's a dermie girl down the island. She's been shot. Tendon behind her heel is cut clean through. You're going to help her."

"Of course, but . . ." The priest paused. "You? A non-hyper? Helping a so-called dermie?" His voice went high with amazement.

"So I'm a sucker!" Paul barked. "Now get what you need, and come on."

"The Lord bless you," the priest mumbled in embarrassment as he hurried away.

"Don't sic any of your maniacs on me!" Paul called after him. "I'm armed."

"I'll have to bring a surgeon," the cleric said over his shoulder.

Five minutes later, Paul heard the muffled grunt of a starter. Then an engine coughed to life. Startled, he scurried away from the tree and sought safety in a clump of shrubs. An ambulance backed out of the driveway and into the street. It parked at the curb by the tree, engine running. A pallid face glanced out curiously toward the shadows. "Where are you?" it called, but it was not the priest's voice.

Paul stood up and advanced a few steps.

"We'll have to wait on Father Mendelhaus," the driver called. "He'll be a few minutes."

"You a dermie?"

"Of course. But don't worry. I've plugged my nose and I'm wearing rubber gloves. I can't smell you. The sight of a nonhyper arouses some craving, of course. But it can be overcome with a little will power. I won't infect you, although I don't understand why you nonhypers fight so hard. You're bound to catch it sooner or later. And the world can't get back to normal until everybody has it."

Paul avoided the startling thought. "You the surgeon?"

"Uh, yes. Father Williamson's the name. I'm not really a specialist, but I did some surgery in Korea. How's the girl's condition? Suffering shock?"

"I wouldn't know."

They fell silent until Father Mendelhaus returned. He came across the street carrying a bag in one hand and a brown bottle in the other. He held the bottle by the neck with a pair of tongs and Paul could see the exterior of the bottle steaming slightly as the priest passed through the beam of the ambulance's headlights. He placed the flask on the curb without touching it, then spoke to the man in the shadows.

"Would you step behind the hedge and disrobe, young man? Then rub yourself thoroughly with this oil."

"I doubt it," Paul snapped. "What is it?"

"Don't worry, it's been in the sterilizer. That's what took me so long. It may be a little hot for you, however. It's only an antiseptic and deodorant. It'll kill your odor, and it'll also give you some protection against picking up stray micro-organisms."

After a few moments of anxious hesitation, Paul decided to trust the priest. He carried the hot flask into the brush, undressed, and bathed himself with the warm aromatic oil. Then he slipped back into his clothes and reapproached the ambulance.

"Ride in back," Mendelhaus told him. "And you won't be infected. No one's been in there for several weeks, and as you probably know, the micro-organisms die after a few hours exposure. They have to be transmitted from skin to skin, or else an object has to be handled very soon after a hyper has touched it."

Paul warily climbed inside. Mendelhaus opened a slide

and spoke through it from the front seat. "You'll have to show us the way."

"Straight out Broadway. Say, where did you get the gasoline for this wagon?"

The priest paused. "That has been something of a secret. Oh well . . . I'll tell you. There's a tanker out in the harbor. The people left town too quickly to think of it. Automobiles are scarcer than fuel in Galveston. Up north, you find them stalled everywhere. But since Galveston didn't have any through-traffic, there were no cars running out of gas. The ones we have are the ones that were left in the repair shop. Something wrong with them. And we don't have any mechanics to fix them."

Paul neglected to mention that he was qualified for the job. The priest might get ideas. He fell into gloomy silence as the ambulance turned onto Broadway and headed down-island. He watched the back of the priests' heads, silhouetted against the headlighted pavement. They seemed not at all concerned about their disease. Mendelhaus was a slender man, with a blond crew cut and rather bushy eyebrows. He had a thin, aristocratic face—now plague-gray—but jovial enough. It might be the face of an ascetic, but for the quick blue eyes that seemed full of lively interest rather than inward-turning mysticism. Williamson, on the other hand, was a rather plain man, with a stolid tweedy look, despite his black cassock.

"What do you think of our plan here?" asked Father Mendelhaus.

"What plan?" Paul grunted.

"Oh, didn't the boy tell you? We're trying to make the island a refuge for hypers who are willing to sublimate their craving and turn their attentions toward reconstruction. We're also trying to make an objective study of this neural condition. We have some good scientific minds, too—Doctor Relmone of Fordham, Father Seyes of Notre Dame, two biologists from Boston College. . . ."

"Dermies trying to cure the plague?" Paul gasped.

Mendelhaus laughed merrily. "I didn't say cure it, son. I said 'study it.'"

"Why?"

"To learn how to live with it, of course. It's been pointed out by our philosophers that things become evil

only through human misuse. Morphine, for instance, is a product of the Creator; it is therefore good when properly used for relief of pain. When mistreated by an addict, it becomes a monster. We bear this in mind as we study neuroderm."

Paul snorted contemptuously. "Leprosy is evil, I suppose, because Man mistreated bacteria?"

The priest laughed again. "You've got me there. I'm no philosopher. But you can't compare neuroderm with leprosy."

Paul shuddered. "The hell I can't! It's worse."

"Ah? Suppose you tell me what makes it worse? List the symptoms for me."

Paul hesitated, listing them mentally. They were: discoloration of the skin, low fever, hallucinations, and the insane craving to infect others. They seemed bad enough, so he listed them orally. "Of course, people don't die of it," he added. "But which is worse, insanity or death?"

The priest turned to smile back at him through the porthole. "Would you call me insane? It's true that victims have frequently lost their minds. But that's not a direct result of neuroderm. Tell me, how would you feel if everyone screamed and ran when they saw you coming, or hunted you down like a criminal? How long would your sanity last?"

Paul said nothing. Perhaps the anathema was a contributing factor. . . .

"Unless you were of very sound mind to begin with, you probably couldn't endure it."

"But the craving . . . and the hallucinations . . ."

"True," murmured the priest thoughtfully. "The hallucinations. Tell me something else, if all the world was blind save one man, wouldn't the world be inclined to call that man's sight a hallucination? And the man with eyes might even come to agree with the world."

Again Paul was silent. There was no arguing with Mendelhaus, who probably suffered the strange delusions and thought them real.

"And the craving," the priest went on. "It's true that the craving can be a rather unpleasant symptom. It's the condition's way of perpetuating itself. Although we're not certain how it works, it seems able to stimulate erotic sensations in the hands. We do know the micro-organisms

get to the brain, but we're not yet sure what they do there."

"What facts have you discovered?" Paul asked cautiously.

Mendelhaus grinned at him. "Tut! I'm not going to tell you, because I don't want to be called a 'crazy dermie.' You wouldn't believe me, you see."

Paul glanced outside and saw that they were approaching the vicinity of the fishing cottage. He pointed out the lamplit window to the driver, and the ambulance turned onto a side road. Soon they were parked behind the shanty. The priests scrambled out and carried the stretcher toward the light, while Paul skulked to a safer distance and sat down in the grass to watch. When Willie was safe in the vehicle, he meant to walk back to the bridge, swim across the gap, and return to the mainland.

