

Each person has a place in the Company, and if there is any reason to believe that an employee is not in his right place, there is always the Bureau of Complaint to appeal to. Who among you, however, dares appeal?

THE DISPATCH EXECUTIVE

by E. William Blau

Pray, which is the way to London Town?

I must be there tonight.

O, walk an hundred miles and turn

To left, and then to right;

Then straight as a line, and then zig-zag,

Then up-hill, and then down;

Walk fast, and in six months you'll be

Not far from London Town.

—MOTHER GOOSE

I

KURT INSEL IS GROWING MIDDLE-AGED and he is tired. He does not want to go in to his office today. He sits in his little apartment parlor with his sugar buns and tea before him on the sun flooded table, and the thought strikes him that he has never really wanted to go in, all the mornings of all the years he has been with the Com-

pany. The idea seems strange to him after so many years. He plays with his teaspoon in the faded Dresden sugar bowl, turning the spoon this way and that, as though it is the idea, trying to see it from all sides at once.

Still, what will happen if he doesn't go in? The thought alone might be enough to convict him of disloyalty if the Board hears of it. The punishment, though not specified in the *Executive Directive* is terrible; the sentence as remote as the Board and as eternal. He has heard of other cases—strange overnight disappearances. One day a man sits at a desk as alive as he, with the same thoughts and hopes and pleasures, and the next day, gone—an empty desk, a silent office—the man vanished without a trace. What has happened to these men? Kurt puts down the teaspoon without stirring his tea. He will not think of it.

The sun draws the tangle of shadows further across his little table as he thinks. Already he is late. He pours the tea into the sink, wraps the sugar buns, and puts them carefully back on the shelf in the cupboard. Then he checks the contents of his briefcase, throws his Company great-coat about his shoulders and leaves the apartment, coughing over his first cigarette.

He arrives at the inner city and makes his way to the Company building. He is thankful when he finally reaches the heavy bronze doors which swing into the outer lobby, for the winter sunlight, always more intense in the inner city, has gotten into his eyes and made his head hurt. Taking a firm grasp on his briefcase, he pushes himself into the confusion of the vast, muralled room. Loose masses of people obstruct him. Men, women, messengers, and guides get into his way. Already the early coffee shifts have started for the cafeteria, and they tangle him in their ranks. He pushes some and excuses himself to others, slipping in and out toward the great marble staircase which rises to the inner lobby, until he feels he might never reach the elevators, spending the rest of his life moving against the people across the marble floors, until just as he reaches the elevator-door he will lie dead among the ever moving feet which will step on the edges of his coat

and kick his briefcase aimlessly across the floor.

But Kurt does, as always, reach the elevators. He walks down the long row of doors until he comes to one indicating his floor, and steps in. When the door opens again he leaves quickly, followed by the others, some of whom have become vaguely familiar to him over the years he has been with the Company.

At last, standing alone in the hallway, he lets out a little sigh and allows his shoulders to slump and his briefcase to dangle from his hand. Now there is only the outer office to get through, but this morning he is already weary.

He wipes the dust from his face with his handkerchief, clears his throat, examines his nails, smooths his Company great-coat and pulls his hat down tightly on his forehead.

He tucks his briefcase securely under his arm and opens the door which has KURT INSEL—HAROLD FENSTER—DISPATCH EXECUTIVES, unpretentiously lettered on it in gold. The roar and clatter of the outer office comes to an abrupt stop when he walks through the door, and a hundred pair of eyes look toward him. He turns his gaze downward and just a few inches ahead of him as the *Executive Directive* has instructed, and begins the long walk down the aisle of little desks which stretch back almost as far as the eye can

see to the small wooden door carrying the simple legend: "Kurt Insel."

He moves past the desks for such a long time that he gets the strange sensation that he might have already passed the next desk and become hopelessly lost among them. Behind each one sits an anonymous girl, and each girl repeats to him a report on the nature of the morning. Of course, he never answers them. It is part of their function to give him this confidence each day, although he can't imagine what he should do with it.

