DRUNKARD'S WALK Conclusion

A war of total annihilation raged within one man. He decidedly was not his own worst enemy. Then who was?

SYNOPSIS

Cornut has only this one problem: he keeps trying to kill himself. There is no reason for it that he can find. Only unhappy people commit suicide and Cornut is a busy, productive mathematics instructor, specializing in the Mnemonics of Number, so successful that not only does he have a TV class of three million Townies but a live one of almost a hundred Gownies! The Townies, all 12 billion of them, live and eat and work bunched together, pressed for room, whereas Gownies are privileged to attend University — and Cornut is

VIII

THE assistant audio engineer, staring bemused through the glass at the filling studio, was humming to himself. It irritated Master Carl. He could not help fitting words to the tune:

Strike the twos and strike the threes:
The Sieve of Eratosthenes!
When the multiples sublime
The numbers that are left are prime.

It did not alleviate his annoyance that the song was one of his own. Classic prime-number exposition was not the subject of the morning's class; it was set theory.

specially privileged, for he was born at University, raised there in the most approved trauma-free manner, studied and now teaches there. And yet nine times in the past seven weeks he has nearly killed himself, the latest being an attempt to climb out of his window, 18 stories above the ground, and is saved just barely in time by

EGERD, *an undergraduate, whom Cornut has drafted into an elaborate system of alarms to protect himself against suicide. Since the danger is greatest when Cornut is waking, Egerd's job is to come into Cornut's room and make sure he is really awakened by the synchronized alarms. This time, however, Egerd is just tardy enough for Cornut to be half out of the window, but in time to pull him back, and for being in the corridor without shaving he is severely reprimanded by*

MASTER CARL, *house master, aged 70, head of the Mathematics Department, and Cornut's friend. To the extent that Master Carl can remain interested in anything but math and submicrophotography and other such preoccupations, he would like to help Cornut. But a Field Expedition has been ordered by*

ST. CYR, *the president of the University, a very old, very strange, very dictatorial man, to pick up several aborigines from an island in the Pacific, and even though that means leaving the system of safeguards and has nothing whatever to do with mathematics, Master Carl insists on Cornut's coming along on the Field Expedition rather than risk St. Cyr's displeasure. Before going, Cornut is told by Med Center that others have gone through the same baffling process of causeless suicides. Some succeeded quickly, others took longer, but the very longest on record is ten weeks — and Cornut has made nine attempts in seven weeks — so his maximum life expectancy is 20 days! Master Carl urges him to take a wife and suggests*

LOCILLE, *a pretty undergraduate, in love with Cornut, loved by Egerd, and Cornut does offer her a marriage of convenience — his convenience. For something surely has to be done to protect him, and, as Master Carl argues, what better protection than a wife who will be on hand at those falling asleep and waking moments? On the morning after his marriage, Cornut finds he has looked for a human alarm clock and received very much more. Locille, going to class, has asked him to take wake-up pills, not only to get to his own class on time but to avoid the deadly drowsy state. In horror, Cornut discovers that he has taken sleepy pills by mistake, and as he drifts helplessly toward murderous slumber, his bitterness is heightened by being caught now that he cares.*

He snapped: "Be still, man! Don't you like your work here?"

The assistant audio engineer paled. He had been brought up on a texas and never stopped dreading the day that he might have to go back to one.

It was not really true that the humming distracted Master Carl. At his age, you either know what you are doing or you don't, and he knew. He went on at the precise moment his theme began and spoke the words he always spoke, while his mind was on Cornut, on the Wolgren anomaly, on his private investigation of the paranormal, on — *especially* on — the responses and behavior of each individual undergraduate in his studio audience. He noted every yawn of a drowsy nucleonics major in the far corner; he observed with particular care the furtive passage of notes from the boy, Egerd, to his protege's — Cornut's — new wife, Locille. He did not intend to do anything about it.

He was grateful to Locille. As a good watchdog, she might very well save the life of Cornut, the only man on the faculty Carl considered to have any chance of ever replacing himself.

In five minutes he had concluded the live portion of his lecture and, indulging his own harmless desires, left the studio. Taped figures danced on the screen behind him, singing *The Ballad of Sets.*

Let S be a number set, then progress:
If, of any two numbers (a and b) in S,
Their sum is also in the set,
The set is closed! *And so we get*
A reproductive set *with this definition:*
"The number set S is closed by addition!"

HE put the class out of his mind and eagerly drew a sheaf of photographic prints out of his briefcase. He had slept only restlessly the night before and had risen early to work at his newest hobby. He had had many. He needed many. Carl was in no way dissatisfied, could not have conceived a world in which he would not have been a mathematician, but it wasn't all pleasure to be a towering elder statesman in a young man's game. It was a queer fact of mathematics that nearly every great mathematician had done his best work before he was thirty. And most of them, like Carl, had turned to other curiosities in their later years.

Someone opened the door, and the choral voices reached him:

If number set M is closed by subtraction,

A modul *is the term for this transaction!*

Master Carl turned, frowning like ice. Egerd! He demanded terribly: "What is a number set closed by multiplication?"

Egerd quailed but said: "It's a ray, Master Carl. It's in the fourth canto. Sir, I want to —"

"Closed to addition and subtraction as well?"

"A ring, sir. Can I speak to you a moment?"

Carl grunted.

"I did study the lesson, Master Carl, as you can see."

He would have said more, but Carl had not finished being stern. "There is no excuse, Egerd, for leaving a class without permission. You know that. It may seem to you that you are able to grasp set theory by studying from books, no doubt. You are wrong. A mathematician must know these simple classical facts and definitions as well as he knows that February has twenty-eight days, and in the same way. By mnemonics! I assure you that you will never become a first-rate mathematician by cutting your classes."

"Yes, sir. That's it. I want to transfer out. As soon as I get back from South America, if it's all right with you, sir."

Master Carl was horrified.

This was not a case for discipline, he saw at once. Carl did not consider that the separation of Egerd from mathematics would be a loss to mathematics. It was compassion for the boy himself that gave him concern.

He temporized by handing Egerd one of his photographs. "See anything?"

EGERD was very patient and took the time to examine the print thoroughly before shaking his head.

"Look at it from this angle, Egerd . . . No?" Master Carl sighed and put the photograph back on the desk. No, it didn't really look like a star at all. It looked like light-struck film, botched in developing.

"Becquerel's didn't look any better," he said. "Well. What is it you want to transfer to?"

"Med School, sir. I've made up my mind." He added, "You can understand why, Master Carl. I don't have much talent for this stuff."

Carl didn't understand; he would never understand. He had, however, some long time before that made up his mind that there were things about his students that didn't much need understanding. His students had many facets; only one concerned him. They were like those paper patterns the soft-headed undergraduates in Topology played with,

hexihexiflexagons, constructions that turned up new sides in bewildering variety each time they were flexed.

He said mournfully: "All right. I'll sign your release." He scowled when he saw that Egerd already had it filled out and ready for him; the boy was *too* eager.

The door opened again.

Master Carl halted with the pen in his hand. "Now what?" He recognized the man — vaguely — that hanger-on of the Department of Liberal Arts whose name escaped him.

The man said with agitation: "Excuse me. I'm sorry. Name's Farley. I'm Master Cornut's sex writer —"

"I have no objection to that. I *do* object to having my privacy disturbed." Although that was not quite true, either. Master Carl was prude enough (perhaps because he was woman-shy enough) to feel that the private affairs of men and women should not be inspired by scripts provided by sexwriters or, as they were once called, marriage counselors. *He* would never have employed one, and he was irked with Cornut.

As it turned out, neither had Cornut. "I was a wedding present," Farley explained, "and so I went to see Cornut this morning with a rough thirty-day draft. I don't use standard forms; I believe in personalized counseling. So I thought I'd better interview the male subject right away because, as I'm sure you know —"

Egerd interrupted desperately: "Master Carl. Please sign my transfer."

The expression in his eyes said more than his words. The flexagon turned up another side, and this time Carl was able to read its design. He nodded and wrote his name. It was entirely clear that Egerd's reasons for transferring away from Locille and Master Cornut had nothing to do with his talent for mathematics.

But the sexwriter would not be stopped. "Then where is the female subject, Master Carl?" he demanded. "They said she would be here."

"Locille? Of course." A terrible thought entered Carl's mind. "You mean that something happened *again?* When you went to see Cornut, he was —"

"Out cold, yes. Almost dead. He's having his stomach pumped now, though. They think he'll be all right."

WHEN they reached Cornut's room, the medic was scanning a spectrum elaborated for him by a portable diagnosticon. Cornut himself was unconscious. The medic reassured them: "Close, but he missed again. How

far is he from that ten-week record?"

Carl interrupted frostily: "Can you wake him up? Good. Then do."

The medic shrugged and fished for a hypodermic. He slipped the piston of the needle into the barrel; the faint spray appeared over Cornut's unbroken skin. The tiny droplets found their way through dermis and epidermis and subcutaneous fat and, in a moment, Cornut sat up.

He said clearly: "I had the most ridiculous dream."

And then he saw Locille and his face went alight. That, at least, was no dream. Master Carl had little tact, but he had enough to take the medic and leave the two of them there.

The experience of having one's stomach pumped is not attractive. This was Cornut's third time, but he had not come to like it; he tasted bile and foulness, his esophagus had been painfully scraped, and the sleepy pills had left him with a headache.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Locille brought him a glass and one of the capsules the medic had left. He swallowed it and began to chuckle. "Lucky Wahl," he said. "You know, if I'd been awake when that fellow came in, I'd have gone over and punched Wahl in the head. It was his idea — he got half of Anthropology to chip in to buy us Farley's services for a year. As it is — I guess Wahl saved my life."

He got up and began to wander around. In spite of the taste and the head, he was feeling rather cheerful, in an unanalyzed way. Even the dream, though queer, had not been unpleasant. Master Carl and Egerd had been in it, and so had St. Cyr and the woman from South America; but so had Locille.

He paused by his desk. "What's this?"

It was a neat sheaf of papers clipped in a folder on which was printed: *S. R. Farley, Consultant.* That was all. Just *Consultant.* He opened it and found the first page a cleanly typed set of what seemed to be equations. The symbols ♂ and ♀ occurred frequently, along with strokes, daggers and congruencies which he more or less remembered from an undergraduate course in symbolic logic.

"That's almost a Boölean notation," he said interestedly. "I wonder . . . Say, look at this, Locille. Line three. If you substitute these three terms from the expansion in line four, and then —"

He stopped. She was blushing.

But he hadn't noticed; he was suddenly scowling at his desk.

"My Wolgren! Where is it?"

"If you mean the report on distributive anomalies you were preparing for Master Carl, he took it as he went out."

"But it isn't finished!"

"He didn't want you working on it. Or anything. He wants you to take the day off — get away from the campus—and he wants me to stay with you."

HE stared glumly at the window. "Hum." He made tasting motions with his lips and tongue and made a face. "Where is there to go, off campus? Do you have any ideas?"

Locille looked a little worried. "As a matter of fact," she said diffidently, "I do."

At sundown they boarded the one-a-day ferry to the texas; there was traffic enough from the city to the texas, and even from the University to the city, but between the texas and the University there was almost none. They leaned against the rail as the ferry rose, looking down at the University's island, the city and the bay. The almost silent blades overhead chopped the scarlet sunset sky into dots and dashes. All they could hear inside the domed deck of the ferry was a bass flutter of blades and a more-than-soprano hiss of the blade-tip jets.

Locille said abruptly: "I didn't tell you about Roger. My brother," she added in a rush.

Cornut stopped an emotion before it had quite got started. "What about him?" he asked, relieved.

"He isn't University caliber. He might have been, but — when Roger was about five years old, he was swimming off the texas — there was another boy in the water, and he dove. They collided. The — the other boy drowned." She paused, turning to look at him. "Roger fractured his skull. Ever since then, he's been — his intelligence never developed much past that point."

Cornut received the information, frowning.

It was not that he minded a stupid brother-in-law; it was only that he had never thought of there being any brother-in-law at all. It had never occurred to Cornut that marriage involved more than two people.

"He isn't insane," Locille said worriedly, "just not intelligent."

Cornut hardly heard her. He was busy trying to cope with the thought that there was more here than watchdog or love; there was something here that he had never counted on. It took twenty minutes to fly the rest of the way to the texas, and it took all of that time for Cornut to puzzle out the fact that he had taken on more than a conveni-

ence or a pleasure — he had assumed a sort of obligation as well.

THE texas stood in ninety feet of water, just over the horizon from Sandy Hook. It was fifteen acres of steel decks, twelve levels high, the lowest of the levels forty feet above mean high water. It was not the fault of the designers of the texas that "mean high water" was an abstraction, the average distance between trough and peak of the great swells of the ocean. The texas crouched on hundreds of metal legs that sank through the ooze to the bedrock beneath, and it was a target. In storms the whitecaps slapped punishingly at its underbelly. If there was lightning, it was sure to strike at the radar beacon on the tower.

Time was when those radars had been the reason for the existence of texas towers. That time was past; satellite eyes and ionosphere-scatter search methods had ended their importance. But the world had found other uses for them. They guided the whale-backed submersibles of the world's cargo fleets surfacing over the continental shelf to find harbor. They served as mother "ships" for the ranging fishery fleets in shallow seas. They provided living room for tens of millions on the American seaboard alone. They provided work space for nuisance industries — the ones that smelled, or were loud, or were dangerous.

Power was free, nearly, on a texas. Each hollow leg was slotted in its lower stretch. The waves that came crashing by compressed the air in the columns, valved through a one-way exhaust into a pressure tank; pneumatic turbines whirred at the release vents of the tanks, and the texas' lights and industries drew current from those turbines. In "good" weather — when the waves roared and pounded — there was power enough to smelt aluminum; the ore boats that unloaded the raw materials carried away the slag, dumping it within sight of the texas itself in the unfillable disposal pit of the ocean. When weather was "bad" — when the Atlantic was glassy smooth — aluminum making stopped for a while. But weather was never really "bad" for long.

Locille's parents lived with her brother in a three-room apartment in the residential area of the texas. It was leeward of the fisheries, across the texas from the aluminum refinery, six levels above the generators. Cornut thought it horrible. It smelled and it was noisy.

