

*Administration problems,  
the Underground,  
a missing volume of  
his encyclopedia,  
and now an old love  
turned rebel—  
enough was enough!*

# VOLUME PAA-PYX

**BY FRED SABERHAGEN**

**Illustrated by TRATTNER**

**W**HEN he was alone in his office with the prisoner, the director said: "Now, what is this secret you can reveal to my ears alone?"

"Are you sure none of them are listening?" The prisoner was a young man with seedy clothing and an odd haircut. As he spoke, he managed to grin in a conspiratorial way, as if he already shared some vital and amusing secret with Director Ahlgren.



And this is about the average of the Underground, thought the director, studying his victim with distaste. And in the next room Barbara waited her turn at being interrogated. How could *she* have ever become connected, however indirectly, with the ideals or people of this Underground represented before him?

"None of them are listening," said the director, who took daily steps to discourage that sort of thing among his subordinates. It was not entirely unheard of for a Party member to turn traitor and join the Underground. "Quickly now, what have you to tell me?"

"This — I will act as a double agent for you," volunteered the young wretch, in a stage whisper, maintaining the idiotic grin. He sat propped erect in his chair by a stiff pillow the director kept handy for such use, his voluntary muscles still mainly paralyzed from the stun pistols of the Political Police.

Director Ahlgren frowned thoughtfully. He took a cigarette from a box on his plain but highly polished desk. "Care for one?"

"No, no. Do you understand what I am offering you? I am a highly trained agent, and I will betray them all to you, because you are the strongest here, and I must serve the strongest." The

young man nodded earnestly as if he hoped the director would imitate the movement and so agree with him.

The director puffed smoke. "Very well, I accept. Now you must show me that you will really do what you say. Tell me the address of your contact cell."

**T**HE YOUNG rebel contorted his forehead, in an apparent effort to conceive a stroke of Machiavellian strategy.

Ahlgren pursued him. "I know each cell of the Underground has its contact with the rest of the organization through one other cell and that you know the address of yours. How can I trust you as a double agent if you won't tell me that much?"

"Wouldn't any of the others tell you? My dear comrades from my own cell?"

All the dear comrades seemed to have taken memory-scrambling drugs, as captured rebels often did, though the director sometimes thought it a superfluous action on their part.

"None of the others offered to act as a double agent." Ahlgren was trying to humor this babbler out of the one piece of valuable information he was likely to possess.

"Our comrades in the contact cell will have heard about the



arrests this morning," said the prisoner, with a sudden happy thought. "They'll have moved already anyway."

Quite likely true, Director Ahlgren knew. "So it can't hurt them if you tell me," he encouraged.

The prisoner pondered a moment longer, then named an address in a quiet residential section about a mile from the Party Building.

"Anything else you can tell me?"

Careful consideration. "No."

PolPol Chief Lazar and a couple of guards came into the office quickly after the director touched the signal button.

"Take him down to Conditioning," said the director, leaning back in his chair. He felt his head beginning to ache.

The rebel screamed and rolled his head, about the most violent motion he could make, as the two PolPol guards caught him gently by the arms and lifted him from his chair.

"Traitor! You are the traitor, not I! You have betrayed my confidence, your own honor, you — " He seemed suddenly to realize what was going to happen to him. "Conditioning! No, not my mind, not my mind! Can't you beat me or something instead? I won't be meee any lonnnngerrrr . . . "

The screaming died away down the corridor outside the office.

"Careful with him," Lazar called sharply to the guards, from the doorway. "Don't let his legs bump, there. You bruised that man this morning; we want no more of that."

He came back into the office, closing the door, viewing Ahlgren with the proper expression of respect. "Would you like me to conduct the next interview, sir?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"I thought you might feel a certain reluctance, sir. I understand you knew the young lady years ago."

"Before I joined the Party. Yes, quite right, I did." The director arose from his chair and walked toward the wide window, past the bookshelves that almost filled one wall, giving the office the air of a study and concealing his secret exit.

FROM the window he looked out upon the sunset that reddened the sky over his prosperous city where bright lights were coming on against the dusk.

I understand Lazar, he thought, because he is ambitious, as I am, or as I was. Under one of the old dictatorships, I would have had to fear such ambition in a subordinate and consider



taking steps against him. But I need not fear Lazar, because the Party claims his perfect loyalty, and he can do nothing against me until I begin to fail the Party. And is that time perhaps drawing near? Will my secret exit always be only a private joke?