Kurt keeps his face in the shadow of his hat and walks on until he finally reaches his door and unlocks it, pushing against it with a heavy sigh. The office is very good—very comfortable. The small closeness of the walls is unbroken by windows. Kurt does not miss a window anymore. A window would make the office merely an extension of the outer world. Without a window, the office at least exists only for him. Kurt is a part of it. Each person has his place in the Company, and this is his.

He takes off his Company great-coat and hat, and lays them carefully over the little armchair in one corner. The Company wants nothing out of place in the office and he is responsible for it. He walks over to his wooden desk and sits down slowly. Everything is as

it should be. The great pile of papers from all the committees and bureaus, containing the business of the week previous, are waiting for him. These he will arrange into one comprehensive report by the middle of the week and dispatch it to one of the anonymous girls outside who will type it and in turn dispatch it to the Multigraph Department, so that by the following week a copy of his report will be on every desk in the Company. Sometimes in the midst of his work corrections are sent to him so the reports have to be thrown away and done over again, and Kurt ponders on the apparent uselessness of his work, even when there are no corrections, because the report is already obsolete by the time the employees receive it. But Kurt's function is not to question his task but to perform it, so he takes the top paper from the pile and lays it before him. This done, he takes the small brass key from his vest pocket, unlocks the desk drawers and replaces the key.

Everything is always as he left it—his papers, trinkets, little bottles, photographs, cigarettes—everything in order. Lighting a cigarette with satisfaction, Kurt takes his five pencils out of the center drawer and arranges them at the top of the desk.

He begins work on the first sheet and sees it is from the Bureau of Communication, the bureau most intimately connected with the

Board itself, and considered to be the closest register of the actual occurrences of the Board for that week. Kurt lingers over this sheet for some minutes. The Board itself might have written some of it. How vast—how remote—it all is! There is nobody who really knows anything about the Board—not even Fenster, the other Dispatch Executive who has the next office, and whose functional contact with the outer world and superior knowledge of the Company and inner city in general Kurt so admires. Some say the Board is in Zurich or Kracow, but this only adds to the mystery. Fenster said once that he believed the Board was really right there in the Company building, but Kurt cannot believe this. If it were true why has nobody ever seen them?

He often wonders about the Board. He thinks of the wild descriptions he has heard—at times as a group of ancient men with shaggy white beards—at other times as unnamed beings who ride on animals everywhere they go. He has heard, as who hasn't, the rumors that actually the last member of the Board died generations ago, and that the Board has really not existed for hundreds of years. Kurt doesn't accept these rumors when he thinks about them logically, but still he can never be sure. If he were to send a messenger to see and return with an answer, and if the messenger had the

rest of time to travel in, he would never reach the Board with all the vastness in between. Even to think of the Board is futile. Kurt puts the Bureau of Communication report aside, as nothing is ever changed on that one, and picks up the next sheet.

Gradually the morning wears on, and the pile of papers on Kurt's left continues to grow. He takes another paper from the pile on the right and then stops and looks more closely. The sheet is blue, and all the rest have been white. He reads at the top "Memorandum of the Bureau of Complaint". Outside of the sheet is perfectly blank.

Bureau of Complaint?

Kurt puts the sheet down, puzzled. He thinks back but he cannot recall having ever taken note of this bureau or seeing a blue sheet before. Possibly it is a new bureau—that must be it. Yet, he has not read of the establishment of a new bureau in the Bureau of Communication report.

Kurt leans back in his chair and bangs on Fenster's wall. "Fenster", he calls, "what is the Bureau of Complaint?"

"What?" Fenster shouts.

"I say, what is the Bureau of Complaint? Is it something new?" The blue sheet seems oddly out of place on his desk. He does not know what to do with it.

"Bureau of Complaint? Why no. It's been around as long as I can remember. . . ."

"Yes?" Kurt asks, puzzled.
"What's its function?"

"Handles Company grievances. Why?" Fenster calls.

Kurt thinks a moment. ". . . I've got to make sure my channel is maintaining its upkeep." he says quickly, hoping his voice has a note of authority, and then is silent. There is no answer from Fenster.