Locille had brought presents. A sash for her father, some-

thing cosmetic for her mother and, Cornut saw with astonishment, one of the flags of the aborigines as a gift for her brother Roger. It had not occurred to Cornut that there should be gifts, much less gifts as expensive as any aboriginal artifact; the things were in great demand as conversation pieces. But he was grateful. The flag was a conversation piece here, too, and he needed one. Locille's mother brought out coffee and cakes, and Cornut entertained them with the Field Expedition to the Pacific island.

He did not, however, mention the blowing up of the plane he was to have been on, his blackout by the side of the road in the tropical jungle — and he could not keep his eyes off Roger.

LOCILLE'S brother was a huge young man, taller than Cornut, with a pleasant expression and dull eyes. He was not offered coffee and refused cake; he sat there, watching Cornut, fingering the worn fabric of his gift, even smelling it, rubbing it against his face. Cornut found him disconcerting. Bar the aboriginals and a handful of clinical cases under study, there was not one human being on the campus with an IQ under a hundred and ten, and Cornut had no experience of the simple-minded. The boy could talk — but mostly did not — and though he seemed to understand what Cornut was saying, he never changed expression.

The fact of the matter was that Roger didn't much care what Cornut was saying. His whole attention was taken up with his gift. As soon as he thought it was proper to do so, he excused himself and carried it to his room.

Roger was aware that it was very old and came from very far away, but that could have been something of last week's, from the city just below the horizon; he had little memory. What Roger thought principally about the flag was that it was a pretty color.

He fixed it with magnetic tacks to the wall of his room, stood back thoughtfully, removed the tacks and replaced the flag closer to his bed. He stood there looking at it, because somehow it satisfied him to stand and look at it.

It was bright moonlight outside, but there was a fair wind sweeping across the long reach from Portugal. The waves were high; and the pneumatic hammer-hammer, and the rattleslam of the valves opening and closing pounded through the texas, one noise reinforcing the other. It made it hard for anyone to talk in the other room. (Cornut was

growing more and more hoarse and deafened and uneasy.) But it didn't bother Roger. Since the day his own crushed skull had minced a corner of his brain, nothing had really *bothered* Roger.

He liked the flag. After ten minutes of staring at it, he took off the magnets that held it, folded it and put it under his pillow. Smiling with pleasure, he went back into the other room to say goodnight to his sister's new husband.

IX

MASTER Carl lighted a do-not-disturb sign on his door and opened the folding screen that hid his little darkroom from the casual eyes of the student housekeepers. He was not ashamed of the hobby that made him operate a darkroom; it was simply none of their business. Carl was not ashamed of anything he did. His room attested to that; it bore the marks of all his interests.

Three boards held chess problems half worked out and forgotten, the pieces lifted, dusted and replaced by a dozen generations of student maids. On the walls were framed prints of Minoan scenes and inscriptions, the ten-year-old relics of his statistical examination into the grammar of Linear B. A carton that had once contained a dozen packs of Rhine cards (and still contained five unopened packs) showed the two years he had spent in demonstrating to his own satisfaction, once for all, that telepathy was not possible.

The proof rested on an analogy, but Master Carl had satisfied himself that the analogy was valid. If, he supposed, telepathic communications could be subsumed under the general equations of Unified Field Law, it had to fall into one of the two possible categories therein. It could be tunable, like the electromagnetic spectrum; or it could be purely quantitative, like the kineto-gravitic realms. He eliminated the second possibility at once: it implied that every thought would be received by every person within range, and observation denied that on the face of it.

Telepathy, if it existed at all, therefore had to be tunable. Carl then applied his analogy. Crystals identical in structure resonate at the same frequency. Humans identical in structure do exist; they are called identical twins. For two years Master Carl had spent most of his free time locating, persuading and testing pairs of identical twins.

It took two years, and no more,

because that was how long it took him to find three hundred and twenty-six pairs; and three hundred and twenty-six was the number the chi-square law gave as the minimum universe in which a statistical sampling could be regarded as conclusive. As soon as the three hundred and twenty-sixth twin had failed to secure significantly more than chance correlation with the card symbols viewed by his sibling, Carl had closed out the experiment at once.

When the two-year job was ended, Carl was not angry; he had simply disproved something. It did not occur to him to go on to a three hundred and twenty-seventh set. He did, however, permit himself to turn to investigating other aspects of what had once been called psionics.

PRECOGNITION he eliminated on logical grounds. Clairvoyance he pondered over for several months before deciding that, like the conjecture that flying saucers were of extraterrestrial origin, it offered too few opportunities for experimental verification to be an attractive study. Hexing he ruled out as necessarily involving either telepathy or clairvoyance. It was not the cases in which the sufferer knew he was hexed that offered a problem; simple suggestion could account for most of those — a man who saw the wax doll with the pins in it, or was told by the ju-ju man that his toenails were being roasted, might very easily sicken and die out of fear. But if the victim did not learn of his hex through physical means, he could learn only by either telepathy or clairvoyance; and Carl had eliminated them.

The traditional list of paranormal powers included only two other phenomena: Fire-sending and telekinesis.

Carl elected to consider the first only a subdivision of the second. Speeding the Brownian movement of molecules (i.e., heating them) to the point of flame was surely no different in kind than gross manipulation of groups of molecules (i.e., moving material objects).

His first attempts at telekinesis involved a weary time of attempting to shift bits of matter, papers first, then balanced pins, hanging threads, finally grains of dust on a microbalance. There was no result. Co-opting some help from Classical Physics, Carl then began a series of tests involving photographic film. It was, the drafted physicists assured him, the medium in which the least physical force produced the greatest measurable effect. A photon, a free electron, almost any particle containing energy

could shift the unstable molecules in the film emulsion.

Carl worked with higher speed emulsions, and higher and higher, learning tricks to make the film still more sensitive — special developers, close temperature control, pre-exposing the film to "soak up" part of the energy necessary to produce an image.

With each new batch of film, he sat for hours, attempting to paint circles, crosses and stars on the emulsion with his mind, visualizing the molecules and willing the change-over. He scissored out stencils and held them over the wrapped film packs, considering it possible that the mental "radiation" might show only as a point source.

He had one temporary and illusive success: A plate of particularly trigger-happy film, wrapped under his pillow all one night, developed the next morning into a ghostly, wavering "X." Master Florian of Photochemistry disillusioned him. Carl had only succeeded in so sensitizing the film that it reacted to the tiny infrared produced by his own body heat.

MASTER Carl's project for this night involved pre-exposing a specially manufactured batch of X-ray film by means of contact with a sheet of luminescent paper. The faint gamma radiation from the paper needed hours to affect the emulsion, but those hours had to be accurately timed.

To fill the space of those hours, Master Carl had another pleasant task. He sent a student courier to his office for the unfinished draft he had abstracted from Cornut's room. It was headed:

A Reconciliation
Of Certain Apparent Anomalies
In Wolgren's Distributive Law

Carl drew a stiff-backed chair up to his desk and began to read, enjoying himself very much.

Wolgren's Law, which had to do with the distribution of non-uniform elements in random populations, was purely a mathematician's rule. It did not deal with material objects; it did not even deal with numerical quantities as such. Yet Wolgren's Law had found applications in every sort of sampling technique known to man, from setting parameters for rejecting inferior batches of canned sardines to predicting election results. It was a general law, but the specific rules that could be drawn from it had proved themselves in nearly every practical test.

In every test but one.

One of Carl's graduate students attempted to reconcile the

Wolgren rule with census data for his doctoral thesis — queerly, the subject seemed never to have been covered. The boy failed. He found another subject, got his degree and was now happily designing communications systems for the TV syndicates, but in failing he had produced a problem worth the attention of a first-rate mathematician; and Carl had offered it to Cornut.

Cornut had worked on it, in his own after-hours time, for six months. Incomplete as it was, the report gave Master Carl three hours of intensive enjoyment. Trust Cornut to do a beautiful job!

Carl followed every step, mumbling to himself, cocking an eyebrow at the use of chi-squared until it was proved by a daring extension of Gibbs' phase-analysis rule. The mathematical statement concerned him, not the subject of census figures themselves.

It was only when he had finished the report and sat back, glowing, that he wondered why Cornut had thought it was not finished. But it was! Every equation checked! The constants were standard and correct, the variables were pinned down and identified with page after page of expansions.

"Very queer," said Carl to himself, staring vacantly at the bench where his X-ray film was quietly soaking up electrons. "I wonder if —"

He shrugged and attempted to dismiss the problem. It would not be dismissed. He thought for a moment of calling in Cornut, but stopped himself. The boy would not be back from his visit to Locille's family, and even if he were, it was no longer in good taste to burst in on him.

Dissatisfied, Master Carl read again the last page of the report. The math was correct. This time he allowed the sense of it to penetrate: "Of n births, the attained age of the oldest member of the population shall equal n times a constant e-log q." Well? Why not?

Carl was irritated. He glanced at his clock. It was only ten.

Frowning, he buttoned his jacket and went out, leaving lights on, door open, report open on the desk . . . and the X-ray film still firmly taped to its gamma-emitting paper.

NO one answered his knock on Cornut's door, so Master Carl, after a moment's thought, pushed it open. The room was empty; the couple had not returned from the texas.

Carl grumbled at the night-proctor and took the elevator down to the campus. He thought a stroll might help. It was chilly, but he scarcely noticed. The q

quantity — was there something wrong with that? But its expansions were all in order. He recalled, as clearly as though they were imprinted on the wall of the Administration Building ahead of him, the equations defining *q;* he even remembered what quantities those equations involved. Public health, warfare, food supply, a trickily derived value for the state of the public mind . . . they had all been in the accompanying tabulations.

"Good night, Carl-san."

He stopped, blinking through the woven iron fence. He had reached the small encampment where the aboriginals were housed; the captain, whatever his name was, had greeted him.

"I thought you people were off — ah — lecturing," Carl said lamely. "On exhibition," he had been about to say.

"Tomorrow, Carl-san," said the waffle-faced man, offering Carl a long, feathered pipe. That had been in the briefing; it was a peace pipe, a quaint and for some reason, to the anthropologists a surprising, custom of the islanders. Carl shook his head. The man — Carl remembered his name; it was Masatura-san — said apologetically, "You softspeak hard, sir. I smell you coming long way yesterday."

"Really?" said Carl, not hearing a word. He was thinking about e-log and the validity of applying it; but that had been all right, too.

"Softspeak brownie not smell good," the man explained seriously.

"No, of course not." Carl was wondering about the values for *a*, the age factor in the final equation.

Tai-i Masatura-san said, growing agitated: "Cornut-san smell bad also, St. Cyr-san speak. Carl-san! Not speak brownie!"

Master Carl glanced at him. "Certainly," he said. "Good night."

The tai-i called after him beseechingly, but Carl still did not hear; he had realized what it was that was unfinished about Cornut's report. The numerical values had been given for every quantity but one.

It was still early; he did not intend to sleep until he had that one remaining value . . .

CORNUT, with his arm around Locille, yawned into the face of the red moon that hung over the horizon. It was growing very late.

They had had to take the ferry to the city and wait to transfer; the only direct popper from the texas to the city was in mid-morning, and Locille's family had no place to put them up. Nor, if they had, would Cornut have

stayed. He needed time to become accustomed to domesticity — it was too many things at once; bad enough that he should have to interrupt his routine to accommodate Locille's presence in his room.

But it was, on the whole, worth while.

The University was under them now, the cables of the bridge lacing the red moon, the lights from the Administration Building bright in the dark mass of towers.

It was odd that the Administration Building should still be lighted.

Drowsily Cornut looked, out of the corner of his eye, at the neat, sleepy head of his wife. He did not know if he liked her better or worse as a member of a family. Her parents — dull — amiable, he supposed, but he was used to brilliance. And her brother was an unfortunate accident, of course, but he had been so enchanted with the rag Locille had brought him, like a child, like an animal. Cornut was not quite pleased to be related to him. Naturally you couldn't choose your relatives. His own children, for example, might be quite disappointing . . .

His own children!

The thought had come quite naturally; but he had never had that particular thought before. Involuntarily he shivered, and looked again at Locille.

She said sleepily, "What's the matter?" And then: "Oh. Why, I wonder what they want."

The ferry was coming in close, and on the hardstand several men were waiting patiently, behind them a police popper, its blades still but its official-business light winking red. In the floodlights that revealed the landing X to the pilot, Cornut recognized one of the men, an administration staffer; the others all wore uniforms.

"I wonder," he said, glad that he didn't have to explain the shudder. "Well, I'll certainly sleep tonight." He took her hand and helped her, unnecessarily but pleasurably, down the steps.

A squat uniformed man stepped forward. "Master Cornut? Sergeant Rhame. You undoubtedly don't remember me, but —"

Cornut said, "But I do. You were in one of my classes six or seven years ago. Master Carl recommended you; in fact, he was your advocate at the orals for your thesis."

There was a pause. "Yes, that's right," said Rhame. "He wanted me to apply for the faculty, but I'd majored in forensic probabilistics and the Force had already accepted me, and — well, that's a long time ago."

Cornut nodded pleasantly.

"Nice to see you again, Rhame. Good night."

RHAME shook his head. Cornut stopped, a quick, vague fear beginning to pulse in his mind. No one enjoys the sudden knowledge that the policeman in front of him wants to discuss official business; Rhame's expression told Cornut that that was so.

Cornut said sharply: "What is it?"

Rhame was not enjoying himself. "I've been waiting for you. It's about Master Carl; you're his closest friend, you know. There are some questions —"

Cornut hardly noticed Locille's sudden, frightened clutching at his arm. He stated: "Something's happened to Carl."

Rhame spread his hands. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew. The lieutenant sent word to have you called from the texas; you must have left before the message got there." He was trying to be kind, Cornut saw. "It happened about an hour ago, around twelve o'clock. The president had gone to bed — St. Cyr, I mean. Master Carl came storming into his residence — very angry, the housekeeper said."

"Angry about what?" asked Cornut in alarm.