Soon Mendelhaus came out and walked toward him with a solemn stride, although Paul was sitting quietly in the deepest shadow—invisible, he had thought. He arose quickly as the priest approached. Anxiety tightened his throat. "Is she . . . is Willie . . . ?"

"She's irrational," Mendelhaus murmured sadly. "Almost . . . less than sane. Some of it may be due to high fever, but . . ."

"Yes?"

"She tried to kill herself. With a knife. Said something about buckshot being the best way, or something . . ."

"Jeezis! Jeezis!" Paul sank weakly in the grass and covered his face with his hands.

"Blessed be His Holy Name," murmured the priest by way of turning the oath aside. "She didn't hurt herself badly, though. Wrist's cut a little. She was too weak to do a real job of it. Father Will's giving her a hypo and a tetanus shot and some sulfa. We're out of penicillin."

He stopped speaking and watched Paul's wretchedness for a moment. "You love the girl, don't you?"

Paul stiffened. "Are you crazy? Love a little tramp dermie? Jeezis . . ."

"Blessed be—"

"Listen! Will she be all right? I'm getting out of here!" He climbed unsteadily to his feet.

"I don't know, son. Infection's the real threat, and shock. If we'd got to her sooner, she'd have been safer."

And if she was in the ultimate stage of neuroderm, it would help."

"Why?"

"Oh, various reasons. You'll learn, someday. But listen, you look exhausted. Why don't you come back to the hospital with us? The third floor is entirely vacant. There's no danger of infection up there, and we keep a sterile room ready just in case we get a nonhyper case. You can lock the door inside, if you want to, but it wouldn't be necessary. Nuns are on the floor below. Our male staff lives in the basement. There aren't any laymen in the building. I'll guarantee that you won't be bothered."

"No, I've got to go," he growled, then softened his voice: "I appreciate it though, Father."

"Whatever you wish. I'm sorry, though. You might be able to provide yourself with some kind of transportation if you waited."

"Uh-uh! I don't mind telling you, your island makes me jumpy."

"Why?"

Paul glanced at the priest's gray hands. "Well . . . you still feel the craving, don't you?"

Mendelhaus touched his nose. "Cotton plugs, with a little camphor. I can't smell you." He hesitated. "No, I won't lie to you. The urge to touch is still there to some extent."

"And in a moment of weakness, somebody might—"

The priest straightened his shoulders. His eyes went chilly. "I have taken certain vows, young man. Sometimes when I see a beautiful woman, I feel desire. When I see a man eating a thick steak on a fast-day, I feel envy and hunger. When I see a doctor earning large fees, I chafe under the vow of poverty. But by denying desire's demands, one learns to make desire useful in other ways. Sublimation, some call it. A priest can use it and do more useful work thereby. I am a priest."

He nodded curtly, turned on his heel and strode away. Halfway to the cottage, he paused. "She's calling for someone named Paul. Know who it might be? Family perhaps?"

Paul stood speechless. The priest shrugged and continued toward the lighted doorway.

"Father, wait . . ."

"Yes?"

"I—I am a little tired. The room . . . I mean, will you show me where to get transportation tomorrow?"

"Certainly."

Before midnight, the party had returned to the hospital. Paul lay on a comfortable mattress for the first time in weeks, sleepless, and staring at the moonlight on the sill. Somewhere downstairs, Willie was lying unconscious in an operating room, while the surgeon tried to repair the torn tendon. Paul had ridden back with them in the ambulance, sitting a few feet from the stretcher, avoiding her sometimes wandering arms, and listening to her delirious moaning.

Now he felt his skin crawling with belated hypochondria. What a fool he had been—touching the rope, the boat, the wheelbarrow, riding in the ambulance. There were a thousand ways he could have picked up a few stray micro-organisms lingering from a dermie's touch. And now, he lay here in this nest of disease. . . .

But strange—it was the most peaceful, the sanest place he'd seen in months. The religious orders simply accepted the plague—with masochistic complacency perhaps—but calmly. A cross, or a penance, or something. But no, they seemed to accept it almost gladly. Nothing peculiar about that. All dermies went wild-eyed with happiness about the "lovely desire" they possessed. The priests weren't wild-eyed.

Neither was normal man equipped with socially-shaped sexual desire. Sublimation?

"Peace," he muttered, and went to sleep.

A knocking at the door awoke him at dawn. He grunted at it disgustedly and sat up in bed. The door, which he had forgotten to lock, swung open. A chubby nun with a breakfast tray started into the room. She saw his face, then stopped. She closed her eyes, wrinkled her nose, and framed a silent prayer with her lips. Then she backed slowly out.

"I'm sorry, sir!" she quavered through the door. "I—I knew there was a patient in here, but I didn't know . . . you weren't a hyper. Forgive me."

He heard her scurrying away down the hall. Somehow, he began to feel safe. But wasn't that exactly what they wanted him to feel! He realized suddenly that he was trapped. He had left the shotgun in the emergency room. What was he—guest or captive? Months of fleeing from the gray terror had left him suspicious.

Soon he would find out. He arose and began dressing. Before he finished, Mendelhaus came. He did not enter, but stood in the hallway beyond the door. He smiled a faint greeting, and said, "So you're Paul?"

He felt heat rising in his face. "She's awake, then?" he asked gruffly.

The priest nodded. "Want to see her?"

"No, I've got to be going."

"It would do her good."

He coughed angrily. Why did the black-cassocked dermie have to put it that way? "Well it wouldn't do me any good!" he snarled. "I've been around too many gray-leather hides already!"

Mendelhaus shrugged, but his eyes bore a hint of contempt. "As you wish. You may leave by the outside stairway—to avoid disturbing the sisters."

"To avoid being touched, you mean!"

"No one will touch you."

Paul finished dressing in silence. The reversal of attitudes disturbed him. He resented the seeming "tolerance" that was being extended him. It was like asylum inmates being "tolerant" of the psychiatrist.

"I'm ready!" he growled.

Mendelhaus led him down the corridor and out onto a sunlit balcony. They descended a stone stairway while the priest talked over his shoulder.

"She's still not fully rational, and there's some fever. It wouldn't be anything to worry about two years ago, but now we're out of most of the latest drugs. If sulfa won't hold the infection, we'll have to amputate, of course. We should know in two or three days."

He paused and looked back at Paul, who had stopped on the stairway. "Coming?"

"Where is she?" Paul asked weakly. "I'll see her."

The priest frowned. "You don't have to, son. I'm sorry if I implied any obligation on your part. Really, you've

done enough. I gather that you saved her life. Very few nonhypers would do a thing like that. I—”

“Where is she?” he snapped angrily.

The priest nodded. “Downstairs. Come on.”

As they re-entered the building on the ground floor, the priest cupped his hands to his mouth and called out, “Nonhyper coming! Plug your noses, or get out of the way! Avoid circumstances of temptation!”

When they moved along the corridor, it was Paul who felt like the leper. Mendelhaus led him into the third room.