The thought is disquieting. The network of the Company is vast. It reaches into every home and every room. It is unthinkable that an employee, especially an Executive, would have a grievance against the Company, for the Company is good. But the Company must have many grievances against its workers. The Bureau of Complaint is the logical nerve center for substantiating such grievances. Kurt remembers his feelings in the apartment that morning and he is too upset to do any more work before twelve.

II

After lunch, Kurt goes to work again on the pile of reports. The next report is from the Department of Anonymous Girls. There is never anything intelligible on that report so he drops it in the wastebasket and lights a cigaret. As always, the basket is empty and the ashtray is clean. This has often been a disturbing note to Kurt, as it has been to others.

The idea that there is somebody else, somewhere in the building, who has a key to the offices has caused more than one neurosis among Executives. Who would it be? Is someone sent by the Board to check on their activities when they are gone? If the person has a key to the offices, then he might have a key to the desks as well, for the desks are supplied by the Company. Kurt feels strange. Even if this person's sole function is to clean the ashtray and empty the wastebasket after they have gone in the evening, what else does he do when left to himself in that black world of vacant rooms, when there is no one to watch? No person spends his whole life content with only emptying wastebaskets. What is his real purpose in the empty building? Perhaps he is content just to sit at the desks when the executives sleep. Then, what of the offices that are suddenly empty . . . ? For the first time he feels uncomfortable in the little room.

He walks around the desk, examining it carefully, and it is then that he sees it: something that looks like an eye staring up at him from the floor by the desk leg. He remains for a moment, in sudden shock; and then puts his foot out cautiously and kicks the thing. It goes skipping across the floor and stops by the far wall. He walks over, and carefully picks it up. It is a button—a horrible, vulgar, worn mother-of-pearl button.

There is no longer any room for doubt, and the proof is almost a relief, at first. He sits down at the desk and lays the button in front of him on the blotter. A pattern begins to take shape for him: a person who comes there at night. Is the Bureau of Complaint aware of this person? Does he visit other offices as well? Kurt decides to keep the button for evidence, yet he cannot let the person know he has it. He opens the right top drawer of his desk and drops the button in, laying a blotter over it. Then he closes and locks the drawer.

The next day he leaves the right top drawer locked, but the button remains on his mind all morning.

As he moves down the long counter at lunch time with his food-tray, in the First Basement Cafeteria, he sees Fenster ahead of him in the line. He wants to see Fenster. If he has ever wanted to see Fenster, it is now. He waves to him. Fenster waves back and continues on to the pastries. Kurt indicates a table and Fenster finally nods. Kurt decides to be very cautious in his approach to the subject. Perhaps he is the first with solid evidence of the night person. Perhaps he should not mention it at all especially to Fenster, whom Kurt has always suspected of being a Company spy. But by the time they reach their desert Kurt can no longer contain himself.

"Oh, by the way Fenster", he begins, "here's something odd . . . I found a button—a mother-of-pearl button lying on my floor yesterday morning."

Fenster looks up at him for a moment and then returns to his cheesecake.

Why the silence? Kurt wonders. What does it mean? "Yes. A button. Can you beat that? Ha ha ha."

"Guess it belongs to Mrs. Unter." Fenster remarks, wiping his mouth with his napkin.

"Mrs. . . . Unter?" Kurt repeats.

"Yeah. The Cleaning Woman. She comes in at night."

Kurt loses his appetite. Fenster knows! The button does not surprise him!

"What's the matter with you, Insel?" he hears Fenster's flat voice asking, "I think you need a vacation." He sees a tall sallow man at an empty table watching him intently.

"I'm a . . . I'm sick", Kurt mumbles getting up from the table. He has to get away and back to his office where he can think. Fenster knows! With a sudden clarity he sees the pattern before him. It has always been there, but until he got the blue sheet he had never recognised it before. Why do the offices have no windows? Why are there *two* Dispatch Executives? Does the Company allow him to exist only so long as he does not

question that existence? Does the Company withdraw itself from a disloyal employee and isolate him for its own protection like a bit of irritation, having long since provided for the continuance of the employee's function by duplicating him but weeding out the imperfections? And Fenster, feeding him just enough information to destroy his security, is already preparing to force the issue and to function smoothly and efficiently, no doubt, when the showdown comes.