"I was hoping you could tell us that. It must have been something pretty serious. He tried to kill St. Cyr with an axe. Fortunately —" He hesitated, but could find no way to withdraw the word. "As it happened, that is, the president's bodyguard was nearby. He couldn't stop Master Carl any other way. He shot Master Carl to death."

X

CORNUT went through that night and the next day in confusion. It was all very simple, everything was made easy for him, but it was impossibly hard to take. Carl dead! The old man shot down — attempting to commit a murder! It was more than unbelievable, it was simply fantastic. Cornut could not admit its possibility for a second.

But he could not deny that it had happened.

Locille was with him almost every moment, closer than a wife, even closer than a watchdog. He didn't notice she was there. But he would have noticed if she were missing. It was as though she had always been there, all his life, because his life was now something radically new, different, something that had begun at one o'clock in the morning, stepping out of a ferry popper to see Sergeant Rhame.

Rhame had asked him all the necessary questions in a quarter

of an hour, but he had not left him then. It was charity, not duty, that kept him. A policeman, even a forensic probabilistician detailed to Homicide at his own personal request, is used to violence and unlikely murderers, and can sometimes help explain difficult facts to the innocent bystanders. He tried. Cornut was not grateful. He was only dazed.

He canceled his classes for the next day — tapes would do — and accompanied Rhame on a laborious retracing of Carl's last moves. First they visited St. Cyr's residence and found the president awake and icy. He did not seem shaken by his experience; but then he never did.

He gave them only a moment of his time. "Carl — a kill-er. It is a great shock, Cor-nut. Ge-ni-us, we can-not ex-pect it to be sta-ble, I sup-pose."

Cornut did not want to linger. St. Cyr's presence was never attractive, but the thing that repelled him about the interview was the sight of the 15th century halberd replaced on the floor where, they said, Master Carl had dropped it as the gunman shot him down. The pile of the carpet there was crisper, cleaner than the rest. Cornut was sickly aware that it had been washed, and aware what stain had been so quickly dissolved away.

He was glad to be out of the president's richly furnished residence, though the rest of the day was also no joy. Their next stop was the night-proctor on Carl's floor, who confirmed that the house master had left at about ten o'clock, seeming disturbed about something but, in his natural custom, giving no clue as to its nature to an undergraduate. Because it did not occur to them to question the aboriginals, they did not learn of his brief and entirely one-sided conversation, but they picked up his trail at the next point.

MASTER Carl had turned up at the Stacks at twenty-five minutes past ten, demanding instant service from the night librarian.

The librarian was a student, working off part of his tuition, as most students did. He was embarrassed and Cornut quickly deduced why. "You were asleep, weren't you?"

The student nodded, hanging his head. The news of Master Carl's death had reached every night clerk on the campus, and the boy had been unable to get to sleep. "He gave me five demerits and —" He stopped, suddenly angry with himself.

"Consider them canceled," Cornut said kindly. "You're quite right in telling us about the demerits, however. Sergeant

Rhame needs all the information."

"Thank you, Master Cornut. I — uh — I also didn't have a chance to get the ashtray off my desk, and he noticed it. But he just said he wanted to use the Stacks." The undergraduate waved toward the great air-conditioned hall where the taped and microfilmed University Library was kept. The library computer was served by some of the same circuits as the Student Test-Indices (College Examinations) Digital Computer on the level above it; all the larger computers on the campus were cross-hooked to some degree.

Rhame was staring at the layout. "It's got more complicated since I was here," he said. "Did Master Carl know how to use it?"

The student grinned. "He thought he did. Then he came storming back to me. He couldn't get the data he wanted. So I tried to help him — but it was classified data. Census figures."

"Ah," said Cornut.

Sergeant Rhame turned and looked at him. "Ah what?"

Cornut said, "I think I know what he was after, that's all. It was the Wolgren."

Rhame understood what he was talking about — fortunately, for it had not occurred to Cornut that anyone would fail to be aware of Wolgren's Distributive Law. Rhame said, "I only use some special Wolgren functions. I don't see exactly what it has to do with census figures."

Cornut sat down, beginning to lecture. Without looking, he put out his hand and Locille, still with him, took it. "It's not important to what you're looking for. Anyway, I don't *think* it is. We had a question up for study — some anomalies in the Wolgren distribution of the census figures — and, naturally, there shouldn't be any anomalies. So I took it as a part-time project."

HE frowned. "I thought I had it beaten, but I ran into trouble. Some of the values derived from my equations turned out to be ridiculous. I tried to get the real values, but I got the same answer as Master Carl — they were classified. Silly, of course."

The student librarian chimed in, "*He* said moronic. He said he was going to take it up with the Saint —" He stopped, blushing.

Rhame said, "Well, I guess he did. What were the values that bothered you?"

Cornut shook his head. "Not important; they're wrong. Only I couldn't find my mistake. So I kept going over the math. I suppose Carl went through the same thing, and then decided to

take a look at the real values in the hope that they'd give some clue, just as I did."

"Let's take a look," said Rhame. The student librarian led them to the library computer, but Cornut nodded him aside. He set up the integrals without any assistance.

"Age values," he explained. "Nothing of any great importance. No reason it should be a secret. But —"

He finished with the keyboard and indicated the viewer of the screen. It flickered and then bloomed with a blunt legend:

CLASSIFIED INFORMATION

Rhame stared at the words. He said, "I don't know."

"I can't believe it, either. True, Carl was a house master. He felt he had certain rights . . ."

The policeman nodded. "What about it, son? Did he act peculiar?"

"He was mad as hell," said the student librarian. "He said he was going right over to the S — to the president's residence and get clearance to receive the data. Said it was moronic — let's see — 'moronic, incompetent bureaucracy,' " he finished with satisfaction.

Sergeant Rhame looked at Cornut. "Well, the inquest will have to decide," he said after a moment.

"Do you think he would try to *kill* a man because of anything like this?" Cornut demanded harshly.

"Master Cornut," said the policeman slowly, "I don't think anybody ever really wants to kill anybody. But he blew his top. If he was angry enough, who knows?" He didn't give Cornut a chance to debate the matter. "I guess that's all," he said, turning back to the night librarian. "Unless he said anything else?"

The student hesitated, then grinned faintly. "Just one other thing. As he was leaving, he gave me ten more demerits for smoking on duty."

THE following morning Cornut was summoned to the chancellor's office to hear the reading of Carl's will.

Cornut was only mildly surprised to find that he was Master Carl's sole heir. He was touched, however. And he was saddened, for Master Carl's own voice told him about it.

That was the approved way of recording the most important documents, and it was like Master Carl to believe that the disposition of his tiny estate was of great importance. It was a tape of his image that recited the sonorous phrases: "Being of

sound and disposing mind, I devise and bequeath unto my dear friend, Master Cornut —"

Cornut sat blinking at the image. It was entirely lifelike. That, of course, was the point; papers could be forged and sound tapes could be altered, but there was no artisan in the world who could quite succeed in making a change in a video tape without leaving a trace. The voice was the voice that had boomed out of millions of student television sets for decades.

Watching, Cornut hardly listened to the words but found himself trying to tell when it was that Carl had made the decision to leave him all his worldly goods. The cloak, he recalled vaguely, was an old one; but when was it Carl had stopped wearing it?

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered about Master Carl, not any more; the tape rattled and flapped off the reel, and the picture of Master Carl vanished from the screen.

Locille's hand touched his shoulder.

The chancellor said cheerfully, "Well, that's it. All yours. Here's the inventory."

Cornut glanced over it rapidly. Books, more than a thousand of them, value fixed by the appraisers (they must have been working day and night!) at five hundred dollars and a bit. Clothing and personal effects — Cornut involuntarily grinned — an arbitrary value of $1. Cash on hand, a shade over a thousand dollars, including the money in his pocket when he died. Equity in the University pension plan, $8,460; monthly salary due, calculated to the hour of death, $271; residuals accruing from future use of taped lectures, estimated, $500. Cornut winced. Carl would have been hurt by that, but it was true; there was less and less need for his old tapes, with newer professors using newer techniques. And there was an estimate of future royalties to be earned by his mnemonic songs, and that was unkindest of all: $50.

CORNUT did not bother to read the itemized liabilities — inheritance tax, income tax, miscellaneous bills. He only noted the net balance was a shade over $8,000.

The funeral director walked silently from the back of the room and suggested, rather handsomely, "Call it eight thousand even. Satisfactory? Then sign here, Master Cornut."

"Here" was at the bottom of a standard mortuary agreement, with the usual fifty-fifty split between the heirs and the mortician. Cornut signed quickly, with

a feeling of slight relief. He was getting off very lightly. With cemetery space at such a premium, the statutory minimum fee for a basic funeral was $2500. If the estate had been less than $5,000, he would have inherited only the balance above $2500. If it had been under $2500, he would have had to make up the difference. That was the law. More than one beneficiary, legally responsible for funeral expenses, had regretted the generous remembering of the deceased. (In fact, there were paupers in the world who sold their wills as an instrument of revenge on occasion. For food, drink, clothing, or whatever, they would bequeath their paltry all to the benefactor's worst enemy, who would then, sooner or later, find himself saddled with an inescapable $2500 cost.)

Sergeant Rhame was waiting for them outside the chancellor's office. "Do you mind?" he asked politely, holding out his hand. Cornut handed over the mortuary agreement, containing the inventory of Carl's estate. The policeman studied it thoughtfully, then shook his head. "Not much money, but he didn't need much, did he? It doesn't help explain anything." He glanced at his watch. "I'll walk over with you. Were due right now at the inquest."

As a tribute to the University the state medical examiner had impaneled a dozen faculty members as his jury. Only one was from the Mathematics Department, a woman professor named Janet, but Cornut dimly recognized several of the others from faculty teas and walks on the campus.

St. Cyr testified, briefly and in his customary uninflected pendulum-tick voice, that Master Carl had shown no previous signs of insanity but had been wild and threatening indeed the night of his death.

St. Cyr's housekeeper testified the same, adding that she had feared for her own life.

The bodyguard who killed Carl took the stand. Cornut felt Locille shrink in the seat beside him; he understood; he felt the same revulsion. The man did not seem much different from other men, though. He was middle-aged, husky, with a slight speech impediment.

He stated that he had been in President St. Cyr's employ for nearly ten years; that he had once been a policeman and that it was not uncommon for very wealthy men to hire ex-policemen as bodyguards; and that he had never before had to kill anyone in defense of St. Cyr's life. "But this one. He was dangerous. He was . . . going to kill . . .

somebody." He got the words out slowly, but without appearing particularly concerned.

Then there were a few others — Cornut himself, the night-proctor, the student librarian, even the sexwriter, Farley, who said that Master Carl had indeed seemed agitated on his one personal contact with him but, of course, the occasion had been a disturbing one — Farley had told him of Master Cornut's most recent suicide attempt. Cornut attempted to ignore the faces that turned toward him.

The verdict took five minutes: "Killed in self-defense, in the course of attempting to commit murder."

For days after that, Cornut kept away from St. Cyr's residence, for the sake of avoiding Carl's executioner. He had never seen the man before Carl was killed and never wanted to see him again.

But as time passed, Carl's death dwindled in his mind; his own troubles, more and more, filled it. He began to approach, then reached, finally passed the all-time record for suiciders.

HE was still alive because of the endless patience and watchfulness of Locille. Every night she watched him go to sleep; every morning she was up before him.

She began to look pale, and he found her taking catnaps in the dressing room while he was lecturing to his classes, but she did not complain.

She also did not tell him, until he found the marks and guessed, that twice in one week, even with her alert beside him, he had nearly severed his wrists, first on a letter opener, second on a broken drinking tumbler. When he chided her for not telling him, she kissed him. That was all.

He was having dreams, too, queer ones; he remembered them sharply when he woke, and for a while told them to Locille, and then stopped. They were very peculiar. They had to do with being watched—being watched by some gruff, irritated warden, or by a hostile Roman crowd waiting for his blood in the arena.

They were unpleasant and he tried to analyze them by himself. It was because he was subconsciously aware of Locille watching him, he told himself; and in the next breath said, *Paranoia*. He did not believe it . . . but what then?

He considered returning to his analyst, but when he broached it to Locille, she only looked paler and more strained. Some of the sudden joy had gone out of their love, and that worried Cornut, and it did not occur to him that

the building of trust and solidarity between them was perhaps worth more.

But not all the joy had gone. Apart from interludes of passion, somewhat constrained by Locille's ironclad determination to stay awake until he was fully asleep, apart from the trust and closeness, there were other things. There was the interest of work shared, for as Cornut's wife Locille became more his pupil than ever before in one of his classes; together they rechecked the Wolgren, found it correct, shelved it for lack of confirming data and began a new study of prime distribution in very large numbers. They were walking back to the Math Tower one warm day, planning a new approach through analytic use of the laws of congruence, when Locille stopped and caught his arm.

Egerd was coming toward them.

He was tanned, but he did not look well. Part of it was for reasons Cornut had only slowly come to know; he was uncomfortable in the presence of the girl he loved and the man she had married. But there was something else. He looked sick.

Locille was direct: "What in the world's the matter with you?"

Egerd grinned. "Don't you know about Med School? It's traditional, hazing freshmen. The usual treatment is a skin fungus that turns sweat rancid, so you stink, or a few drops of something that makes you break out in orange blotches, or—well, never mind. Some of the jokes are kind of, uh, personal."

Locille said angrily: "That's terrible! It isn't a bit funny to me, Egerd!"

Cornut said to her, after Egerd had left, "Boys will be boys." She looked at him swiftly. Cornut knew his tone had been callous. He didn't know that she understood why; he thought his sudden sharp stab of jealousy had been perfectly concealed.

A LITTLE over two weeks after Master Carl's death, the proctor knocked on Cornut's door to say that he had a visitor. It was Sergeant Rhame, with a suitcase full of odds and ends. "Master Carl's personal effects," he said. "They belong to you now. Naturally, we had to borrow them for examination."

Cornut shrugged. The stuff was of no great value. He poked through the suitcase; some shabby toilet articles, a book marked *Diary*—he flipped it open hopefully, but it recorded only demerits and class attendances—an envelope containing photographic film.