Willie saw him enter and hid her gray hands beneath the sheet. She smiled faintly, tried to sit up, and failed. Williamson and a nun-nurse who had both been standing by the bedside turned to leave the room. Mendelhaus followed them out and closed the door.

There was a long, painful pause. Willie tried to grin. He shuffled his feet.

“They’ve got me in a cast,” she said conversationally.

“You’ll be all right,” he said hastily. “It won’t be long before you’ll be up. Galveston’s a good place for you. They’re all dermies here.”

She clenched her eyes tightly shut. “God! God! I hope I never hear that word again. After last night . . . that old woman in the rocking chair . . . I stayed there all alone . . . and the wind’d start the chair rocking. Ooh!” She looked at him with abnormally bright eyes. “I’d rather die than touch anybody now . . . after seeing that. Somebody touched her, didn’t they, Paul? That’s why she did it, wasn’t it?”

He squirmed and backed toward the door. “Willie . . . I’m sorry for what I said. I mean—”

“Don’t worry, Paul! I wouldn’t touch you now.” She clenched her hands and brought them up before her face, to stare at them with glittering hate. “I loathe myself!” she hissed.

What was it Mendelhaus had said, about the dermie going insane because of being an outcast rather than because of the plague? But she wouldn’t be an outcast here. Only among nonhypers, like himself . . .

“Get well quick, Willie,” he muttered, then hurriedly slipped out into the corridor. She called his name twice, then fell silent.

"That was quick," murmured Mendelhaus, glancing at his pale face.

"Where can I get a car?"

The priest rubbed his chin. "I was just speaking to Brother Matthew about that. Uh . . . how would you like to have a small yacht instead?"

Paul caught his breath. A yacht would mean access to the seas, and to an island. A yacht was the perfect solution. He stammered gratefully.

"Good," said Mendelhaus. "There's a small craft in dry dock down at the basin. It was apparently left there because there weren't any dock crews around to get her afloat again. I took the liberty of asking Brother Matthew to find some men and get her in the water."

"Dermies?"

"Of course. The boat will be fumigated, but it isn't really necessary. The infection dies out in a few hours. It'll take a while, of course, to get the boat ready. Tomorrow . . . next day, maybe. Bottom's cracked; it'll need some patching."

Paul's smile weakened. More delay. Two more days of living in the gray shadow. Was the priest really to be trusted? Why should he even provide the boat? The jaws of an invisible trap, slowly closing.

Mendelhaus saw his doubt. "If you'd rather leave now, you're free to do so. We're really not going to as much trouble as it might seem. There are several yachts at the dock; Brother Matthew's been preparing to clean one or two up for our own use. And we might as well let you have one. They've been deserted by their owners. And . . . well . . . you helped the girl when nobody else would have done so. Consider the boat as our way of returning the favor, eh?"

A yacht. The open sea. A semitropical island, uninhabited, on the brink of the Caribbean. And a woman, of course—chosen from among the many who would be willing to share such an escape. Peculiarly, he glanced at Willie's door. It was too bad about her. But she'd get along okay. The yacht . . . if he were only certain of Mendelhaus' intentions . . .

The priest began frowning at Paul's hesitation. "Well?"

"I don't want to put you to any trouble. . . ."

"Nonsense! You're still afraid of us! Very well, come

with me. There's someone I want you to see." Mendelhaus turned and started down the corridor.

Paul lingered. "Who . . . what—"

"Come on!" the priest snapped impatiently.

Reluctantly, Paul followed him to the stairway. They descended to a gloomy basement and entered a smelly laboratory through a double-door. Electric illumination startled him; then he heard the sound of a gasoline engine and knew that the power was generated locally.

"Germicidal lamps," murmured the priest, following his ceilingward gaze. "Some of them are. Don't worry about touching things. It's sterile in here."

"But it's not sterile for your convenience," growled an invisible voice. "And it won't be sterile at all if you don't stay out! Beat it, preacher!"

Paul looked for the source of the voice, and saw a small, short-necked man bending his shaggy gray head over a microscope at the other end of the lab. He had spoken without glancing up at his visitors.

"This is Doctor Seevers, of Princeton, son," said the priest, unruffled by the scientist's ire. "Claims he's an atheist, but personally I think he's a puritan. Doctor, this is the young man I was telling you about. Will you tell him what you know about neuroderm?"

Seevers jotted something on a pad, but kept his eye to the instrument. "Why don't we just give it to him, and let him find out for himself?" the scientist grumbled sadistically.

"Don't frighten him, you heretic! I brought him here to be illuminated."

"Illuminate him yourself. I'm busy. And stop calling me names. I'm not an atheist; I'm a biochemist."

"Yesterday you were a biophysicist. Now, entertain my young man." Mendelhaus blocked the doorway with his body. Paul, with his jaw clenched angrily, had turned to leave.

"That's all I can do, preacher," Seevers grunted. "Entertain him. I know nothing. Absolutely nothing. I have some observed data. I have noticed some correlations. I have seen things happen. I have traced the patterns of the happenings and found some probable common denominators. And that is all! I admit it. Why don't you preachers admit it in your racket?"

"Seevers, as you can see, is inordinately proud of his humility—if that's not a paradox," the priest said to Paul.

"Now, Doctor, this young man—"

Seevers heaved a resigned sigh. His voice went sour-sweet. "All right, sit down, young man. I'll entertain you as soon as I get through counting free nerve-endings in this piece of skin."

Mendelhaus winked at his guest. "Seevers calls it masochism when we observe a fast-day or do penance. And there he sits, ripping off patches of his own hide to look at through his peeping glass. Masochism—heh!"

"Get out, preacher!" the scientist bellowed.

Mendelhaus laughed mockingly, nodded Paul toward a chair, and left the lab. Paul sat uneasily watching the back of Seevers' lab jacket.

"Nice bunch of people really—these black-frocked yahoos," Seevers murmured conversationally. "If they'd just stop trying to convert me."

"Doctor Seevers, maybe I'd better—"

"Quiet! You bother me. And sit still, I can't stand to have people running in and out of here. You're in; now stay in."

Paul fell silent. He was uncertain whether or not Seevers was a dermie. The small man's lab jacket bunched up to hide the back of his neck, and the sleeves covered his arms. His hands were rubber-gloved, and a knot of white cord behind his head told Paul that he was wearing a gauze mask. His ears were bright pink, but their color was meaningless; it took several months for the gray coloring to seep to all areas of the skin. But Paul guessed he was a dermie—and wearing the gloves and mask to keep his equipment sterile.

He glanced idly around the large room. There were several glass cages of rats against the wall. They seemed airtight, with ducts for forced ventilation. About half the rats were afflicted with neuroderm in its various stages. A few wore shaved patches of skin where the disease had been freshly and forcibly inflicted. Paul caught the fleeting impression that several of the animals were staring at him fixedly. He shuddered and looked away.