It is only twelve-thirty and the outer office is empty, but he locks his door and holds his head in his hands. The name the person answers to is Mrs. Unter. The name conjures up visions of great, brute arms and thick formless features. And she is a Cleaning Woman. What is behind that phrase? Cleaning Woman! What desire and directive masquerades behind that function when she comes up into the building at night, when only the emergency lights are on, and the offices are empty and dark?

III

It is almost ten before he reaches his desk the next morning. He sits down, determined to plunge himself into his work.

By eleven he is aware that his right elbow is uncomfortably hot. He lifts it quickly from his desk and notices a bright light coming

from all around his right top desk drawer. He quickly unlocks it and burns his fingers on the knob. He takes out his handkerchief and opens the drawer. There is the button, glowing through the blotter and filling the drawer with light. He thrusts his hand into the heat with panic and picks up the button. It is as cold as when he put it in there but glowing brightly. His hand becomes hot and he quickly opens the bottom drawer and throws the button in and locks the drawer.

When he returns from lunch he is almost afraid to enter his office. When he does there is no sign of light from the desk, and although he watches carefully all afternoon, the drawer remains dark. He leaves the office that day feeling exhausted.

The next day is Thursday. He can see the bottom drawer glowing softly as soon as he steps into the office. Without even taking off his hat he runs to the drawer and opens it. There is no mistake—the button is gleaming more brightly than ever. Kurt feverishly takes the contents from all his other drawers and stuffs them down on top of the button, and slams the drawer. The rest of the day he waits, not even going down to lunch.

By one, it has begun to glow again, and by three it has become so bright that it hurts his eyes to look directly at it. Five o'clock is

drawing near, and if he leaves it glowing all hope will be gone.

Desperately he picks up his wastebasket and goes into the outer office and, avoiding the eyes of the anonymous girls, he fills it with water at the water-cooler. As he returns to his office he notices Fenster leaning against the door frame of his own office, smoking a cigaret and watching him.

"What are you doing now, Insel?" Fenster calls, but Kurt pretends not to see him and goes into his office and locks his door. Then he pulls the bottom drawer open, pours the wastebasket of water into it, and quickly slams and locks it. The glow disappears and Kurt laughs aloud with relief. The water begins to seep out all over the floor but Kurt doesn't care about anything as long as the light is gone.

Friday morning he opens his office to find the whole room filled with a brilliant light. Horrified, he runs to the bottom drawer where the light is the strongest. He unlocks it and yanks the knob but it won't bulge. He pulls harder, moving the desk, but the water he has poured in has warped the wood and he can't move the drawer an inch. Terror overcomes him. He runs around the office trying to escape the light, but there is no place to hide. He must attack before he himself is attacked. He determines to go immediately to the Bureau of Complaint and pretend

to bring the whole thing to their attention. He can no longer go on as things are, and besides, if he is right they are waiting for him anyway.

But all his pencils and papers are in the bottom drawer and he can't get to them. He goes out of his office, locking the door quickly behind him, and steps into Fenster's office. Fenster puts down the magazine he has been reading and looks up at Kurt inquiringly.

"I've got some urgent business", Kurt blurts out, "and they're exterminating in my office so I wonder if I could use your desk for a few minutes." Fenster remains seated a moment, considering the probability of Kurt's statement, and then stands up with a shrug of his shoulders.

Kurt sits down and collects his thoughts. Half the victory is in the approach. He must approach the Bureau of Complaint in the right way. He should have an obvious executive's touch to the letter to show he is important, yet enough humility to show he doesn't think he is. Kurt finally takes a piece of paper and writes:

Bureau of Complaint
Room 35001
Company

Dear Sirs:

The recent communication of the Bureau of the other day, eg: Monday, has established its

validity with the intelligence of this writer.