Sergeant Rhame said: "That's what I wanted to ask you about. He had a lot of photographic equipment. We found several packs of film, unopened, which Master Carl had pressed against some kind of radiation-emitting paint on a paper base. The lab spent a lot of time trying to figure it out. They guessed he was trying to get the gamma radiation from the paint to register on the film, but we don't know why."

Cornut said: "Neither do I, but I can make a guess." He told Rhame about Carl's off-duty interests, and the endless laborious work that he had been willing to put into them. "I'm not sure what his present line was, but I know it had something to do with trying to get prints of geometrical figures—stars, circles, that sort of thing. Do you mean he finally succeeded in getting one?"

"Not exactly." Sergeant Rhame opened the package and handed Cornut a glossy print. "All the negatives were blank except one. This one. Make anything of it?"

Cornut studied it. It seemed to be a photograph of a sign or a printer's proof. He puzzled over it for a while, then shook his head.

The lettering on the print said simply:

YOU DAMN OLD FOOL

XI

THE wind was brisk, and the stretched cables under the texas made a bull-roarer sound as they vibrated. The pneumatic generators rattled, whined and crashed. Locille's brother was too used to them to notice.

He was feeling rather poorly, but it was his custom to do what his parents expected him to do, and they expected that he would watch the University broadcasts of his sister's classes. The present class was Cornut's, and Roger eyed with polite ignorance the professor's closely reasoned exposition of Wilson's Theorem. He watched the dancing girls and the animated figures with more interest, but it was, on the whole, a disappointing show. The camera panned the studio audience only twice, and in neither case was he able to catch a glimpse of Locille.

He reported to his mother, took his last look at the flag Locille had brought him, and went to work.

As the day wore on, Roger felt worse. First it was his head pounding, then his bones aching, then an irresistible sudden nausea. Roger's job was conducive to that; he spent the whole day standing thigh-deep in a smelly fluid composed of salt water, fish lymph and blood.

Ordinarily it didn't bother him (as nothing much bothered him, anyhow). Today was different. He steadied himself with one hand against a steel-topped table, shook his head violently to clear it. He had just come back from a hasty trip to the washroom, where he had vomited. Now it seemed he was close to having to race out there again.

Down the table, the sorter called: "Roger! *Hey!* You're holding up the works."

Roger rubbed the back of his neck and mumbled something that was not intelligible, even to himself. He got back to work because he had to; the fish were piling up.

It was the sorter's job to separate the females of the stocked Atlantic salmon run from the males. The male fish were thrust down a chute to a quick and undistinguished death. But the females, in breeding season, contained something too valuable to be wasted on the mash of entrails and bony parts that made dry fish meal. That was Roger's job—Roger's and a few dozen others who stood at tables just like his.

The first step was to grasp the flopping female by the tail with one hand and club her brains out. The second was to hold her with both hands, exposing her belly to his partner across the table, whose knift ripped open the egg sac inside. (Sometimes the knife missed. Roger's job was not sought after.) A quick wringing motion; the eggs poured one way, the gutted body slid another, and he was ready for the next fish. Even the dullest grew to dislike the work. Roger had held the same job for four years.

"Come on, Roger!" the sorter was yelling at him again.

Roger stared at him woozily. For the first time he became suddenly aware of the constant *slam,* bang, rattle, *roar* that permeated the low-level fishery plant. He opened his mouth to say something, and then he ran. He made it to the washroom, but just barely in time.

AN hour later, his mother was astonished to see him home. "What happened?"

He tried to relate everything that had happened, but it involved some complicated words. He settled for: "I didn't feel good."

She was worried. Roger was always healthy. He didn't look good, ever, but that was because the part of his brain that was damaged had something to do with his muscle tone; but in fact he had been sick hardly a week's total in his life.

She said doubtfully: "Your father will be home in an hour

or so, but maybe I ought to call him. I wonder. What do you think, Roger?"

That was rhetoric; she had long since reconciled herself to the fact that her son did not think. He stumbled and straightened up, scowling. The back of his neck was beginning to pain badly. He was in no mood to contemplate hard questions. What he wanted was to go to bed, with Locille's flag by his pillow, so that he could fondle it drowsily before he slept. That was what he liked. He told his mother so.

She was seriously concerned now. "You *are* sick. I'd better call the clinic. You go lie down."

"No. No, you don't have to. They called at the place." He swallowed with some pain; he was beginning to shiver. "Mr. Garney took me to the dia — the dia —"

"The diagnosticon at the clinic, Roger."

"Yes, and I got some pills." He reached in his pocket and held up a little box. "I already took one and I have to take some more later."

His mother was not satisfied, but she was no longer very worried; the diagnostic equipment did not often fail. "It's that cold water you stand in," she said, helping him to his room. "I've told you, Roger, you ought to have a better job. Slicer, maybe even sorter. Or maybe you can get out of that part of it altogether. You've worked there enough years . . ."

"Good night," Roger said inappropriately — it was early afternoon. He began to get ready for bed, feeling a little better in the familiar, comfortable room with his familiar, comfortable bed and the little old Japanese flag wadded up by the pillow. "I'm going to sleep now," he told her, and got rid of her at last.

He huddled under the warming covers — set as high as the rheostat would go, but still not high enough to warm his shaking body. The pain in his head was almost blinding now.

At the clinic, Mr. Garney had been painfully careful to explain what the pills were for. They would take away the pain, stop the throbbing, make him comfortable, let him sleep. Feverishly Roger shook another one out of the box and swallowed it.

It worked, of course. The clinic's pills always performed as advertised. The pain dwindled to a bearable ache, then to a memory. The throbbing stopped.

Roger felt drowsily peaceful. He could not see his face and therefore did not know how flushed it was becoming. He had no idea that his temperature was climbing rapidly. He went quite

happily to sleep — with the old, frayed flag against his cheek — just as he had done for nearly three weeks now, and as he would never in this life do again.

THE reason Roger hadn't seen his sister in the audience was that she wasn't there; she was waiting in Cornut's little dressing room. Cornut suggested it. "You need the rest," he said solicitously, and promised to review the lesson with her later.

Actually he had another motive entirely. As soon as he was off the air, he wrote a note for Locille and gave it to a student to deliver:

There's something I have to do. I'll be gone for a couple of hours. I promise I'll be all right. Don't worry.

Before the note reached her, Cornut was at the bridge, in the elevator, on his way to the city.

He did have something to do and he did not want to talk to Locille about it. The odd dreams had been worsening, and there had been other things. He nearly always had a hangover now, for instance. He had found that a few drinks at night made him sleep better and he had come to rely on them.

And there was something else about which he could not talk to Locille at all because she would not talk.

The monotrack let him out far downtown, in a bright, noisy, stuffy underground station. He paused at a phone booth to check the address of the sexwriter, Farley, and hurried up to street level, anxious to get away from the smell and noise. That was a mistake. In the open, the noise pounded more furiously, the air was even more foul. Great cubical blocks of buildings rose over him; small three-wheeled cars and large commercial vehicles pounded on two levels around him. It was only a minute's walk to Farley's office, but the minute was an ordeal.

The sign on the door was the same as the lettering on his folder:

S. R. Farley

Consultant

The sexwriter's secretary looked very doubtful, but finally reported that Mr. Farley would be able to see Master Cornut without an appointment.

Cornut went in, sat across the desk, refused a cigarette and said directly: "I've studied the sample scripts you left for us, Farley. They're interesting, though I don't believe I'll require your services in future. I think I've

grasped the notation, and I find that there is one page of constants which seems to describe the personality of my wife and myself."

"Oh, yes. Very important," said Farley. "Yours is incomplete — I had no real opportunity to interview you — but I secured your personnel-file data, the profile from the Med Center and so on."

"Good. Now I have a question to ask you."

Cornut hesitated. The proper way to ask the question was to say: "I suspect, from a hazy, sleepy recollection, that the other morning I made a rather odd suggestion to my wife." That was the proper way, but it was embarrassing, and it also involved a probability of having to reveal how many rather odd things he had done, some of them nearly fatal, in those half-waking moments . . .

"Let me borrow a piece of paper," he said instead, and rapidly sketched in a line of symbols. Stating the problem in terms of ♂ and ♀ made it vastly less embarrassing. He shoved it across the desk to the sexwriter. "What would you say to this? Does it fit in with your profile of our personalities?"

Farley studied the line and raised his eyebrows. "Absolutely not!" he said. "You wouldn't think of it and she wouldn't accept it!"

"You could say it was an objectionable thing?"

"*Master Cornut!* Don't use moralistic terms! What is customary and moral in one place is—"

"Please, Mr. Farley. In terms of our own personalities—you have them sketched out on the profile—this would be objectionable?"

The sexwriter laughed. "More than that, Master Cornut. It would be absolutely impossible."

Cornut took a deep breath. "But suppose," he said after a moment, "I told you that I had proposed this to my wife."

Farley drummed his fingers on the desk. "Then I can only say that other factors are involved."

"Like what?"

Farley said seriously: "You must be trying to drive her away from you."

IN the two blocks between Farley's office and the monotrack station entrance, Cornut saw three men killed; a turbotruck on the upper traffic level seemed to stagger, grazed another vehicle and shot through the guard rail, killing its driver and two pedestrians.

It was a shocking interpolation of violence into Cornut's

academic life, but it seemed quite in keeping with the rest of his day. His own life was rapidly going as badly out of control as the truck.

You must be trying to drive her away from you.

Cornut boarded his train, hardly noticing, thinking hard. He didn't *want* to drive Locille away!

But he also did not *want* to kill himself, and yet there was no doubt that he had kept trying. It was all part of a pattern and there could be no doubt of its sum: He was trying to destroy himself in every way. Failing to end his life, that destroyer inside himself was trying to end the part of his life that had grown to mean most to him, his love for Locille. And yet it was the same thing really, he thought, for with Locille gone, Carl dead, Egerd transferred, he would have no one close to him to help him through the dangerous half-awake moments that came at least twice in every twenty-four hours.

He would not last a day.

He slumped back into his seat, with the first sensation of despair he had ever felt. One part of his mind said judgmatically: "It's too bad."

Another part entirely was taking in his surroundings. Even in his despair, the novelty of being among so many non-University people made an impression. They seemed so tired and angry, he thought abstractedly; one or two even looked sick. He wondered if any of them had ever known the helplessness of being under siege from the most insidious enemy of all, himself.

But suppose Master Carl was right after all, said Cornut to himself, quite unexpectedly—what if he was right?

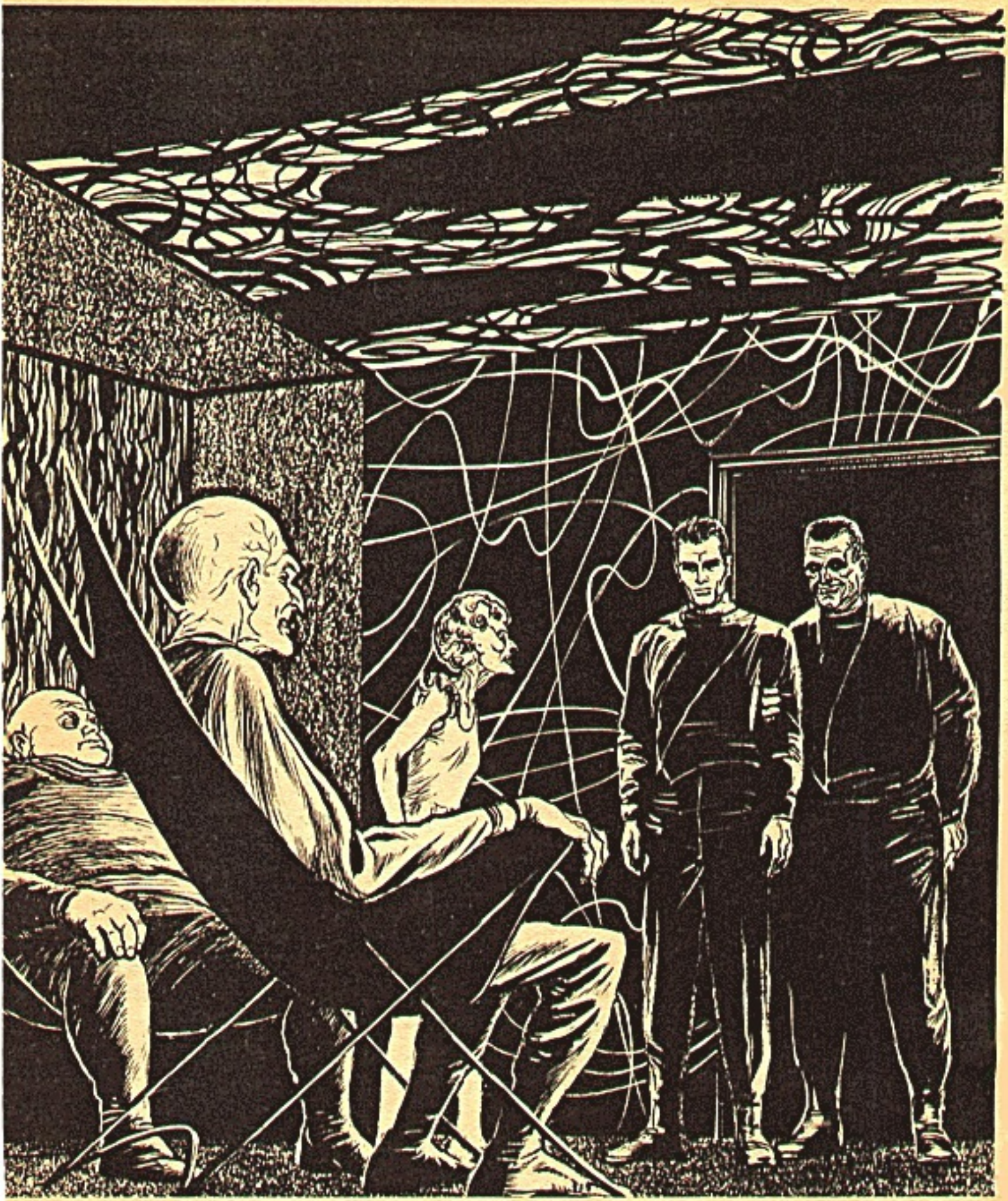
The thought startled Cornut. It came through without preamble, and if there had been a train of rumination that caused it, he had forgotten its existence. Right? Right about what?