He glanced casually at the usual maze of laboratory glassware, then turned his attention to a pair of hemis-

pheres, suspended like a trophy on the wall. He recognized them as the twin halves of one of the meteorites, with the small jelly-pocket in the center. Beyond it hung a large picture frame containing several typewritten sheets. Another frame held four pictures of bearded scientists from another century, obviously clipped from magazine or textbook. There was nothing spectacular about the lab. It smelled of clean dust and sour things. Just a small respectable workshop.

Seevers' chair creaked suddenly. "It checks," he said to himself. "It checks again. Forty per cent increase." He threw down the stub pencil and whirled suddenly. Paul saw a pudgy round face with glittering eyes. A dark splotch of neuroderm had crept up from the chin to split his mouth and cover one cheek and an eye, giving him the appearance of a black and white bulldog with a mixed color muzzle.

"It checks," he barked at Paul, then smirked contentedly.

"What checks?"

The scientist rolled up a sleeve to display a patch of adhesive tape on a portion of his arm which had been discolored by the disease. "Here," he grunted. "Two weeks ago this area was normal. I took a centimeter of skin from right next to this one, and counted the nerve endings. Since that time, the derm's crept down over the area. I took another square centimeter today, and recounted. Forty per cent increase."

Paul frowned with disbelief. It was generally known that neuroderm had a sensitizing effect, but new nerve endings . . . No. He didn't believe it.

"Third time I've checked it," Seevers said happily. "One place ran up to sixty-five per cent. Heh! Smart little bugs, aren't they? Inventing new somesthetic receptors that way!"

Paul swallowed with difficulty. "What did you say?" he gasped.

Seevers inspected him serenely. "So you're a non-hyper, are you? Yes, indeed, I can smell that you are. Vile, really. Can't understand why sensible hypers would want to paw you. But then, I've insured myself against such foolishness."

He said it so casually that Paul blinked before he caught the full impact of it. "Y-y-you've done what?"

"What I said. When I first caught it, I simply sat down with a velvet-tipped stylus and located the spots on my hands that gave rise to pleasurable sensations. Then I burned them out with an electric needle. There aren't many of them, really—one or two points per square centimeter." He tugged off his gloves and exhibited pick-marked palms to prove it. "I didn't want to be bothered with such silly urges. Waste of time, chasing nonhypers—for me it is. I never learned what it's like, so I've never missed it." He turned his hands over and stared at them. "Stubborn little critters keep growing new ones, and I keep burning them out."

Paul leaped to his feet. "Are you trying to tell me that the plague causes new nerve cells to grow?"

SeEVERS looked up coldly. "Ah, yes. You came here to be illoooooinated, as the padre put it. If you wish to be de-idiotized, please stop shouting. Otherwise, I'll ask you to leave."

Paul, who had felt like leaving a moment ago, now subsided quickly. "I'm sorry," he snapped, then softened his tone to repeat: "I'm sorry."

SeEVERS took a deep breath, stretched his short meaty arms in an unexpected yawn, then relaxed and grinned. "Sit down, sit down, m'boy. I'll tell you what you want to know, if you really want to know anything. Do you?"

"Of course!"

"You don't! You just want to know how you—whatever your name is—will be affected by events. You don't care about understanding for its own sake. Few people do. That's why we're in this mess. The padre now, he cares about understanding events—but not for their own sake. He cares, but for his flock's sake and for his God's sake—which is, I must admit, a better attitude than that of the common herd, whose only interest is in their own safety. But if people would just want to understand events for the understanding's sake, we wouldn't be in such a pickle."

Paul watched the professor's bright eyes and took the lecture quietly.

"And so, before I illuminate you, I want to make an impossible request."

"Yes, sir."

"I ask you to be completely objective," Seevers continued, rubbing the bridge of his nose and covering his eyes with his hand. "I want you to forget you ever heard of neuroderm while you listen to me. Rid yourself of all preconceptions, especially those connected with fear. Pretend these are purely hypothetical events that I'm going to discuss." He took his hands down from his eyes and grinned sheepishly. "It always embarrasses me to ask for that kind of cooperation when I know damn well I'll never get it."

"I'll try to be objective, sir."

"Bah!" Seevers slid down to sit on his spine, and hooked the base of his skull over the back of the chair. He blinked thoughtfully at the ceiling for a moment, then folded his hands across his small paunch and closed his eyes.

When he spoke again, he was speaking to himself: "Assume a planet, somewhat earthlike, but not quite. It has carboniferous life forms, but not human. Warm blooded, probably, and semi-intelligent. And the planet has something else—it has an overabundance of parasite forms. Actually, the various types of parasites are the dominant species. The warm blooded animals are the parasites' vegetables, so to speak. Now, during two billion years, say, of survival contests between parasite species, some parasites are quite likely to develop some curious methods of adaption. Methods of insuring the food supply—animals, who must have been taking a beating."

Seevers glanced down from the ceiling. "Tell me, youngster, what major activity did Man invent to secure his vegetable food supply?"

"Agriculture?"

"Certainly. Man is a parasite, as far as vegetables are concerned. But he learned to eat his cake and have it, too. He learned to perpetuate the species he was devouring. A very remarkable idea, if you stop to think about it. Very!"

"I don't see—"

"Hush! Now, let's suppose that one species of micro-parasites on our hypothetical planet learned, through long evolutionary processes, to stimulate regrowth in the animal tissue they devoured. Through exuding controlled

amounts of growth hormone, I think. Quite an advancement, eh?"

Paul had begun leaning forward tensely.

"But it's only the first step. It let the host live longer, although not pleasantly, I imagine. The growth control would be clumsy at first. But soon, all parasite-species either learned to do it, or died out. Then came the contest for the best kind of control. The parasites who kept their hosts in the best physical condition naturally did a better job of survival—since the parasite-ascendancy had cut down on the food supply, just as Man wastes his own resources. And since animals were contending among themselves for a place in the sun, it was to the parasite's advantage to help insure the survival of his host-species—through growth control."

Seevers winked solemnly. "Now begins the downfall of the parasites—their decadence. They concentrated all their efforts along the lines of . . . uh . . . scientific farming, you might say. They began growing various sorts of defense and attack weapons for their hosts—weird bio-devices, perhaps. Horns, swords, fangs, stingers, poison-throwers—we can only guess. But eventually, one group of parasites hit upon—what?"

Paul, who was beginning to stir uneasily, could only stammer. Where was Seevers getting all this?

"Say it!" the scientist demanded.

"The . . . nervous system?"

"That's right. You don't need to whisper it. The nervous system. It was probably an unsuccessful parasite at first, because nerve tissue grows slowly. And it's a long stretch of evolution between a microspecies which could stimulate nerve growth and one which could direct and utilize that growth for the host's advantage—and for its own. But at last, after a long struggle, our little species gets there. It begins sharpening the host's senses, building up complex senses from aggregates of old style receptors, and increasing the host's intelligence within limits."