In consequence he will be able to set aside a portion of his time for the registration of a matter pertinent to the aforesaid Bureau.

It is to be found within precedent to pursue this course of action in the words of Walt Whitman, viz: "Shut not your doors to me, proud Libraries".

Therefore, the writer will be assured of your disposal and wishes to be

Utterly Sincere,
Kurt Insel
Dispatch Executive

As he reads it over with satisfaction he becomes uncomfortably aware of Fenster hovering behind him, so he stuffs it in an envelope and addresses it.

"See you're writing to the Bureau of Complaint", Fenster observes, looking over Kurt's shoulder.

". . . Yes." Kurt answers, becoming very preoccupied with the sealing of the envelope.

"What seems to be the trouble?" Fenster asks in an offhand manner.

Kurt continues to stare in the other direction. "I've asked for an appointment." He finally answers.

"Ah . . ."

Kurt is not sure if that is a question or a statement. "I'm com-

plaining about Mrs. . . . Unter." he feels forced to add.

"Good!" Fenster exclaims. "I think that's a great idea!"

"You do?" Kurt asks, turning with surprise.

"Yes. I think you should."

"Why?"

"The sooner the better." Fenster continues, ignoring Kurt's question. "Here. I'll mail it for you right away." He snatches the letter out of Kurt's hand and leaves him alone in the office. Kurt remembers Fenster's behavior at lunch, and starts forward to retrieve his letter, but it is too late; it is out of his hands. He goes back to his own office fearing what he had done.

IV

Monday morning it is after eleven when he finally reaches his office through the crowds of the inner city. The brilliance of Friday afternoon is completely gone now, and his office is dark. He snaps the light switch and finds on his desk a square piece of paper with BUREAU OF COMPLAINT printed at the top. It reads: "Mr. Kurt Inzip from Mr. Nass: You will be pleased to report at this Bureau Monday afternoon at 3:00 p.m.," and there is no signature.

Kurt is on edge as he waits for three to come. He isn't hungry at noon-time and can eat no lunch. The note makes him feel cool in-

side. His name isn't even spelled right. There is no doubt by now that Fenster is mixed up in it somehow. Perhaps Fenster knows about last Monday and has informed on him.

At three, Kurt catches the elevator that is headed for the top floor where the Bureau is located. He gets off and walks down a narrow, dusty corridor that needs a new coat of paint. The corridor is against the outer wall of the building, and there is a row of windows along it. He hears the wind that blows forever at this height rattling the dusty window panes, and seeing the sheer drop from the windows makes him dizzy, so he keeps against the yellowed wall to his right. There is only one door in the whole corridor, and at the far end, one old-fashioned radiator and a barrel of rags. There are a lot of scraps of paper lying about, and some orange peels. On the door is the number 35001, and beneath it, in gilt so faded that only an outline remains, is BUREAU OF COMPLAINT—NEVER CLOSED.

Kurt knocks on the door. There is no answer. He opens the door and looks in on a vast room at least two stories high, which takes up the whole floor and is filled with a purple, dusty half-light like a railroad station. In the wall to the right, three narrow windows rounded at the top and two stories high, let in the fading pink light

of afternoon through their sooty panes. The whole ceiling is a dome another story high, the very top of the building itself, and Kurt hears the wind shrieking across it. An old dim light fixture hangs from the center of the dome on a chain two stories long.

The room is cold, especially near the smooth concrete floor where the wind seeps in and creates a draft. Along the door wall and the wall opposite the windows is a haphazard row of leather chairs with wooden arms. The leather is old and cracked, and the stuffing hangs out of some of them. All along the walls are vague piles of papers, rags and other rubbish, and against the far wall at the back are a number of cardboard boxes and barrels, as though the room had originally been intended as a storeroom, or a loft. On one wall is an old box telephone and finally, far in the back, is a long high desk like that in a courtroom, and sitting behind it, sending volumes of smoke into the grey air, are four men.