The PA system murmured that the next stop was his. Cornut got up absently, thinking. Right?

He had doubted that Master Carl had really tried to kill St. Cyr. But the evidence was against Carl. The police lab had verified his fingerprints on the axe, and they could not have been deceived.

So suppose Carl really had picked up the weapon to split the old man's skull. Incredible! But *if* he had . . . and *if* Carl had not merely gone into an aberrated senile rage . . .

Why, then, said Cornut to himself, emerging from the elevator at the base of the bridge pier and blinking at the familiar



campus, perhaps he had a reason. Perhaps St. Cyr needed killing.

XII

ENTERING the room was like being plunged under the surface of the sea. The lights were blue-green, concealed and reflecting from blue-green walls. A spidery mural of blue and green lines covered one wall like a wave pattern. From boxes along the floor, great curving branches of pale plants from the hybridization farms rose, resembling the kelp of the mermaid forests.

The pelagic motif was not a matter of design; it was only that these shapes and these colors were the ones that most pleased and comforted President St. Cyr. This was his room. Not his study, with its oak panels and ancient armor; not even the "private" drawing room where he sometimes entertained members of the faculty. This was the room he reserved for a very, very few.

Four of these few were present now. A fat man, gross arms quivering, turned himself around and said, "When?" He said, "Do you want us all?" He said, "That's Jillson's job."

St. Cyr grinned and, after a moment, his bodyguard said, "No, I don't. Really. You enjoy it more than I do."

A woman in a preposterously young frock opened her thin-lipped mouth and cackled hilariously when there was a knock on the door.

Jillson, the bodyguard, opened it and revealed St. Cyr's thin, silent housekeeper with Master Cornut.

St. Cyr, on a turquoise wing chair, raised a hand. Jillson took Master Cornut by the arm and led him in, the door behind him closing on the housekeeper.

"Mas-ter Cor-nut," said St. Cyr in his odd, uninflected voice. "I have been wait-ing for you."

The old woman in the young dress laughed shrilly for no visible reason. The bodyguard smiled. The fat man chuckled.

Cornut could not help, even then, looking around this room where he had never been. It was cool—the air was kept a full dozen degrees under the usual room temperature Cornut liked. There was a muted muttering of music in the background, too low to distinguish a tune. And these people—were odd.

He ignored Jillson, the assassin of Master Carl, whom he remembered from the inquest. The fat man blinked at him. "Sen-a-tor Dane," said St. Cyr. "And Miss May Kerbs."

Miss May Kerbs was the one

who had laughed. She swayed over to Cornut, looking like a teen-age girl in her first party formal.

"We were talking about you," she said shrilly, and Cornut, with a physical shock, recognized that this was no teenager.

SHE suddenly resembled the woman from South America whom he had met on the Field Expedition; the features were not much alike, but their state of repair was identical. The face was a skull's face under the makeup. She was fifty if she was a day — no, seventy-five — no, she was older than that. She was older than he liked to think, for a woman who dressed like a brash young girl.

Cornut found himself acknowledging the introductions. Talking about him? What had they been saying?

"We knew you'd be here, pal," said the assassin, Jillson, kindly. "You think we murdered the kid."

"The kid?"

"Master Carl," said Jillson, not quite in a stammer.

He had a reason, said a thought in Cornut's mind. Queerly, it came in the half-stammering accent of Jillson.

"But sit down, Mas-ter Cornut." St. Cyr gestured.

Invitingly, the woman plumped cushions of aqua and turquoise on a divan.

"I don't want to sit down!"

"No. But please do." St. Cyr's blue-tinged face was only polite.

The fat man wheezed, "Too bad, youngster. We didn't want to poke him along. I mean, why bother? But he was a nuisance. Every year," he expanded cheerily, "we get maybe half a dozen who really make nuisances of themselves, mostly like you, some like him. His trouble was going after the classified material in the 'Stacks. Well," he said, severely waving a fat finger, "that material is classified for a reason."

Cornut sat down at last because he couldn't help himself. It was not going at all as he had expected; they were not denying a thing. But to admit that they killed Carl to protect some unimportant statistic in the census figures?

It made no sense!

The blonde laughed piercingly.

"Forgive Miss Kerbs," said the fat man. "She thinks you are funny for presuming to judge whether or not our actions are sensible. Believe me, young man, they are."

Cornut found that he was grinding his teeth. These one-sided conversations, the answers coming before the questions

were spoken, these queer half-understood remarks . . .

It was as though they knew every thought he had.

It was as though they were — but no, it couldn't be! Carl had proved it!

The damn old fool.

Cornut jumped. The thought was in the tones of the fat man's wheeze, and he remembered where he had seen words like that before.

The fat man nodded, his chins pulsing like a floating jellyfish. "We exposed his photographic plate for him," he chuckled. "Oh, yes. It was only a joke, but we knew he would not live to make trouble over it. Once he had the Wolgren analysis, he would have to be helped along." He said politely, "Too bad, because we wanted him to publish his proof that telepathy was impossible. Quite true, it is. For him. But not for us. And unfortunately not, my young friend, for you."

LOCILLE woke shivering, reaching out at once to Cornut's side of the bed; but he was not in it.

She turned on the room lights and scanned the nearest of the battery of clocks; one o'clock in the morning.

Locille got up, looked out the window, listened at the hall door, turned on the broadcast radio, shook the speaker-mike of the University annunciator to make sure it was working, checked the telephone to see that it was not unhooked, sat down on the side of the bed and, finally, began silently to shake. She was frightened.

Whatever compulsion drove Cornut to try suicide had never before stricken him when he was wide-awake and in possession of his thoughts. Was that no longer true? But if it was still true, *why* had he gone off like that?

The radio was whispering persuasively its stream of news bulletins: Strikes in Gary, Indiana, a wreck of a cargo rocket, three hundred cases of Virus Gamma in one twelve-hour period, a catastrophic accident between a nuclear trawler and a texas (she listened briefly, then relaxed) off the coast of Haiti. Because it did not mention Cornut's name, she heard very little. Where could he be?

When the telephone sounded, she answered it at once.

It was not Cornut; it was the rough, quick voice of a busy man. "— asked me to call. She is with your brother. Can you come?"

"My mother asked you to call?"

Impatiently: "That's what I said. Your brother is seriously ill." The voice did not hesitate.

"It is likely that he will die within the next few hours. Goodby."

Locille dressed swiftly. She left urgent instructions with the night-proctor on what to do when — not if; *when* — Cornut returned. Watch him asleep; keep the door open; check him every half hour; be with him when he wakes.

"Yes, ma'am," said the student, and then, with gentleness, "He'll be all right."

But would he? Locille hurried across the campus, closing her mind to that question. It was too late for a ferry from the island. She would have to go to the bridge, ride to the city, hope for a helipopper ferry to the texas from there. The Med Center was bright with lights from many rooms; curious, she thought, and hurried by. In their wired enclosure, the aboriginals were murmuring, not asleep. Curious again.

But suppose the proctor forgot?

Locille reassured herself that he would not forget; he was one of Cornut's own students. In any case, she had to take the chance. She was almost grateful that something was making her leave, for the waiting had been unbearable.

She walked by the president's residence with the barest glance; that it, too, was lighted was of no relevance to her own problems, she thought. In this she was wrong.

It was not until she was actually boarding the monotrack that realization of where she was going and why finally struck her. Roger! He was *dying*.

She began to weep, for Roger, for the missing Cornut, for herself.

AT that moment, Cornut, sore-eyed, was picking himself up from the floor. Over him stood Jillson, holding a club wrapped with a wet cloth. Cornut was aching as he had never imagined he could. He mumbled: "You don't have to hit me any more."

"Per-haps we do," said St. Cyr from his blue-green throne. "We do not like this, you know, but we must."

"Speak for yourself," said Jillson, and the ancient blonde screeched with laughter. They were talking among themselves, Cornut realized; he could hear only the aural part, but they were joking, commenting . . . they were having a fine old time, while this methodical maniac bludgeoned him.

The fat senator wheezed: "Understand our position, Cornut. We aren't cruel. We don't kill you shorties for nothing. But we aren't human and we can't be

judged by human laws . . . All right, Jillson."

The bodyguard brought the club down and Cornut sank against the cushions the thoughtful old blonde kept repiling for him. What made it particularly bad was that the senator held a gun.

The first time Cornut was beaten, he had fought, but then the senator had held him at gunpoint while Jillson systematically battered him. And all the time they kept talking!

St. Cyr said mildly: "Stop."

It was time for another break. That had been the fifth beating in six or seven hours, and in between they had interrogated him.

"Tell us what you un-der-stand, Cor-nut."

The club had taught him obedience. "You are a worldwide organization," he recited, "of the next species after humanity. I understand that. You need to survive and it doesn't matter if the rest of us don't. Through your telepathic abilities you can suggest suicide to some persons who have the power in a latent form —"

Thud.

"An a-bort-ed form," corrected St. Cyr as Cornut struggled erect again after the blow.

He coughed and saw blood on the back of his hand. But he only said: "An aborted form. Like myself."

"Abortions of mutations," chuckled the senator. "Unsuccessful attempts on the part of nature to create others like ourselves."

"Yes. Abortions of mutations, unsuccessful attempts. That is what I am," Cornut parroted. "And — and you are able to suggest many things, as long as the subject has the — the abortive talent, and as long as you are able to reach his mind when it is not fully awake."

The blonde said, "Very good! You're an apt learner, Cornut. But telepathy is only a fringe benefit. Do you know what it is that makes us *really* different?"

He cringed away from Jillson as he shook his head.

The bodyguard glanced at the woman, shrugged and said, "All right, I won't if you say so. Go ahead."

"What it is that makes us different is our age, my dear boy." She giggled shrilly. "For example, I am two hundred and eighty-three years old."

THEY fed him after a while and let him rest.

Although he ached in every cell, there was hardly a mark on him; that was the reason for padding the club. And that had a meaning, too, Cornut thought

painfully. If they didn't want to mark him, then they realized that he would be seen. Which meant that, at least, they weren't going to kill him out of hand and bury him somewhere.

Two hundred and eighty-three years old.

And yet she was the next to youngest of the four of them; Jillson was only a century or so old. The senator had been born while America was still a British colony. St. Cyr had been born in Louis Napoleon's France.

The whole key had been in the restricted areas of the Stacks, for the anomaly in the Wolgren application was not Wolgren's fault at all. What the data would have shown was a failure of some people to die. Statistically insignificant for thousands of years, that fraction had grown and grown in the last two or three centuries — since Lister, since Pasteur, since Fleming. They were immortal not because they could not become diseased or succumb to a wound, but because they would not otherwise die.

WITH the growth of preventive medicine, they had begun to assert their power. They were not wiser than the rest of humanity or stronger. Even their telepathy was, it seemed unique only because the short-lived human had not the time to develop it; it depended on intricate and slow-forming neuronic hookups. Everything that made them powerful was only the gift of time.

They had money. But who, given a century or two of compound interest, could not be as rich as he choose? They had furthered many a war, for what greater boon than war is there to medical science? They had endowed countless foundations, for the surgery of the short-lived could help preserve their own infinitely more valuable lives. And they had only contempt for the short-lived who fed them, served them and made their lives possible.

They *had* to be a closed corporation. Even an immortal needs friends, and the ordinary humans could for them be nothing more than weekend guests.

Contempt . . . and fear. There were the Cornuts, they told him, who had a rudimentary telepathic sense, who could not be allowed to live to develop it. Suggest killing and the short-lived one died; it was that easy. The sleeping mind can build a dream out of a closing door, a distant truck's exhaust. The half-awake mind can convert that dream into action . . .

He heard a shrill laugh and the door opened. Jillson came in

first. "No!" cried Cornut, bracing himself against the club.

XIII

LOCILLE sat next to her mother in the hospital's cafeteria, grateful that at last they had found a place to sit down. The hospital on the texas was unusually busy, worried visitors occupying every inch of space in the waiting room, the halls outside the reception area, even the glassed-in sundeck that hung over the angry waves and was normally used for the comfort of the patients during the day. It was very late and the cafeteria should have been closed, but the hospital had opened it for coffee and very little else.

Her mother said something, but Locille only nodded. She hadn't heard. It was not easy to hear, with the loud bull-roarer *twangg* of the suspended cables from the texas droning at them. And she had, besides, been thinking mostly of Cornut.

There had been no fresh news from the night-proctor on the phone; Cornut still had not returned.

"He ate so well," her mother said suddenly.

Locille patted her hand. The coffee was cold, but she drank it anyhow. The doctor knew where to find her, she thought, though of course he would be busy . . .

"He was the best of my babies," said her mother.

Locille knew that it was very close to ending for her brother. The rash that baffled the medics, the fever that glazed his eyes — these were only the outward indicators of a terrible battle inside his motionless body; they represented the fact of blood and pain and death, but they were not the fact itself. Roger was dying. The outward indicators had been controlled, but salve could only dry up the pustulant sores, pills could only calm his breathing, shots could only ease the pain in his head.

"He ate so well," her mother dreamed aloud, "and he talked at eighteen months. He had a little elephant with a music box and he could wind it up."

"Don't worry," said Locille worriedly.

"But we let him go swimming," sighed her mother, looking around the crowded room. It was she, not Locille, who first saw the nurse coming toward them through the crowd, and she must have known as soon as Locille, from the look on the nurse's face, what the message would be.

"He was the tenth today," whispered the nurse, after look-

ing for a private place to tell them and not finding it. "He never regained consciousness."

CORNUT walked out of the residence, blinking. It was morning. "Nice day," he said politely to Jillson, beside him. Jillson nodded. He was pleased with Cornut. The kid wasn't going to give them any trouble.

As they walked, Jillson "shouted" in Cornut's mind. It was hard with these half-baked telepaths, but it was part of his job. He was the executioner. *You need to die. You'll kill yourself.*

"Oh, yes," said Cornut, aloud. He was surprised. He'd promised, hadn't he? He bore no resentment for the beating. He understood that it had a purpose; the more dazed, the more exhausted he was, the surer their control of him. He had no objection at all to being under the control of four ancient immortals.