Seevers grinned mischievously. "Comes a planetary shake-up of the first magnitude. Such parasites would naturally pick the host species with the highest intelligence to begin with. With the extra boost, this brainy animal quickly beats down its own enemies, and consequently the enemies of its microbenefactor. It puts itself in much the

same position that Man's in on Earth—lord it over the beasts, divine right to run the place, and all that. Now understand—it's the animal who's become intelligent, not the parasites. The parasites are operating on complex instinct patterns, like a hive of bees. They're wonderful neurological engineers—like bees are good structural engineers; blind instinct, accumulated through evolution."

He paused to light a cigarette. "If you feel ill, young man, there's drinking water in that bottle. You look ill."

"I'm all right!"

"Well, to continue: The intelligent animal became master of his planet. Threats to his existence were overcome—unless he was a threat to himself, like we are. But now, the parasites had found a safe home. No new threats to force readaption. They sat back and sighed and became stagnant—as unchanging as horseshoe crabs or amoeba or other Earth ancients. They kept right on working in their neurological beehives, and now they became cultivated by the animal, who recognized their benefactors. They didn't know it, but they were no longer the dominant species. They had insured their survival by leaning on their animal prop, who now took care of them with god-like charity—and selfishness. The parasites had achieved biological heaven. They kept on working, but they stopped fighting. The host was their welfare state, you might say. End of a sequence."

He blew a long breath of smoke and leaned forward to watch Paul, with casual amusement. Paul suddenly realized that he was sitting on the edge of his chair and gaping. He forced a relaxation.

"Wild guesswork," he breathed uncertainly.

"Some of it's guesswork," SeEVERS admitted. "But none of it's wild. There is supporting evidence. It's in the form of a message."

"Message?"

"Sure. Come, I'll show you." SeEVERS arose and moved toward the wall. He stopped before the two hemispheres. "On second thought, you better show yourself. Take down that sliced meteorite, will you? It's sterile."

Paul crossed the room, climbed unsteadily upon a bench, and brought down the globular meteorite. It was the first time he had examined one of the things, and he inspected it curiously. It was a near-perfect sphere,

about eight inches in diameter, with a four-inch hollow in the center. The globe was made up of several concentric shells, tightly fitted, each apparently of a different metal. It was not seemingly heavier than aluminum, although the outer shell was obviously of tough steel.

"Set it face down," Seevers told him. Both halves. Give it a quick little twist. The shells will come apart. Take out the center shell—the hard, thin one between the soft protecting shells."

"How do you know their purposes?" Paul growled as he followed instructions. The shells came apart easily.

"Envelopes are to protect messages," snorted Seevers.

Paul sorted out the hemispheres, and found two mirror-polished shells of paper-thin tough metal. They bore no inscription, either inside or out. He gave Seevers a puzzled frown.

"Handle them carefully while they're out of the protectors. They're already a little blurred . . ."

"I don't see any message."

"There's a small bottle of iron filings in that drawer by your knee. Sift them carefully over the outside of the shells. That powder isn't fine enough, really, but it's the best I could do. Felger had some better stuff up at Princeton, before we all got out. This business wasn't my discovery, incidentally."

Baffled, Paul found the iron filings and dusted the mirror-shells with the powder. Delicate patterns appeared—latitudinal circles, etched in iron dust and laced here and there with diagonal lines. He gasped. It looked like the map of a planet.

"I know what you're thinking," Seevers said. "That's what we thought too, at first. Then Felger came up with this very fine dust. Fine as they are, those lines are rows of pictograph symbols. You can make them out vaguely with a good reading glass, even with this coarse stuff. It's magnetic printing—like two-dimensional wire-recording. Evidently, the animals that printed it had either very powerful eyes, or a magnetic sense."

"Anyone understand it?"

"Princeton staff was working on it when the world went crazy. They figured out enough to guess at what I've just told you. They found five different shell-messages among a dozen or so spheres. One of them was a sort of a key. A

symbol equated to a diagram of a carbon atom. Another symbol equated to a pi in binary numbers. Things like that—about five hundred symbols, in fact. Some we couldn't figure. Then they defined other symbols by what amounted to blank-filling quizzes. Things like—'A star is . . .' and there would be the unknown symbol. We would try to decide whether it meant 'hot,' 'white,' 'huge,' and so forth."

"And you managed it?"

"In part. The ruthless way in which the missiles were opened destroyed some of the clarity. The senders were guilty of their own brand of anthropomorphism. They projected their own psychology on us. They expected us to open the things shell by shell, cautiously, and figure out the text before we went further. Heh! What happens? Some machinist grabs one, shakes it, weighs it, sticks it on a lathe, and—brrrrr! Our curiosity is still rather apelike. Stick our arm in a gopher hole to see if there's a rattlesnake inside."

There was a long silence while Paul stood peering over the patterns on the shell. "Why haven't people heard about this?" he asked quietly.

"Heard about it!" SeEVERS roared. "And how do you propose to tell them about it?"

Paul shook his head. It was easy to forget that Man had scurried away from his presses and his broadcasting stations and his railroads, leaving his mechanical creatures to sleep in their own rust while he fled like a bee-stung bear before the strange terror.

"What, exactly, do the patterns say, Doctor?"

"I've told you some of it—the evolutionary origin of the neuroderm parasites. We also pieced together their reasons for launching the missiles across space—several thousand years ago. Their sun was about to flare into a supernova. They worked out a theoretical space-drive, but they couldn't fuel it—needed some element that was scarce in their system. They could get to their outer planet, but that wouldn't help much. So they just cultured up a batch of their parasite-benefactors, rolled them into these balls, and fired them like charges of buckshot at various stars. Interception-course, naturally. They meant to miss just a little, so that the projectiles would swing into long elliptical orbits around the suns—close enough

in to intersect the radiational 'life-belt' and eventually cross paths with planets whose orbits were near-circular. Looks like they hit us on the first pass."

"You mean they weren't aiming at Earth in particular?"

"Evidently not. They couldn't know we were here. Not at a range like that. Hundreds of light-years. They just took a chance on several stars. Shipping off their pets was sort of a last ditch stand against extinction—symbolic, to be sure—but a noble gesture, as far as they were concerned. A giving away of part of their souls. Like a man writing his will and leaving his last worldly possession to some unknown species beyond the stars. Imagine them standing there—watching the projectiles being fired out toward deep space. There goes their inheritance, to an unknown heir, or perhaps to no one. The little creatures that brought them up from beasthood."

Seevers paused, staring up at the sunlight beyond the high basement window. He was talking to himself again, quietly: "You can see them turn away and silently go back . . . to wait for their collapsing sun to reach the critical point, the detonating point. They've left their last mark—a dark and uncertain benediction to the cosmos."

"You're a fool, Seevers," Paul grunted suddenly.

Seevers whirled, whitening. His hand darted out forgetfully toward the young man's arm, but he drew it back as Paul sidestepped.

"You actually regard this thing as desirable, don't you?" Paul asked. "You can't see that you're under its effect. Why does it affect people that way? And you say I can't be objective."

The professor smiled coldly. "I didn't say it's desirable. I was simply pointing out that the beings who sent it saw it as desirable. They were making some unwarranted assumptions."