There is a very fat man whom Kurt has seen occasionally in the elevator, standing before the desk and moving his hands around as he talks in a voice that alternates between anger and a whine. The four men behind the desk are in a state of constant agitation, shifting around in their chairs, leaning across one another to talk among themselves, puffing at their

cigars and paying no attention whatever to the man in front of them.

Kurt suddenly wants to run from the room, but instead he sits on the edge of one of the leather chairs by the door. He has become confused. He could not even bring the evidence because it is stuck in his drawer. Even as accuser he will be judged. He feels here more than down below, in the building, the cold machinery of isolation moving to envelope him. Kurt stops thinking and feverishly tries to prepare a statement in his mind.

Suddenly the man in the middle behind the desk stands up and angrily brings both fists down on top of it with a crash. "Go away, Mr. Pawl! Go *away!*" he roars at the fat man. "You're dismissed! Dismissed! Dismissed!" The fat man turns panting, and thunders out of the door past Kurt, his eyes wide, his face red, and his lower lip hanging down and dry.

The members of the Bureau become very quiet and immobile, staring straight ahead of them, their cigars forgotten in their ashtrays. The man in the center calls out, "Next case. Mr. Kurt Inzip."

Kurt gets up and slowly approaches the desk. He feels he will stumble. "That's Insel, sir." he mumbles as he crosses the vast floor. He stops before the desk, looking up at the florid, heavy-set man with rimless glasses, who has called him.

"I'm Nass," the man says. "Well?"

Kurt stands dumbly, having lost the power of speech.

"Our time is precious." Nass says.

"I know they have told you but you can't take their word", Kurt begins absurdly, ruining all his preparation. "You can't believe their version. I was sick that morning. . . . I was very sick."

"You are sick, Mr. Inzip. Well, I don't see . . ."

"No! I'm not. I was. You don't understand."

"We are trying to, Mr. Inzip. You were sick."

"Yes I was. I really was then."

"When were you sick, Mr. Inzip?"

"What was the trouble?" the man on the end asks, staring ahead of him.

"I was . . . last week I didn't want, that is I didn't think I could come in."

"Then you didn't come in last week, Mr. Inzip." Nass affirms.

"I . . . yes I *did* come in."

"You said you were sick," recalls the man on the end.

"I wasn't sick I mean."

"You weren't sick?" asks the thin man on Nass's right.

"I *was* sick," Kurt says wretchedly.

"Come, come, Mr. Inzip. You were sick or you weren't sick. Were you or weren't you?" Nass asks impatiently.

"I didn't *think* I was sick." Kurt answers, his voice shaking.

"Didn't . . . think . . . he . . . was . . . sick . . ." the man on Nass's left repeats, writing in a large book.

"You said you didn't want to come in. . . ." the man on the end adds.

"I did want to . . . I felt sick. I didn't know I wanted to . . ."

"You just said you didn't think you were sick, Mr. Inzip." Nass says.

"I did think so!"

"You said you didn't." says the man on Nass's left, looking in the book.

"I mean I just felt it."

"Then, you weren't really." Concludes the man on Nass's right.

"I was . . . I thought I was . . . I . . . I don't know! I don't know!" Kurt shouts at the desk.

"There, there, Mr. Inzip. We must control our nerves." Nass says soothingly. The man on the end pours a glass of water from the large metal pitcher on the desk and comes around and hands it to Kurt.

"Drink this. You'll feel better." he smiles, laying his hand on Kurt's shoulder. The rest of the Bureau have all relit their cigars and are blowing smoke over the edge of the desk.

"Why don't you smoke?" asks the man on Nass's right in a fatherly way.

"Thank you." Kurt says gratefully and lights a cigaret with uncertain fingers.

"Now, about this illness." Nass resumes.

"No no! It's Mrs. Unter!" Kurt shouts, his nerves wearing thin.

"Ah. Mrs. Unter is sick."

"No. She isn't." Kurt says. He is trying hard to control himself. "She isn't sick. She's in my office. Don't you understand?"

"In your office?" the Bureau choruses.

"I have her button and I know. I did everything but it wouldn't go out. I've filled my desk with water and it wouldn't!"