You die, Cornut, but what difference does it make? Today, tomorrow, fifty years from now. It's all the same.

"That's right," Cornut agreed politely. He was not very interested. The subject had been thoroughly covered, all night long.

He noticed absently that there was a considerable crowd around the Med Center. The whole campus seemed somehow uneasy.

They crossed under the shadow of the Administration Building and circled around it, toward Math Tower.

You will die, you know, shouted Jillson. *One day the world will wake up and no Cornut. Put a stethoscope to his poor chest, no heartbeats. The sound of a beating heart that you have heard every day of your life will never be heard again.*

Cornut was embarrassed. These things were true; he did not mind being told them, but it was certainly rather immature of Jillson to take such evident pleasure in them.

The brain turns into jelly, chanted Jillson gleefully. *The body turns into slime.* He licked his lips, hot-eyed.

Cornut looked about him, anxious to change the subject. "Isn't that Sergeant Rhame?"

Jillson pounded on: *The hangnail on your thumb that hurts now will dissolve and rot and molder. Not even the pain will ever be thought of by any living human again. Your bedgirl, is there anything you ever put off telling her? You never will now.*

"It is Sergeant Rhame. Sergeant!"

Damn! crashed a thought in Cornut's mind; but Jillson was

smiling, smiling. "Hello, Sergeant," he said with his voice, his mind raging.

IF Cornut had known how, he would have helped Jillson along, but his half-dazed condition robbed him of enterprise. Too bad, he thought consolingly, hoping that Jillson would pick up the thought. I know St. Cyr ordered you to stay with me until I was dead, but don't worry. I'll kill myself.

I promise.

Sergeant Rhame was talking gruffly to Jillson about the mob at Med Center. Cornut wished Rhame would go away. He understood that Rhame was a danger to the immortals; they could not be involved with the same people in violent deaths. Rhame had investigated the death of Master Carl at Jillson's hands; he could not now be allowed to investigate even the suicide of Master Cornut, when he had seen Jillson with him going to his death. Jillson would have to leave him now. Too bad. It was so right, Cornut thought, that he should die for the sake of preserving the safety of the immortals. He knew this; they had told him so themselves.

Something caught his attention: "— since the sickness began they've been mobbing every hospital," Sergeant Rhame was saying to Jillson, waving at the mob before Med Center.

"Sickness?" asked Cornut. He stared at the policeman. It was as though Rhame had said, "I've got to get some garlic. There are vampires loose tonight." Sickness was a relic of the dark ages. You could have a headache or a queasy stomach, yes, but you went to the clinic and the diagnosticon did the rest.

Rhame grumbled, "Where've you been, Master Cornut? Nearly a thousand deaths in this area alone. Mobs seeking immunization. It's smallpox, they think."

"Smallpox?" Even more fantastic! Cornut knew the word only as an archeological medical relic.

"Accidents all over the city," said Rhame, and Cornut thought suddenly of the crash he had seen. "Fever and rash and — hell, I don't know what all the symptoms are. But it's fatal. The — the medics don't seem to have a cure."

"Me disfella smellim," said a voice from behind Rhame. "Him spoilim fes distime. Plantim manyfella pox." It was one of the aboriginals, quietly observing while Rhame's police squad erected barricades in front of their enclosure. "Plantim mefella Mary," he added sadly.

Rhame said, "Understand any

of it? It's English, if you listen close. Pidgin. He's been saying they know about smallpox. He said his wife died of it."

"Plantim mefella Mary," agreed the aboriginal in a melancholy voice.

Rhame said, "Unfortunately, I think he's right. Looks like your Field Expedition brought a lot of trouble back with it; the focus of infection seems to vector from these people. Look at their faces."

Cornut looked. The broad, dark cheeks were waffled with old pitted scars.

"So we're trying to keep the mob from making trouble here," said Sergeant Rhame, "by putting a fence around them."

Cornut was even more incredulous than before. Mob violence?

It was not really his problem . . . since he would have no more problems in the world. He nodded politely to Rhame, conspiratorially to Jillson, and moved on toward Math Tower. The aboriginal yelled something after him — "Waitimup mefella Masatura-san! He speak you!" — it sounded like. Cornut paid no attention.

Jillson "yelled" after him too. *Don't forget! You must die!* Cornut turned and nodded. Of course he had to die. It was only right.

FORTUNATELY Locille was not in the room. Cornut felt, and quelled, a swift reeling sense of horror at the thought of losing her. It was only an emotion, though, and he was its master.

Probably Pithecanthropus had had similar emotions, he thought, casting about for a convenient way to die.

He made sure his door was locked and decided to treat himself to a farewell drink. He found a bottle, poured, toasted the air and said aloud: "To the next species." Then he buckled down to work.

The idea of dying is never far from the mind of any mortal, but Cornut had not viewed it as anything up close in the foreground of his future. It was curiously alarming. Everybody did it, he assured himself. (Well, almost everybody.) Why did it seem so hard?

As Cornut was a methodical man, he sat down at his desk and began to make a list, headed:

MEANS OF DEATH

1. *Poison.*
2. *Slash wrists.*
3. *Jump from window. (Or bridge.)*
4. *Electrocution.*

He paused. Electrocution? It didn't sound so bad, especially considering that he had already tried most of the others, helped

along by the insistent siren voice of the immortals in his brain. It would be nice to try something new.

He poured himself another drink to think about it and began to hum. He was feeling quite peaceful.

"It's only right that I should die," he said. "Naturally. Are you listening, Jillson?" He couldn't tell, of course, but probably they were.

And maybe they were worried. That was a saddening thought; he didn't want the immortals to worry about him.

"I understand perfectly," he said out loud. "I hope you hear me. I'm in your way." He paused, not aware that he had raised a lectorial finger. "It is like this. Suppose I had terminal cancer. Suppose St. Cyr and I were in a shipwreck and there was only one lifebelt. He has a life ahead of him; I have at best a week of pain. Who gets the lifebelt?" He shook the finger. "St. Cyr does!" he thundered. "And this is the same case. I have a mortal disease, humanity. And it's their lives or mine!"

He poured another drink and decided that the truths that had been whipped into him were too great to lose. The sheet of paper with suicide possibilities fell unheeded to the floor. Humming, he wrote:

We are children and the immortals are fully grown. Like children, we need their knowledge. They lead us; they direct our universities and plan our affairs; they have the wisdom of centuries and without them we would be lost, random particles, statistical chaos. But we are dangerous children, so they must remain secret and those who guess must die . . .

HE crumpled the piece of paper angrily. He had nearly spoiled everything! He saw all the more clearly why he had to die to protect their secret. He scrambled on the floor for the list of suicide possibilities, but stopped, bent over, staring at the floor.

The truth was that he didn't like any of them.

He sat up and poured a drink. He couldn't rely on himself to do a good job, he grumbled to himself. Slashing his wrists, for example. Someone might come; and what could be more annoying than waking up on an operating table with sutures in his veins and the whole damned thing to do over again?

He noticed that his glass was again empty, but didn't bother to refill it. He was feeling quite sufficiently alcoholic already. If it weren't for his own confounded human ineptitude, he

could be feeling pretty good, in fact, for it was nice to know that in a very short time he would be serving the best interests of the world by dying. Very nice. . .

He got up and wandered to the window, beaming. Outside, the mobs were still swarming, trying to get immunization at the Med Center. Poor fools. He was *so* much better off than they!

"Strike the twos and strike the threes," he sang. "The Sieve of — say!"

He had an idea. How fine it was, he thought gratefully, to have the wise helping hand of an elder friend in a time like this. He didn't have to worry about how to die or whether he'd make a mess of it. He needed only to give St. Cyr and the others a chance. Just relax . . . let himself get drowsy . . . even more drunk, perhaps. They would do the rest.

"The Sieve of Eratosthenes," he sang cheerfully. "When the multiples sublime, the numbers that are left are prime!" He stumbled over to his bed and sprawled on it.

After a moment he got up, angrily. He wasn't being a bit fair. If it was difficult for him to find a convenient way of dying in his room, why should he impose that problem on his good liege, St. Cyr?

He was extremely irritated with himself over that; but, picking up the bottle, marching out into the hall, singing as he looked for a conveniently fatal spot, he gradually began to feel very good again.

SERGEANT Rhame tested the barricades in front of the aboriginal enclosure and sent his men back to trying to control the mobs at Med Center. All the time his squad was working, the aboriginals had been trying to talk to them in their odd pidgin, but the police were too busy. The one who spoke English at all well, Masatura-san, was in his hut; the others were almost incomprehensible.

Rhame glanced at his watch and decided that he had time for a quick cup of coffee before going over to help his men with the crowd. Although, he thought, it might be kinder to leave the crowd alone to crush half its members to death. At least it would be quick. And the private information of the police department surgeon was that the inoculations were not very effective. . .

He turned, startled, as a girl's voice called him.

It was Locille, weeping. "Please, can you help me? Cornut's gone, and my brother's dead, and — I found this." She

held out the sheet with Cornut's carefully lettered list of suicide possibilities.

The fact that Rhame had been taken from his computer studies to help hold a mob down was evidence enough that he really belonged there; but he hesitated and was lost. Individual misery was that much more persuasive than mass panic.

He began with the essentials: "Where is he? No idea at all? No note? Any witnesses who might have seen him go? You didn't ask? *Why* — " But he had no time to ask why she had failed to question witnesses; he knew that every moment Cornut was off by himself was very possibly the moment in which he would die.

They found the student proctor, jumpy and distracted but still somewhere near his post. And he had seen Cornut!

"He was kind of crazy, I thought. I tried to tell him something—you know Egerd, used to be in his class?" (He knew perfectly just how well Locille had known Egerd.) "He died this morning. I thought Master Cornut would be interested, but he didn't even hear when I told him."

Rhame observed the expression on Locille's face, but there was no time to worry about her feeling for a dead under-graduate. "Which way? When?"

Cornut had gone down the corridor more than half an hour before. They followed.

Locille said miserably: "It's a miracle he's alive at all! But if he lasted this long . . . and I was just a few minutes late . . ."

"Shut up," the policeman said harshly, and called out to another undergraduate.

Trailing Cornut was easy; he had been conspicuous by his wild behavior even on that panicky day. A few yards from the faculty refectory, they heard raucous singing.

"It's Cornut!" cried Locille, and raced ahead. Rhame caught her at the door of the kitchens where she had worked so many months.

Cornut was staggering about, singing in a slurred howl one of Master Carl's favorite tunes:

Add ray to modul, close th' set
To adding, subtracting—

He stumbled against a cutting table and swore good-naturedly.

Produce a new system, an'
this goddam thing
Is gen'rally termed a (hic)
ring!

In one hand he had a sharp knife, filched from the meat-cutter's drawer; he waved it, marking time.

"Come on, damn it!" he cried, laughing. "Poke me along!"

"Save him!" cried Locille, and started to run to him, but Rhame grabbed her arm. "Let go of me! He might kill himself with that knife!"

Cornut didn't even hear them; he was singing again. Rhame said at last: "But he isn't doing it, you see, and he's had plenty of time, by the look of the place. Maybe I'm wrong, Locille, but it looks to me as if he's not suicidal—just blind drunk."

XIV

THROUGHOUT the city and elsewhere there were scenes like the one in front of Med Center, as a populace panicked by the apparition of pestilence—vanished these centuries! — scrambled for the amulet that would guard them against it. Hardly one in a couple of hundred was seriously ill, but that was enough. Half of one per cent of billions is millions—millions of cases of the most deadly, most contagious and least excusable disease in medicine. For smallpox can infallibly be prevented, and only a world which had forgotten Jenner could have been taken by it unaware . . . or a world in which the memory of Jenner's centuries-old cure had been systematically removed.

In the highest tower of Port Monmouth, the eight major television networks shared joint transmitter - repeater facilities. Equatorially mounted wire saucers scanned the sky for the repeater satellites. As each satellite in its orbit broke free of the horizon, a saucer hunted and found it. That saucer clung to it as it traversed the sky, breaking free and commencing the search pattern for a new one as the old one dipped beneath the curve of the Earth again. There were more than sixty satellites circling the Earth which the repeaters could use, each one specially launched and instrumented to receive, amplify and rebroadcast the networks' programs.

Sam Gensel was senior shift engineer for the all-network technical crew at Port Monmouth.

It was not up to him to go out and get the pictures, to stage the shows or to decide what went out on the air. Lecturing math professors, dimple-kneed dancers, sobbing soap-opera heroines—he saw all of them on the banked row of monitors in his booth, yet he saw none of them. They were only pictures. What he really liked was test patterns; they showed more of what he wanted to see. He watched for ripples of poor phasing, drifts off center, the electronic snowstorm of line failure. If the picture was

clear, he hardly noticed what it represented . . . except tonight.

Tonight he was white-faced.

"Chief," moaned the rabbity junior engineer from Net Five, "it's all over the country! Sacramento just came in. And the relay from Rio has a local collect that shows trouble all over South America."

"Watch your monitor," Gensel ordered, turning away. It was very important that he keep a clear head, he told himself. Unfortunately the head that he had to keep clear was aching fiercely.

"I'm going to get an aspirin," he growled to his line man, a thirty-year veteran whose hands, tonight, were trembling. Gensel filled a paper cup of water and swallowed two aspirins, sighed and sat down at the coffee-ringed desk in the office he seldom had time to use.

One of the monitors showed an announcer whose smile was desperate as he read a newscast:

"—disease fails to respond to any of the known antibiotics. All persons are cautioned to stay indoors as much as possible. Large gatherings are forbidden. All schools are closed until further notice. It is strongly urged that even within families personal contact be avoided as much as possible. And, above all, the Department of Public Health urges that everyone wait until an orderly program of immunization can be completed."

GENSEL turned his back on the monitor and picked up the phone. He dialed the front office. "Mr. Tremonte, please. Gensel here. Operational emergency priority."