"Maybe they just didn't care."

"Of course they cared. Their fallacy was that we would open it as they would have done—cautiously. Perhaps they couldn't see how a creature could be both brash and intelligent. They meant for us to read the warning on the shells before we went further."

"Warning . . . ?"

Seevers smiled bitterly. "Yes, warning. There was one group of oversized symbols on all the spheres. See that

pattern on the top ring? It says, in effect—'Finder-creatures, you who destroy your own people—if you do this thing, then destroy this container without penetrating deeper. If you are self-destroyers, then the contents will only help to destroy you.' ”

There was a frigid silence.

“But somebody would have opened one anyway,” Paul protested.

Seevers turned his bitter smile on the window. “You couldn’t be more right. The senders just didn’t foresee our monkey-minded species. If they saw Man digging out the nuggets, braying over them, chortling over them, cracking them like walnuts, then turning tail to run howling for the forests—well, they’d think twice before they fired another round of their celestial buckshot.”

“Doctor Seevers, what do you think will happen now? To the world, I mean?”

Seevers shrugged. “I saw a baby born yesterday—to a woman down the island. It was fully covered with neuroderm at birth. It has some new sensory equipment—small pores in the finger tips, with taste buds and olfactory cells in them. Also a nodule above each eye sensitive to infrared.”

Paul groaned.

“It’s not the first case. Those things are happening to adults, too, but you have to have the condition for quite a while. Brother Thomas has the finger pores already. Hasn’t learned to use them yet, of course. He gets sensations from them, but the receptors aren’t connected to olfactory and taste centers of the brain. They’re still linked with the somesthetic interpretive centers. He can touch various substances and get different perceptive combinations of heat, pain, cold, pressure, and so forth. He says vinegar feels ice-cold, quinine sharp-hot, cologne warm-velvet-prickly, and . . . he blushes when he touches a musky perfume.”

Paul laughed, and the hollow sound startled him.

“It may be several generations before we know all that will happen,” Seevers went on. “I’ve examined sections of rat brain and found the micro-organisms. They may be working at rerouting these new receptors to proper brain areas. Our grandchildren—if Man’s still on Earth by then—can perhaps taste analyze substances by touch,

qualitatively determine the contents of a test tube by sticking a finger in it. See a warm radiator in a dark room—by infrared. Perhaps there'll be some ultraviolet sensitization. My rats are sensitive to it."

Paul went to the rat cages and stared in at three gray-pelted animals that seemed larger than the others. They retreated against the back wall and watched him warily. They began squeaking and exchanging glances among themselves.

"Those are third-generation hypers," Seevers told him. "They've developed a simple language. Not intelligent by human standards, but crafty. They've learned to use their sensory equipment. They know when I mean to feed them, and when I mean to take one out to kill and dissect. A slight change in my emotional odor, I imagine. Learning's a big hurdle, youngster. A hyper with finger pores gets sensations from them, but it takes a long time to attach meaning to the various sensations—through learning. A baby gets visual sensations from his untrained eyes—but the sensation is utterly without significance until he associates milk with white, mother with a face shape, and so forth."

"What will happen to the brain?" Paul breathed.

"Not too much, I imagine. I haven't observed much happening. The rats show an increase in intelligence, but not in brain size. The intellectual boost apparently comes from an ability to perceive things in terms of more senses. Ideas, concepts, precepts—are made of memory collections of past sensory experiences. An apple is red, fruity-smelling, sweet-acid flavored—that's your sensory idea of an apple. A blind man without a tongue couldn't form such a complete idea. A hyper, on the other hand, could add some new adjectives that you couldn't understand. The fully-developed hyper—I'm not one yet—has more sensory tools with which to grasp ideas. When he learns to use them, he'll be mentally more efficient. But there's apparently a hitch.

"The parasite's instinctive goal is to insure the host's survival. That's the substance of the warning. If Man has the capacity to work together, then the parasites will help him shape his environment. If Man intends to keep fighting with his fellows, the parasite will help him do a

better job of that, too. Help him destroy himself more efficiently."

"Men have worked together—"

"In small tribes," Seevers interrupted. "Yes, we have group spirit. Ape-tribe spirit, not race spirit."

Paul moved restlessly toward the door. Seevers had turned to watch him with a cool smirk.

"Well, you're illuminated, youngster. Now what do you intend to do?"

Paul shook his head to scatter the confusion of ideas. "What can anyone do? Except run. To an island, perhaps."

Seevers hoisted a cynical eyebrow. "Intend taking the condition with you? Or will you try to stay nonhyper?"

"Take . . . are you crazy? I mean to stay healthy!"

"That's what I thought. If you were objective about this, you'd give yourself the condition and get it over with. I did. You remind me of a monkey running away from a hypodermic needle. The hypo has serum health-insurance in it, but the needle looks sharp. The monkey chatters with fright."

Paul stalked angrily to the door, then paused. "There's a girl upstairs, a dermie. Would you—"

"Tell her all this? I always brief new hypers. It's one of my duties around this ecclesiastical leper ranch. She's on the verge of insanity, I suppose. They all are, before they get rid of the idea that they're damned souls. What's she to you?"

Paul strode out into the corridor without answering. He felt physically ill. He hated Seevers' smug bulldog face with a violence that was unfamiliar to him. The man had given the plague to himself! So he said. But was it true? Was any of it true? To claim that the hallucinations were new sensory phenomena, to pose the plague as possibly desirable—Seevers had no patent on those ideas. Every dermie made such claims; it was a symptom. Seevers had simply invented clever rationalizations to support his delusions, and Paul had been nearly taken in. Seevers was clever. *Do you mean to take the condition with you when you go?* Wasn't that just another way of suggesting, "Why don't you allow me to touch you?" Paul was shivering as he returned to the third floor room to recoat himself with the pungent oil. Why not leave now? he thought.

But he spent the day wandering along the waterfront, stopping briefly at the docks to watch a crew of monks scrambling over the scaffolding that surrounded the hulls of two small sea-going vessels. The monks were caulking split seams and trotting along the platforms with buckets of tar and paint. Upon inquiry, Paul learned which of the vessels was intended for his own use. And he put aside all thoughts of immediate departure.

She was a fifty-footer, a slender craft with a weighted fin-keel that would cut too deep for bay navigation. Paul guessed that the colony wanted only a flat-bottomed vessel for hauling passengers and cargo across from the mainland. They would have little use for the trim seaster with the lines of a baby destroyer. Upon closer examination, he guessed that it had been a police boat, or Coast Guard craft. There was a gun-mounting on the forward deck, minus the gun. She was built for speed, and powered by diesels, and she could be provisioned for a nice long cruise.

Paul went to scrounge among the warehouses and locate a stock of supplies. He met an occasional monk or nun, but the gray-skinned monastics seemed only desirous of avoiding him. The dermie desire was keyed principally by smell, and the deodorant oil helped preserve him from their affections. Once he was approached by a wild-eyed layman who startled him amidst a heap of warehouse crates. The dermie was almost upon him before Paul heard the footfall. Caught without an escape route, and assailed by startled terror, he shattered the man's arm with a shotgun blast, then fled from the warehouse to escape the dermie's screams.