"What do you mean, Inzip?" Nass roars. "Are you tampering with Company property?"

"No wonder he was sick." The man on the end comments dryly.

"It's her button! Her button!"

"You have destroyed her property, and now she wants something of yours to make up for it." The man on Nass's right sums up idiotically.

Kurt is filled with panic. They are not trying to understand him. They are making him sound like an idiot. What are they after!

"It's not *your* office Inzip." Nass comments.

"Insell!" shouts Kurt.

"Then, do you feel she was sent to . . . she . . . say . . . has come to harm you, and that's why you were sick," says the man with the book.

"Ah!" says the man on Nass's right.

"That's a serious charge," Nass warns in a low voice.

"I don't make the charge!" Kurt says.

"You already have," says the man with the book. "It's registered."

"I haven't!"

"Well, we'll see what can be done, Inzip," Nass sighs. "Of course, it might go better for you if you modify your statements a bit . . ."

"But I haven't made any statements!" Kurt says hoarsely.

"Yes you have," says the man with the book, holding it up for Kurt to see.

"Why don't you let us tone them down a bit when we send in our report, Inzip?" Nass suggests in a confidential tone.

Kurt is grateful that his statements will be toned down. He only wants to leave and go back to his little office and warm cream walls, and pencils. "Yes. Oh yes!" he says, feeling suddenly relieved.

There is a long silence while the wind shrieks across the dome and rattles the windows. Then Nass says, "Good. That's all, Inzip. We'll be in touch with you soon."

"Thank you, sir," Kurt mumbles, and goes to the door.

"We'll take care of everything . . ." Nass calls as Kurt closes the door behind him. When he stands

in the corridor he feels so weak that he must lean against the wall for a few minutes before returning to the elevator.

V

For the next two days Kurt sits in his office getting very little done. He receives no communication from the Bureau, and he is beginning to fear a summons from the Board itself. He has finally managed to get his bottom drawer open, and has taken his possessions out in a soggy lump and put them back in their proper places. The button has ceased to glow, but he has scratched some of the finish on his desk. It is very noticeable.

At lunch time he manages to avoid Fenster by sitting at a table already occupied by three other people, but coming up in the elevator the second day he finds Fenster standing beside him.

"Hear you stirred up quite a fuss," Fenster finally says.

"What do you mean?" Kurt whispers.

"That business about Mrs. Unter. It's all over the Company, you know."

"What? What business?"

"I'll bet the Board decides she's just inefficient, so she won't be prosecuted. . . . But it was a good trick. I didn't think you had it in you."

"Had what in me?" Kurt asks out loud.

"Oh, come off it, Insel. We're all looking for the same thing. And I'm not saying anything. . . ."

Kurt remains silent, feeling all the eyes in the car turning toward him.

"I think you'll get a promotion out of this." Fenster adds. "In fact, when I mailed your letter, I put in a word for myself. . . ."

"Good God what are you talking about! I don't *want* a promotion! I'm not . . ."

The car comes to a stop at their floor, and Fenster laughs with more suggestiveness than humor. "Just remember who your friends were when you were down here, Insel," he says, thumping Kurt's shoulder, and goes off toward the washroom. Kurt returns to his office with his head spinning. He locks his door and sits down miserably at his desk.

The next morning he finds a memorandum on his desk from Mr. Nass, telling him that he will be pleased to report at the Bureau of Complaint, at three.

It is already after three when he thinks of it again. He rushes from his office without taking time to close his desk or door, and arrives at the Bureau ten minutes late.

When Kurt enters the great, dusty room again, there are only three men present at the high desk. The man who sits at the end is gone.

"Come in, Inzip! Come in!" Nass says. "The Bureau has good news for you!" He winks one huge eye, and the man with the book smiles broadly. "The Bureau has presented your case before the Board", Nass continues, "and you have acquitted yourself."

"Acquitted myself?" Kurt thinks. "Oh thank God! Thank God!"

"Not only that, but we've gotten your promotion for you! And the Bureau is directed to make every effort on your behalf about this Unter thing. . . ." Kurt's relief turns cold. Then he remembers that he has left his office open and all his drawers unlocked. The cold becomes agony. He fidgets, waiting for his chance to get back before it is too late.