The girl was businesslike and efficient (but did her voice have a faint hysterical tremor?). "Yes, sir. Mr. Tremonte is at his home. I will relay."

Click, click. The picture whirred, blurred, went to black. Then it came on again. Old man Tremonte was slouched at ease in a great leather chair, staring out at him irritably; the flickering light on his face showed that he was sitting by his fireplace. "Well?"

That queer, thin voice. Gensel had always, as a matter of employee discipline, stepped down hard on the little jokes about the Old Man—he had transistors instead of tonsils; his wife didn't put him to bed at night, she turned him off. But there was something creepy about the slow, mechanical way he talked, and that old, lined face!

Gensel said rapidly: "Sir, every net is carrying interrupt news bulletins. The situation is getting bad. Net Five canceled the sports roundup, Seven ran an old tape of Bubbles Brinkhouse —the word is he's dying. I want

permission to go over to emergency procedure. Cancel all shows, pool the nets for news and civil-defense instructions."

Old man Tremonte rubbed his thin, long nose and abruptly laughed, like a store-window Santa. "Gensel, boy," he rasped, "don't get upset over a few sniffly noses. You're dealing with an essential public service."

"Sir, there are people sick, dying!"

Tremonte said slowly: "That leaves a lot who aren't. We'll continue with our regular programs—and, Gensel, I'm going away for a few days; I expect you to be in charge. I do not give you permission to go over to emergency procedure," and he cut the contact.

I never got a chance to tell him about the remote from Philadelphia, thought Gensel despairingly, thinking of the trampled hundreds at the Municipal Clinic.

He felt his warm forehead and decided cloudily that what he really needed was a couple more aspirin . . . although the last two, for some reason, hadn't agreed with him. Not at all. In fact, he felt rather queasy.

Definitely queasy.

At the console, the line man saw his chief gallop clumsily toward the men's washroom, one hand pressed to his mouth.

The line man grinned. Fifteen minutes later, though, he was not grinning at all. That was when the Net Three audio man came running in to report that the chief was out cold, breathing like a broken-down steam boiler, on the washroom floor.

CORNUT, with black coffee in him, was beginning to come back to something resembling normal functioning.

He heard Rhame talking to Locille: "What he really needs is massive vitamin injections. That would snap him right around — but you've seen what the Med Center looks like. We'll have to wait until he sobers up."

"I am sober," said Cornut feebly, but he knew it was untrue. "What happened?"

He listened while they told him what had been going on in the past twenty-four hours. Locille's brother dead, Egerd dead, plague loose in the land . . . the world had become a different place.

He heard and was affected, but there was enough liquor in him and enough of the high-pressure compulsion exercised by the immortals so that he was able to view this new world objectively. Too bad. But he felt shame—*why* had he failed to kill himself?

Locille's hand was in his, and

Cornut, looking at her, never wanted to let it go again. He had not died when he should have, and now he wanted to live. It was shameful, but he could not deny it.

The liquor in him gave the world a warm, fresh appearance. He still was ashamed, but the feeling was remote; it was a failure of his childhood, bad, but so long ago. Meanwhile he was warm and comfortable.

"Please drink some more coffee," said Locille, and he was happy to oblige her.

All the stimuli of twenty-four full hours were working on him at once, the beating, the strain, the compulsion of the immortals, the liquor.

He caught a glimpse of Locille's expression and realized he had been humming.

"Sorry," he said, and held out his cup for more coffee.

AROUND the texas, the waves were growing higher. The black barges tossed like chips. Locille's parents braved the wind-blown rain topside to witness the solemn lowering of their son's casket into the black-decked funeral barge. They were not alone—there were other mourners with them, strangers—and it was not quiet. *Dwang-g-g* went the bullroarer vibration of the steel cables. Hutch-*chumpf*, hutch-*chumpf*, the pneumatic pens in the tower's legs caught trapped air from the waves and valved it into the pressure tanks for the generators. The noise nearly drowned out the sound of the music.

It was the custom to play solemn music at funerals, from tapes kept in the library for the purpose. The bereft were privileged to choose the program—hymns for the religious, chorales for the classicists, largos for the merely mourning. Today no choice was offered. The audio speakers played without end, a continuous random selection of dirges. There were too many mourners watching their children, parents or wives being winched onto the tossing barges, on their way to the deep-sea funerary drop.

Six, seven . . . Locille's father carefully counted eight barges lying along the texas, waiting to be loaded. Each one held a dozen bodies. It was a bad sickness, he thought with detachment, realizing that the bodies outnumbered the mourners because, often enough, whole families were being put aboard the barge together.

He rubbed the back of his neck, which had begun to hurt. The mother standing beside him neither thought nor counted, only wept.

WHEN Cornut sobered, he began to view his world and his past day in harsher, clearer perspective. Rhame helped. The policeman had the scraps of paper Cornut had left and he was remorseless in questioning. "*Why* must you die? *Who* are the immortals? *How* did they make you try to kill yourself—and why didn't you this last time, with every chance in the world?"

Cornut tried to explain. To die, he said, remembering the lesson that had come with the beating, that is nothing; all of us do it. Suicide is a victory in a way, because it makes death come to us on our terms. St. Cyr and the others, however—

"St. Cyr's gone," snapped the policeman. "Did you know that? He's gone and so is his bodyguard. Master Finloe from Biochemistry is gone, and his secretary says he left with Jillson and that old blonde. Where?"

Cornut frowned. It was not in keeping with his concept of immortality that they should flee in the face of a plague. Supermen should be heroic, should they not? He tried to explain that, but Rhame pounced on him: "Super-murderers, you mean! Where did they go?"

Cornut said apologetically: "I don't know. But I assure you that they had reasons."

Rhame nodded. His voice was suddenly softer. "Yes, they did. Would you like to know what those reasons were? The savages brought that disease. They came off their island carrying active smallpox, nearly every one of them. The most active cases were brought; the well ones were left on the island. They were given injections—to cure them, they thought, but the surgeon says they were only cosmetic cures; the disease was still contagious. And they were flown to every major city in the world, meeting thousands of people. They were coached," said Rhame, his face working, "in the proper behavior in civilized society. For example, the pipe of peace isn't their custom; they were told it would please us. Does that add up to anything for you?"

Cornut leaned forward, his horrified eyes on Rhame. Add up? It added up; the sum was inescapable. The disease was deliberately spread. The immortals had, in their self-oriented wisdom, determined to move against the short-lived human race, in a way that had nearly destroyed it more than once in ancient days: They had spread a fearsome plague.

Locille screamed.

Cornut realized tardily that she had been drowsing against

his shoulder, unable to sleep, unable after the sleepless night to stay fully awake. Now she was sitting bolt upright, staring at the tiny glittering manicure scissors in her hand.

"Cornut!" she cried. "I was going to stab you in — in the throat!"

IT was night, and outside the high arch of the bridge was a line of color, the lights of the speedy monotracks and private vehicles making a moving row or dots.

On one of the monotracks, the motorman was half listening to a news broadcast:

"The situation in the midwest is not as yet critical, but a wave of fear has spread through all the major cities of Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska. In Omaha more than sixty persons were killed when three heli-buses bearing emigrants collided in a bizarre midair accident, apparently caused by pilot error in one of the chartered planes. Here in Des Moines all transportation came to a halt for nearly ninety minutes this morning as air-control personnel joined the fleeing throngs, leaving their posts unattended. In a statement released—"

The motorman blinked and concentrated on his controls. He was fifty years old, had held this job and almost this run more than half his life. He rubbed the sensor collar irritably; he had worn it nearly thirty years, but tonight it bothered him.

The collar was like a deadman's switch, designed to monitor temperature and pulse, electronically linked to cut the monotrack's power and apply the brakes in the event of death or serious illness to the motorman. He was quite used to wearing these collars and appreciated their need; but tonight, climbing the approach ramp to the bridge in third speed, his throat began to feel constricted.

Also his head ached. Also his eyes itched and burned. He reached for the radio mike that connected him to the dispatcher's office, and croaked, "Charley, I think I'm going to black out. I—" He fell forward. The sensors around his neck had marked his abnormal pulse and respiration and reacted as he collapsed. The monotrack stopped dead.

But another one drove catastrophically into its tail.

The motorman of the second unit had been feeling queasy for more than an hour and was anxious to get to the end of his run; he had been overriding the automatic slowdown controls all the way across the bridge. As he passed the critical parameters of sensor monitoring, his own collar

switched off the power in his drive wheels, but by then it was too late; the wheels raced crazily against air. Even the sensor collars had not been designed to cope with two motorman failures in the same second. White sparks flew from bridge to water and died—great white sparks that were destroyed metal. The sound of crashing battered at the campus of the University below. The bridge stopped, its moving lights becoming a row of colored dots with one great hideous flare of color in the middle.

Distant ambulance sirens began to wail.

CORNUT held his weeping wife, his face incredulous, his mind working. Locille trying to kill him? Impossible!

But like the other impossible factors in his own life, it was not inexplicable. He became conscious of faint whispering thoughts in his own mind. He said to Rhame: "They couldn't reach me! They tried to work through her!"

"Why couldn't they reach you?"

Cornut shrugged and patted Locille's shoulder. She sat up, saw the scissors and hurled them away. "Don't worry, I under stand," he said to her, and to the policeman: "I don't know why. Sometimes they can't. Like in the refectory kitchen; they could have killed me. I even wanted them to, but they didn't. And once on the island, when I was all beered up. And once—remember, Locille? — on the bridge. Each time I was wide open to them, and on the bridge they almost made it. But each time I was fuddled. I'd been drinking," he said, "or taking sleepy pills, and they should have been able to walk right in and take possession . . ." His voice trailed thoughtfully off.

Rhame said sharply: "What's the matter with Locille?"

The girl blinked and sat up again. "I guess I'm sleepy," she apologized. "Funny . . ."

Cornut was looking at her with great interest, not as a wife but as a specimen. "What's funny?"

"I keep hearing someone talking to me," she said, rubbing her face fretfully. She was exhausted, Cornut saw; she could not stay awake much longer—not even if she thought herself a murderer, not even if he died before her eyes, not even if the world came to an end.

"Talking to you? Saying what?"

"I don't know. Funny. 'Me softspeak you-fella.' Like that."

Rhame said immediately: "Pidgin. You've been with the aboriginals." He dismissed the

matter and returned to Cornut: "You were on the point of something. You said sometimes they could get at you, sometimes not. Why? What was the reason?"

"Drinking or taking sleepy pills."

It was true! Three times he had been where death should have found him, and each time it had missed.

And each time he had been fuddled! The alcohol or sedation in his brain, the selective chemicals that struck first at the uppermost level of the brain, reducing visual discrimination, slowing responses . . . it had deafened him to the mind voices that willed him to death!

"Smellim olefella bagarimop allfella," Locille said clearly, and smiled. "Sorry. That's what I wanted to say."

Cornut sat frozen for an endless second.

Then he moved. The bottle he had carried with him, Rhame had thriftily brought back to the room. Cornut grabbed it, up-ended it, took a deep swallow and passed it to Locille. "Drink! Don't argue — take a good stiff drink!" He coughed and wiped tears from his eyes. The liquor tasted foul; it would take little to make him drunk again.

But that little might save his life . . . Locille's life . . . it might save the world's!

XV

TAI-I Masatura-san got up from his bed and walked to the strong new fence. The crazy white people had not come up with dinner for them. It was getting very late, he judged. A few weeks ago, on his island, the Southern Cross, wheeling about the sky, was all the clock a man needed. These strange northern constellations were cold and unpleasant. They told him nothing he wanted to know, neither time nor direction.

His broad nostrils wrinkled angrily.

In order to become a tai-i, a captain, he had had to become skilled in the art of reading the stars, among many other arts. Now that art was of no value, rendered useless by the stronger art of the white man. His gift of deepsmell — the reaching out with a part of his mind to detect truth or falsehood that made him a tribal magistrate — had been voided by the old ones, who smelled so strongly and yet could baffle his inner nose.

He should never have trusted the softspeaking white man of great age, he thought, and spat on the ground.

His second in command moaned at the door of the hut.

In the creolized speech which served them better than the

tribe's pidgin or Masatura-san's painful English, the man whimpered: "I have asked them to come, but they do not seem to hear."

"One hears," said Masatura-san.

"The old ones are softspeaking endlessly," whined the sick man.

"I hear," said Masatura-san, closing his mind. He squatted, looking at the stars and the fence. Outside, the campus was still noisy, voices, vehicles, even so late at night.

He thought very carefully what he wanted to do.

Masatura-san was a tai-i because of strength and learning, but also because of heredity. When the Japanese off the torpedoed destroyer had managed to reach that Pacific island in 1944, they had found a flourishing community. The Japanese strain in Masatura-san's ancestry came only from that generation. Before that, his forebears were already partly exotic, for the twelve Japanese were not the first sailors to wash ashore. Once "Masatura-san" had been "Masterson." English fathers and Melanesian mothers had produced a sturdy race — after the objecting male Melanesians had been killed off. The Japanese repeated the process with the hybrids they found, as the English had done before them, except for a few.

One of those few was the great-grandfather of Tai-i Masatura-san. He had been spared for exactly one reason: He was the chief priest of the community, and had been for nearly a century; the islanders all would have died to save him.

Three hundred years later, his second-generation offspring had inherited some of his talents. One was "deepsmelling" — no sniff of the nostrils, but a different sense entirely. Another was age. Masatura-san himself was nearly a century old. It was the only thing he had managed to conceal from the owners of the strange softspeak voices who had found him on his island, and promised him much if he would help them.

The "deepsmell" of the world beyond the barricade was very bad.

Tai-i Masatura-san thought carefully and made a decision. He moved over to the hut and poked his second in command with his foot. "Speak along himfella two-time again," he ordered in pidgin. "Me help."

CORNUT left his wife smiling laxly and sound asleep. "I'll be back," he whispered, and with Sergeant Rhame hurried out onto the campus.