Choking with shame, he found a dermie monk and sent him to care for the wounded creature. Paul had shot at other plague victims when there was no escape, but never with intent to kill. The man's life had been spared only by hasty aim.

"It was self-defense," he reminded himself.

But defense against what? Against the inevitable?

He hurried back to the hospital and found Mendelhaus outside the small chapel. "I better not wait for your boat," he told the priest. "I just shot one of your people. I better leave before it happens again."

Mendelhaus' thin lips tightened. "You shot—"

"Didn't kill him," Paul explained hastily. "Broke his arm. One of the brothers is bringing him over. I'm sorry, Father, but he jumped me."

The priest glanced aside silently, apparently wrestling against anger. "I'm glad you told me," he said quietly. "I suppose you couldn't help it. But why did you leave the hospital? You're safe here. The yacht will be provisioned for you. I suggest you remain in your room until it's ready. I won't vouch for your safety any farther than the building." There was a tone of command in his voice, and Paul nodded slowly. He started away.

"The young lady's been asking for you," the priest called after him.

Paul stopped. "How is she?"

"Over the crisis, I think. Infection's down. Nervous condition not so good. Deep depression. Sometimes she goes a little hysterical." He paused, then lowered his voice. "You're at the focus of it, young man. Sometimes she gets the idea that she touched you, and then sometimes she raves about how she wouldn't do it."

Paul whirled angrily, forming a protest, but the priest continued: "Seevers talked to her, and then a psychologist—one of our sisters. It seemed to help some. She's asleep now. I don't know how much of Seevers' talk she understood, however. She's dazed—combined effects of pain, shock, infection, guilt feelings, fright, hysteria—and some other things. Morphine doesn't make her mind any clearer. Neither does the fact that she thinks you're avoiding her."

"It's the plague I'm avoiding!" Paul snapped. "Not her."

Mendelhaus chuckled mirthlessly. "You're talking to me, aren't you?" He turned and entered the chapel through a swinging door. As the door fanned back and forth, Paul caught a glimpse of a candlelit altar and a stark wooden crucifix, and a sea of monk-robles flowing over the pews, waiting for the celebrant priest to enter the sanctuary and begin the Sacrifice of the Mass. He realized vaguely that it was Sunday.

Paul wandered back to the main corridor and found himself drifting toward Willie's room. The door was ajar, and he stopped short lest she see him. But after a mo-

ment he inched forward until he caught a glimpse of her dark mass of hair unfurled across the pillow. One of the sisters had combed it for her, and it spread in dark waves, gleaming in the candlelight. She was still asleep. The candle startled him for an instant—suggesting a deathbed and the sacrament of the dying. But a dog-eared magazine lay beneath it; someone had been reading to her.

He stood in the doorway, watching the slow rise of her breathing. Fresh, young, shapely—even in the crude cotton gown they had given her, even beneath the blue-white pallor of her skin—soon to become gray as a cloudy sky in a wintery twilight. Her lips moved slightly, and he backed a step away. They paused, parted moistly, showing thin white teeth. Her delicately carved face was thrown back slightly on the pillow. There was a sudden tightening of her jaw.

A weirdly pitched voice floated unexpectedly from down the hall, echoing the semisinging of Gregorian chant: "*Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo, et mundabor. . .*" The priest was beginning Mass.

As the sound came, the girl's hands clenched into rigid fists beneath the sheet. Her eyes flared open to stare wildly at the ceiling. Clutching the bedclothes, she pressed the fists up against her face and cried out: "No! Noooo! God, I won't!"

Paul backed out of sight and pressed himself against the wall. A knot of desolation tightened in his stomach. He looked around nervously. A nun, hearing the outcry, came scurrying down the hall, murmuring anxiously to herself. A plump mother hen in a dozen yards of starched white cloth. She gave him a quick challenging glance and waddled inside.

"Child, my child, what's wrong! Nightmares again?"

He heard Willie breathe a nervous moan of relief. Then her voice, weakly—"They . . . they made me . . . touch . . . Ooo, God! I want to cut off my hands!"

Paul fled, leaving the nun's sympathetic reassurance to fade into a murmur behind him.

He spent the rest of the day and the night in his room. On the following day, Mendelhaus came with word that the boat was not yet ready. They needed to finish caulking and stock it with provisions. But the priest assured

him that it should be afloat within twenty-four hours. Paul could not bring himself to ask about the girl.

A monk brought his food—unopened cans, still steaming from the sterilizer, and on a covered tray. The monk wore gloves and mask, and he had oiled his own skin. There were moments when Paul felt as if he were the diseased and contagious patient from whom the others protected themselves. Like Omar, he thought, wondering—"which is the Potter, pray, and which the Pot?"

Was Man, as Seevers implied, a terrorized ape-tribe fleeing illogically from the gray hands that only wanted to offer a blessing? How narrow was the line dividing blessing from curse, god from demon! The parasites came in a devil's mask, the mask of disease. "Diseases have often killed me," said Man. "All disease is therefore evil." But was that necessarily true? Fire had often killed Man's club-bearing ancestors, but later came to serve him. Even diseases had been used to good advantage—artificially induced typhoid and malaria to fight venereal infections.

But the gray skin . . . taste buds in the fingertips . . . alien micro-organisms tampering with the nerves and the brain. Such concepts caused his scalp to bristle. Man—made over to suit the tastes of a bunch of supposedly beneficent parasites—was he still Man, or something else? Little bacteriological farmers imbedded in the skin, raising a crop of nerve cells—eat one, plant two, sow an olfactor in a new field, reshuffle the feeder-fibers to the brain.

Monday brought a cold rain and stiff wind from the Gulf. He watched the water swirling through littered gutters in the street. Sitting in the window, he watched the gloom and waited, praying that the storm would not delay his departure. Mendelhaus smiled politely, through his doorway once. "Willie's ankle seems healing nicely," he said. "Swelling's gone down so much we had to change casts. If only she would—"

"Thanks for the free report, Padre," Paul growled irritably.

The priest shrugged and went away.

It was still raining when the sky darkened with eve-

ning. The monastic dock-crew had certainly been unable to finish. Tomorrow . . . perhaps.

After nightfall, he lit a candle and lay awake watching its unflickering yellow tongue until drowsiness lolled his head aside. He snuffed it out and went to bed.

Dreams assailed him, tormented him, stroked him with dark hands while he lay back, submitting freely. Small hands, soft, cool, tender—touching his forehead and his cheeks, while a voice whispered caresses.

He awoke suddenly to blackness. The feel of the dream-hands was still on his face. What had aroused him? A sound in the hall, a creaking hinge? The darkness was impenetrable. The rain had stopped—perhaps its cessation had disturbed him. He felt curiously tense as he lay listening to the humid, musty corridors. A . . . faint . . . rustle . . . and . . .

Breathing! The sound of soft breathing was in the room with him!