"Already," Nass continues, now reading from a sheet of close-typed legal paper, "Nuvola has been despatched to Brazil, and immediately . . ."

"Brazil?" Kurt repeats. "But why did he go to Brazil?"

The smile on the face of the man with the book disappears, while the person on Nass's right continues to stare tensely in front of him as if he is afraid he will come apart any minute. Nass stops reading, lays the paper down and studies Kurt for a long while. "You *do* wish to be helped, don't you?" he finally asks.

"Yes. Of course, sir." Kurt answers.

There is a pause while Nass finds his place again. ". . . Nuvo-la has been despatched to Brazil", he continues with great emphasis, "and immediately following this meeting, Trocken and Nariz will make ready to sail for Benares to await further orders." Trocken, the man on the right, begins stuffing papers and pencils into his briefcase.

"Benares." Kurt mumbles.

Nariz and Trocken arise from the desk and walk toward the door, talking between themselves in low tones. Kurt stands, listening to their feet for a long while. "Well?" asks Nass, "Is there anything else?"

The door slams at the end of the room and the wind moans outside. Kurt continues to stare blankly into the vague shadows behind the desk.

"Nothing else? Good." Nass says, suddenly becoming a mass of activity—sorting papers, transferring them from one drawer to another, stuffing fistfuls into his briefcase—unaware that Kurt is in the room. Then he stands up and throws a company great-coat that has been lying on a leather chair nearby, around his shoulders. Stepping away from the desk, he strides feverishly around the room—poking at piles of trash and examining the walls, dome, windows, and furniture in the half light, and then aware of Kurt again he blusters, "My post will be Munich.

You've been promoted, so from now on you'll get out of that office and stay up here to take care of the Bureau for us."

"But my office!" Kurt says. "That's why I came here! I don't *want* to get out!"

"Nonsense. Everybody wants to get out." Nass says, picking up an old leather chair and carrying it to the other end of the room.

"My office! My office!" Kurt shouts, on the verge of tears.

"You're up here now, Inzip!" Nass calls, much annoyed, his back to the room. "Have you no gratitude?"

Kurt can faintly hear a scraping noise. It is Mrs. Unter, stirring in the bowels of the building. Already she is going stealthily up to his office. In a moment she will see it deserted. She will go in, slowly at first, and then she will run to his desk. She will leap upon it. She will crouch in his chair and roar. She will bury her huge red hands in his open drawers and close her fists on his possessions. She will sniff at them with her nose and roll her great eyes in her sunken face.

"You mustn't do this!" Kurt pleads.

"We are going on your account." Nass answers laconically, and walks over to the telephone. Taking hold of it with both hands he rips it from the wall and pushes it into Kurt's arms. "Keep this with you at all times, Inzip." Nass

says, heading for the door. "We'll be in constant touch with you."

"You don't understand. . . ."

The door slams with a bang. Kurt stands in the center of the huge, empty room, staring at the door. The broken telephone dangles from his hand. The wind wails, and the cold draft chills his legs. The light grows dimmer and blends the chairs and rubbish into deep shadows along the worn brick walls as the winter sun turns red against the tall windows. Tears begin to fill his eyes and he shouts, "You bad people!" shaking his fist at the door, "You bad people! You have destroyed me and you don't even know my name!" and he buries his face in his hands.

The knock on the door is barely

loud enough to be heard, and after a moment the door opens and a small man with a faded silk vest and a green eyeshade steps into the room, holding some broken machinery in his hands. "Is this the Bureau of Complaint?" he asks in a whisper. He sees Kurt standing in the center of the room, and stares at him a moment, visibly impressed. Then, taking the sobs as a kind of encouragement, he approaches timidly and begins, "You see, sir, I am the Mimeograph Executive, and . . ." but Kurt sinks to his knees, and the only sounds that can be heard in the room are the moans of the kneeling man, and the wind that rattles the dusty windows and shrieks forever across the dome.



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