The wind was rising and stars broke through scudding clouds. The campus was busy. Around the Med Center, hundreds of people still waited, not because they had hope of immunization —the fact that the vaccine was ineffective had been announced —but because they had nowhere else to go. Inside the clinic, medics with white faces and red eyes labored endlessly, repeating the same tasks because they knew no others. In the first hour they had discovered that the reference Stacks had been looted of three centuries of epidemiology; they could not hope to replace them in time, but they could not help but try. Half the medics were themselves sick, ambulatory but doomed.

Cornut was worried, not for himself but for Locille. Thinking back to the Field Expedition, he remembered the shots that they had all taken and felt it more than likely that everyone receiving them had been rendered immune to the smallpox. But what of Locille? She had had nothing.

He had already told Rhame about the shots, and Rhame had instantly reported to the police headquarters; they would radio the island, try to locate the medics who had administered the vaccine. Neither of them was hopeful. The immortals would surely have removed all traces of what might halt their attack against the short-lived bulk of humanity.

But that thought had a corollary, too: If the immortals had removed it, the immortals had it now.

The aboriginals were waiting. "You called us?" said Cornut—it was a question; he still could not really believe in it — and Masatura-san nodded and reached for his hand.

Rhame blinked at them dizzily. Cornut had made him also take three large drinks—not because Rhame had shown any signs of being telepathic, only because Cornut was not sure. It seemed like a drunken vision, the math teacher linking hands with the squat brown man, wordless. But it was no vision.

After a moment Cornut released the islander's hand. Masatura-san nodded and, without a word, took the bottle from Cornut, drank deep, and passed it to his second in command, barely conscious on the ground behind him.

"Let's go," said Cornut thickly, his eyes glazed. (It was hard to be just drunk enough!) "We need a popper. Can you get one?"

Rhame reached into his pocket automatically and spoke briefly into his police radio before he asked questions. "What happened?"

Cornut wavered and caught his arm. "Sorry. It's the immortals. You were right; they imported the smallpox carriers—went to a lot of trouble. But this fellow here, he's a lot older than he looks. He can read minds, too."

The police radio squawked faintly. "They'll meet us over near Med Center," Rhame said, putting it back in his pocket. "Let's go." He was already moving before he asked: "But where are we going?"

Cornut was having difficulty walking. Everything was moving slowly, so slowly; his feet were like sausage-shaped balloons, he was wading through gelatine. He measured his movements carefully, in a drunken, painstaking effort at clarity; he did not dare get really drunk, he did not dare become really sober.

He said: "I know where the immortals are. He told me. Not words—holding my hand, mind to mind; physical contact helps. He didn't know the name of the place, but I can find it in the popper."

Cornut stopped and looked astonished. "God, I *am* drunk. We'll need some help."

Rhame said, stumbling over the words, "I'm drunk, too, but I figured that out for myself. The whole Emergency Squad is meeting us."

THE cleared space near the Med Center was ideal for landing helipoppers, even though it was dotted now with prostrate figures, sick or exhausted. Rhame and Cornut heard the staccato bark and flutter of the helipoppers and stood at the edge of the clear space, waiting. There were twelve police poppers settling toward them. Eleven poised themselves in air, waiting; the twelfth blossomed with searchlights and came on down.

In the harsh landing light, one of the recumbent figures near them pushed himself up on an elbow, mumbling. His eyes were wide even in the blinding light. He stared at Cornut, his lips moving, and he cried faintly: "Carriers!"

Rhame first realized the danger. "Come on!" he said, beginning to trot, lurching, toward the landing popper. Cornut followed, but others were waking feverishly.

"Carriers!" they cried, a few of them and then dozens. It was like the birth of a lynch mob. "Carriers! They did it to us! Get them!" Sick figures pushed themselves to their knees, hands clutching at them. Some men, drooping in a knot, whirled and came toward them. "Carriers!"

Cornut began to run. Carriers? Of course they were not carriers; he knew what it was. It was St.

Cyr perhaps, or one of the others, unable to break through the barrier of alcohol to reach his own mind, working with the half-waking minds of the feverish or exhausted hundreds on the grass to attack and destroy them. It was quite astonishing, meditated one part of his mind with drunken gravity, that there were so many partial telepaths in this random crowd; but the other part of his mind cried Run, run!

Stones began to fly, and from fifty yards away, across the green, Cornut heard a sound that might have been a shot. But the popper was whirling its blades above them now. They boarded it and it lifted, leaving the sudden mob milling about below.

The popper rose to join the rest of the squad. "That was just in time," breathed Cornut to the pilot. "Thanks. Now head east until—"

The co-pilot was turning toward him, and something in his eyes stopped Cornut. He and Rhame acted together. As the co-pilot was reaching for his gun, the police sergeant brought up his fist. Co-pilot went one way, the gun another. Cornut jumped for the gun, pointed it at the pilot. "This is an emergency popper, right? With medical supplies?"

Rhame understood at once. He leaped for the locker and broke out a half-liter of brandy in a sealed flask. He handed it to the pilot. "Drink!" he ordered. Then: "Get on the radio! Tell every man in the squad to take at least two ounces of brandy!"

It was, thought Cornut fuzzily, a hell of a way to fight a war.

XVI

RHAME was only a sergeant, but the pilot of the lead popper was a deputy inspector. The other helipoppers questioned the order, but they obeyed. The fleet sailed out over the bay, over the city, up toward the mountains.

Under them, the city lay helpless, a giant killing-pen where blind crowds roamed in terror. Cornut could see, even from a thousand feet, the fires of wrecked vehicles, the litter of motionless bodies, the utter confusion that the plague had wrought. There had been by now, the deputy inspector said, more than ten thousand reported deaths in the city, but only a fraction of them were from smallpox. Accident and violence had slain the rest. How many deaths were unreported? Twice as many, a hundred times as many—there was no way of telling.

It was, Cornut knew, what the immortals wanted. They had

kept their herd of short-lived cattle for a long time; the herd had increased until it threatened to deprive its unseen owners of space, food, everything. Like any herdsmen, the immortals had decided to thin it out. What could be more painless—for them—than a biological thinner? Myxomatosis had given Australia control of the rabbit swarm; smallpox could bring the human one under control.

Cloudily, Cornut was able to read the motives of St. Cyr and the others, striking down those who like himself might learn of their existence, defeating research that might give them away by concealing it. It was a constant defensive action, and he could understand their need to

remove every threat. He could forgive their attempts on his own life, he could forgive their killing of so much of a world.

But he could not forgive the threat to Locille. For she was exposed. Some would survive the plague in any event—some always did—but Cornut was a mathematician and he did not accept such odds.

All these years, he mused, immortals were directing humanity in directions they chose. No wonder the great strides in medicine, no wonder the constant competition between manufacturers to outdo each other producing luxuries and comforts. What would happen to progress if the immortals were destroyed?

And yet, he thought, begin-

ning to sober up, wasn't there something in Wolgren about that? No, not Wolgren. Somewhere in statistical theory. Something about random movements.

The Brownian movement of molecules—that had been on Master Carl's mind, he remembered. The Drunkard's walk—the movement from a dead center ever smaller, asymptotically, never stopping.

Straight-line progress was always to an end. If the immortals directed it, it could go only so far as they could conceive, and no further.

They were not the future, he realized with sharp clarity. They instigated—and let humanity do the solving, because they could solve nothing themselves. They were the old generations refusing to make way for the new, and the future was always the new generations, never the old, and —*Cornut!* said a shrill, angry voice in his brain.

Panicky, he grabbed for the flask of medicinal brandy. The liquor supply was getting low. They would have to hurry; they dared not get sober.

SENATOR Dane stirred angrily and crackled an oath with his mind that sent ripples of laughter through the party. *Don't laugh!* he thought. *I've lost them again!*

But was there real reason to worry? Senator Dane never drank, but he had observed the shorties drinking and he knew what drinking could do. They would pile up against a hill; they would crash into each other. Certainly they would never find this place—although Masatura-san's mind had been powerfully clear, and possibly there had been a leak, and—no, St. Cyr himself had selected Masatura-san's tribe for the job of extermination and no one could conceal anything from St. Cyr. And the place was unfindable.

It had been a resort hotel at one time, used for conventions of the sort that are not meant to be public, pre-empted from a gangster who had in turn pre-empted it from its not very legitimate builders. The gangster had been a nuisance and the immortal who killed him had felt rather virtuous as he murdered a murderer.

The hotel no longer had roads leading to it and there was no other habitation within twenty miles. That had been expensive, but, expense was the least important factor in any of their plans. There was room for all of them, seventy-five immortals from every part of the world, children of sixty or sixty-five on up to the oldest, a man who had been born in the reign of Cali-

gula. (There were few born before the twentieth century, because of the public-health contribution to their longevity, but those few seemed unwilling ever to die at all.)

There were women who, with repeated plastic surgery, had managed to keep themselves in the general appearance, from a distance, of youth. There were visible ancients, like St. Cyr with his cyanosis and his scars, the squat old Roman with his great recurring keloids, the hairless, fat black man who had been born in slavery on the estate of the King's Governor of Virginia. Color made no difference to them, nor race nor age; the factor that counted was power. They were the strongest in the world, as they insured by killing off anyone potentially stronger.

Not one had seen a war or an earthquake or a volcano at close range. Each had, for all of his prolonged life, surrounded himself with walls and with guards. There were drawbacks to their lives, but not such a drawback as dying.

In the hotel, staffed by Sudanese flown in a decade earlier—kept completely out of touch with the world and guarded from even chance contact with a wanderer by a totally unfamiliar tongue—the immortals prepared to sit out the plague. Senator Dane wandered among them, jovial but inclined to worry. He annoyed them. The undertone of worry irritated. They chaffed him about it, in words of fifty languages (they knew them all) or in thoughts, with gesture and tone. But he infected them all.

FEAR is a relative thing. The man who is starving does not fear the early frost that may destroy the crops. He can only worry about what is close at hand. The well-fed man can worry years ahead.

The immortals could worry a full century ahead. They looked far into the future, and every distant pebble in their path was a mountain. Suppose, mumbled the fear behind Dane's jolly mask, that they do find our place here. True, we can destroy them with their minds, as we always have—but that is a nuisance—and some of us may get hurt. This is our best place, but we have others, and staying far away from scenes of violence has always been the best policy for us.

Shut up, thought (or said, or gestured) the others.

He was interfering with their fun. The Roman was demonstrating a delicate balance of a feather on a soap-bubble (he was the strongest of them; it was hard to move physical objects

with the mind, but with age it became possible).

But the fear said: We have lost them. They might be anywhere. (The bubble collapsed.) The fear said: Even if we flee, they are not stupid; they might search the house and find our own medics. And then—look then! Then they can end the plague, and, with not enough of them dead, billions of people will be hunting down us seventy-five! (The feather floated to the ground. The immortals shouted at Dane peevishly.)

"Go," said St. Cyr in his clock-tick voice, angry enough to speak aloud, "de-stroy the ser-um. Do not spoil our day!"

Unwillingly Dane went. His mumbling worry stopped abruptly, and cheerfully they went back to their enjoyment. It stopped abruptly for Dane too. He was in the downstairs hall, looking for one of the Sudanese, when he heard a sound behind him. But he was fat and he was, in spite of everything, very old. The blow caught him and he fell heavily. He was only vaguely conscious of the hands that rolled him over, the acrid taste of the liquid—was it brandy? But he *never* drank!—they were forcing down his throat.

He did not know, but there were a dozen stumbling figures around him. As he began to recover consciousness, he knew, but then it was too late. It was so *still!* The voices in his mind were not speaking! The alcohol was a barrier; it deafened him, blinded him, marooned him; he had only eyes and mouth and ears, and for one whose life has been illuminated by the rapid flash of the mind itself, that is black silence. He began to sob, hardly noticing that the figures who had attacked him were now moving on toward the main hall, not noticing at all that they carried guns.

XVII

CORNUT passed out completely on the way back and slept soddenly for hours. Rhame let him sleep. There was time enough for everything now, even for sleep. The medics, with the restored tapes for the Stacks, had already begun the task of preparing vaccine; the captured hundred liters of serum was already being rationed to the public. The mobs were quieted—it took only hope to end their terror—and the danger, for most, was past. Not for all. The serum would never reach places in time for some, and there were many already dead. But the dead were only in the millions . . .

Cornut woke up like an explosion.

His head was pounding; he staggered to his feet, ready to fight. Rhame, full of wake-up pills, reassured him quickly. "It's all right. Look!"

They were back in the city, in a hastily cleared penal wing of one of the hospitals. Along a corridor, room after room, there were old, old men and women, sleeping or staggering.

"Twenty of them," said Rhame proudly, "and every one guaranteed to have one point five per cent of alcohol in the blood or better. We'll keep them that way until we decide what to do next."

"Only twenty?" demanded Cornut, suddenly alarmed. "What about the others?" Rhame smiled like a shark. "I see," said Cornut, visioning that queer contradiction, dead immortals. Better, he told himself, than a dead planet.

He did not linger. Rhame had already phoned the campus and learned that Locille was well but still asleep, but Cornut needed to see her himself.

A police popper took him to the campus in a pelting rainstorm and he ran through the wet grass. The grass was stained and littered; the windows of the Med Center showed where the mob had nearly smashed its way in. He hurried past, past the aboriginal camp, now deserted, past the Administration Building, past the memory of Master Carl and the clinic where Egerd had died. The rain clouds stank of fumes from fires in the city; across the river there still lay thousands of unburied dead.

But the clouds were thin and radiance was beginning to shine through.

In his room, Locille stirred and woke. She smiled.

"I knew you'd be back," she said.

He took her in his arms, but even in that moment he could not forget what Rhame had told him, what they had already learned from the drunken, babbling immortals.

It was not short-lived humans the immortals had killed or driven to death—it was young immortals. The mutant gene was a dominant, and now that it had shown so often, it would soon fill the race. The immortals had not preserved themselves at the expense of a race that should have become extinct. They had only protected their own power against the Cornuts, the Locilles, the countless others with whom they refused to share.

"I knew you'd be back," she whispered again.

"I told you I would," he said. "I'll always be back" . . . and he wondered how to tell her what "always" had suddenly come to mean for them.

—FREDERIK POHL

AT LAST!

You can paint an original picture like this, using real artists' oil paints... the

Vis-A-Lens (overlay) way

Trade Mark

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