He let out a hoarse shriek that shattered the unearthly silence. A high-pitched scream of fright answered him! From a few feet away in the room. He groped toward it and fumbled against a bare wall. He roared curses, and tried to find first matches, then the shotgun. At last he found the gun, aimed at nothing across the room, and jerked the trigger. The explosion deafened him. The window shattered, and a sift of plaster rustled to the floor.

The brief flash had illuminated the room. It was empty. He stood frozen. Had he imagined it all? But no, the visitor's startled scream had been real enough.

A cool draft fanned his face. The door was open. Had he forgotten to lock it again? A tumult of sound was beginning to arise from the lower floors. His shot had aroused the sleepers. But there was a closer sound—sobbing in the corridor, and an irregular creaking noise.

At last he found a match and rushed to the door. But the tiny flame revealed nothing within its limited aura. He heard a doorknob rattle in the distance; his visitor was escaping via the outside stairway. He thought of pursuit and vengeance. But instead, he rushed to the washbasin and began scrubbing himself thoroughly with harsh brown soap. Had his visitor touched him—or had the hands been only dream-stuff? He was frightened and sickened.

Voices were filling the corridor. The light of several candles was advancing toward his doorway. He turned to see monks' faces peering anxiously inside. Father Mendelhaus shouldered his way through the others, glanced at the window, the wall, then at Paul.

"What—"

"Safety, eh?" Paul hissed. "Well, I had a prowler! A woman! I think I've been touched."

The priest turned and spoke to a monk. "Go to the stairway and call for the Mother Superior. Ask her to make an immediate inspection of the sisters' quarters. If any nuns have been out of their rooms—"

A shrill voice called from down the hallway: "Father, Father! The girl with the injured ankle! She's not in her bed! She's gone!"

"Willie!" Paul gasped.

A small nun with a candle scurried up and panted to recover her breath for a moment. "She's gone, Father. I was on night duty. I heard the shot, and I went to see if it disturbed her. She wasn't there!"

The priest grumbled incredulously. "How could she get out? She can't walk with that cast."

"Crutches, Father. We told her she could get up in a few days. While she was still irrational, she kept saying they were going to amputate her leg. We brought the crutches in to prove she'd be up soon. It's my fault, Father. I should have—"

"Never mind! Search the building for her."

Paul dried his wet skin and faced the priest angrily. "What can I do to disinfect myself?" he demanded.

Mendelhaus called out into the hallway where a crowd had gathered. "Someone please get Doctor Seevers."

"I'm here, preacher," grunted the scientist. The monastics parted ranks to make way for his short chubby body. He grinned amusedly at Paul. "So, you decided to make your home here after all, eh?"

Paul croaked an insult at him. "Have you got any effective—"

"Disinfectants? Afraid not. Nitric acid will do the trick on one or two local spots. Where were you touched?"

"I don't know. I was asleep."

Seevers' grin widened. "Well, you can't take a bath in

nitric acid. We'll try something else, but I doubt if it'll work for a direct touch."

"That oil—"

"Uh-uh! That'll do for exposure-weakened parasites you might pick up by handling an object that's been touched. But with skin to skin contact, the bugs're pretty stout little rascals. Come on downstairs, though, we'll make a pass at it."

Paul followed him quickly down the corridor. Behind him, a soft voice was murmuring: "I just can't understand why nonhypers are so . . ." Mendelhaus said something to Seevers, blotting out the voice. Paul chafed at the thought that they might consider him cowardly.

But with the herds fleeing northward, cowardice was the social norm. And after a year's flight, Paul had accepted the norm as the only possible way to fight.

Seevers was emptying chemicals into a tub of water in the basement when a monk hurried in to tug at Mendelhaus' sleeve. "Father, the sisters report that the girl's not in the building."

"What? Well, she can't be far! Search the grounds. If she's not there, try the adjoining blocks."

Paul stopped unbuttoning his shirt. Willie had said some mournful things about what she would rather do than submit to the craving. And her startled scream when he had cried out in the darkness—the scream of someone suddenly awakening to reality—from a daze-world.

The monk left the room. Seevers sloshed more chemicals into the tub. Paul could hear the wind whipping about the basement windows and the growl of an angry surf not so far away. Paul rebuttoned his shirt.

"Which way's the ocean?" he asked suddenly. He backed toward the door.

"No, you fool!" roared Seevers. "You're not going to—get *him*, preacher!"

Paul sidestepped as the priest grabbed for him. He darted outside and began running for the stairs. Mendelhaus bellowed for him to stop.

"Not me!" Paul called back angrily. "Willie!"

Moments later, he was racing across the sodden lawn and into the street. He stopped on the corner to get his bearings. The wind brought the sound of the surf with it.

He began running east and calling her name into the night.

The rain had ceased, but the pavement was wet and water gurgled in the gutters. Occasionally the moon peered through the thinning veil of clouds, but its light failed to furnish a view of the street ahead. After a minute's running, he found himself standing on the seawall. The breakers thundered a stone's throw across the sand. For a moment they became visible under the coy moon, then vanished again in blackness. He had not seen her.

"Willie!"

Only the breakers' growl responded. And a glimmer of phosphorescence from the waves.

"Willie!" he slipped down from the seawall and began feeling along the jagged rocks that lay beneath it. She could not have gotten down without falling. Then he remembered a rickety flight of steps just to the north, and he trotted quickly toward it.

The moon came out suddenly. He saw her, and stopped. She was sitting motionless on the bottom step, holding her face in her hands. The crutches were stacked neatly against the handrail. Ten yards across the sand slope lay the hungry, devouring surf. Paul approached her slowly. The moon went out again. His feet sucked at the rain-soaked sand.

He stopped by the handrail, peering at her motionless shadow. "Willie?"

A low moan, then a long silence. "I did it, Paul," she muttered miserably. "It was like a dream at first, but then . . . you shouted . . . and . . ."

He crouched in front of her, sitting on his heels. Then he took her wrists firmly and tugged her hands from her face.

"Don't . . ."

He pulled her close and kissed her. Her mouth was frightened. Then he lifted her—being cautious of the now-sodden cast. He climbed the steps and started back to the hospital. Willie, dazed and weary and still uncomprehending, fell asleep in his arms. Her hair blew about his face in the wind. It smelled warm and alive. He wondered what sensation it would produce to the finger-pore receptors. "Wait and see," he said to himself.

The priest met him with a growing grin when he

brought her into the candlelit corridor. "Shall we forget the boat, son?"

Paul paused. "No . . . I'd like to borrow it anyway." Mendelhaus looked puzzled.

Seevers snorted at him: "Preacher, don't you know any reasons for traveling besides running away?"

Paul carried her back to her room. He meant to have a long talk when she awoke. About an island—until the world sobered up.

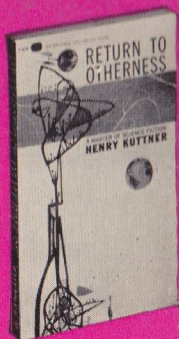


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