Watching his own eyes in the half-mirror of the window, the director told himself: Someone must govern the people; someone always has. The worldwide Party does better than the old governments. There are no wars. There is no corruption and no real struggle for power among Party members, because there is practically no disobedience in the carefully chosen ranks. The mass of the citizens seem content with their bread and circuses. There is only the Underground, and maybe some kind of Underground is necessary in any society.

"Lazar."

"Sir?"

"How do we do it? How do we attain such perfection of power that the essence of power is enough, that we have no need to constantly threaten or stupefy the citizens?"

The gay and active city below was now brightening itself against the gathering night. No giant signs proclaimed the glories of the Party. No monolithic

statues deified the World Directors, past or present. The Party was invisible.

Lazar seemed a bit shocked at the question. "The selfless obedience of each individual is the life and strength of the Party, sir." A phrase from the catechism.

"Of course . . . but look, Lazar. That Citizens Policeman directing traffic down there. He's probably never even thought of joining the Party. He wears a stun pistol, because of the non-political criminals he must sometimes deal with; but if one of your PolPol agents were to walk up to him and arrest him, the odds are he would offer no resistance. Now why? The Citizens Police are as well armed and I think more numerous than your men."

Lazar studied the traffic cop below through narrowed eyes. "I can't remember when we've had to arrest a Citizens Policeman."

"Neither can I. The point is — how do we do it?"

"Superior dedication and discipline will prevail, sir."

"Yes." But the parroted phrases were no real answer. The Citizens Police were presumably disciplined and dedicated, too. Lazar was unwilling or unable to really discuss the subject.

Such questions had not occurred to Ahlgren himself until recently. He could not remember



ever seriously considering the possibility of himself opposing the Party in any way, even before that day five years ago when he had been accepted as a member.

"And we of the Party control the means of Conditioning," said Lazar.

"Conditioning, yes." Barbara. He had to fight to keep anything from showing in his face. It was hard.

He knew there was not one person in the gay and bright-lit city before him who could not be brought to the basement of this building at any time, at a word from himself, to undergo Conditioning. The Ultimate Pain, he had heard it called by Party theorists. But it needed no dramatization.

The citizens had a slang term for it that he had heard somewhere: brain-boiling.

The office intercom sounded on the director's desk. "Chief Lazar's office would like him to come in, if possible." Tight security. No details would be spoken unnecessarily over even the director's line. No risks would be taken at all.

He was faintly relieved. "Your office wants you for something; I won't need you here any longer. Good job today."

"Thank you, sir." Lazar was gone in a moment.

ALHGREN was alone in his soft-lit office. His eyes ranged along the bookshelves. The Party put no restrictions on reading. Aquinas — some of the Eastern philosophers — Thomas Paine — Russell. The encyclopedia, with the gap where that one volume had been missing for a week. Volume P. What the devil could have happened to it? Was there a kleptomaniac on his staff? It seemed absurd for anyone to steal an ordinary book.

But he was only procrastinating. He went to sit again at his desk, leafed through papers. Bulky contracts and specifications for the new water supply for his city. And the Citizens Council had voted a new tax; he would have to hire collectors. Too much non-political work, as usual, and now the Underground flaring up again, and —

He keyed the intercom and ordered, "Bring the girl in," without giving himself any more time to think about what he was going to have to do.

He sat waiting, his head aching, trying to hold nerves and face and hands steady. The PolPol report on Barbara was on his desk, mixed up now with the waterworks, and he read it for the hundredth time. She had spoken in public against the Party this morning in the presence of a PolPol officer.



She came into the office quietly, between the blank-faced uniformed PolPol women. She walked unaided and Ahlgren felt a faint, smothered gladness that it had not been necessary to stun her.

"Leave us," he told the guards, who instantly obeyed. Would it look suspicious for him to want to be alone with another prisoner? It didn't matter — in a few minutes he would send her to Conditioning, because he had to send her; there was nothing else the Party could do with her. He felt his heart sinking.

He met her eyes for the first time and was vastly grateful to see no terror in them.

"Sit down, Barbara."

She sat without speaking and watched him as if more sorry for him than for herself. It was her look of that day years ago, when he had told her of losing a job . . . If I had married her in those days, he thought, as I almost did, and never joined the Party, I would now be sitting in some outer office waiting, desperate to do anything to spare her the Pain, but helpless. Now I sit here, representing the Party, still helpless. But no, if I had married her I would have found some way to keep her from this.

"I'm sorry, Barbara," he said finally. "You know what I must do."

The waiting, unchanging sympathy of her eyes wrenched at him. She had never been beautiful, really, but so utterly alive. . .

"I — would like you to come back when you are—recovered," he heard himself maundering. "You'll be all —"

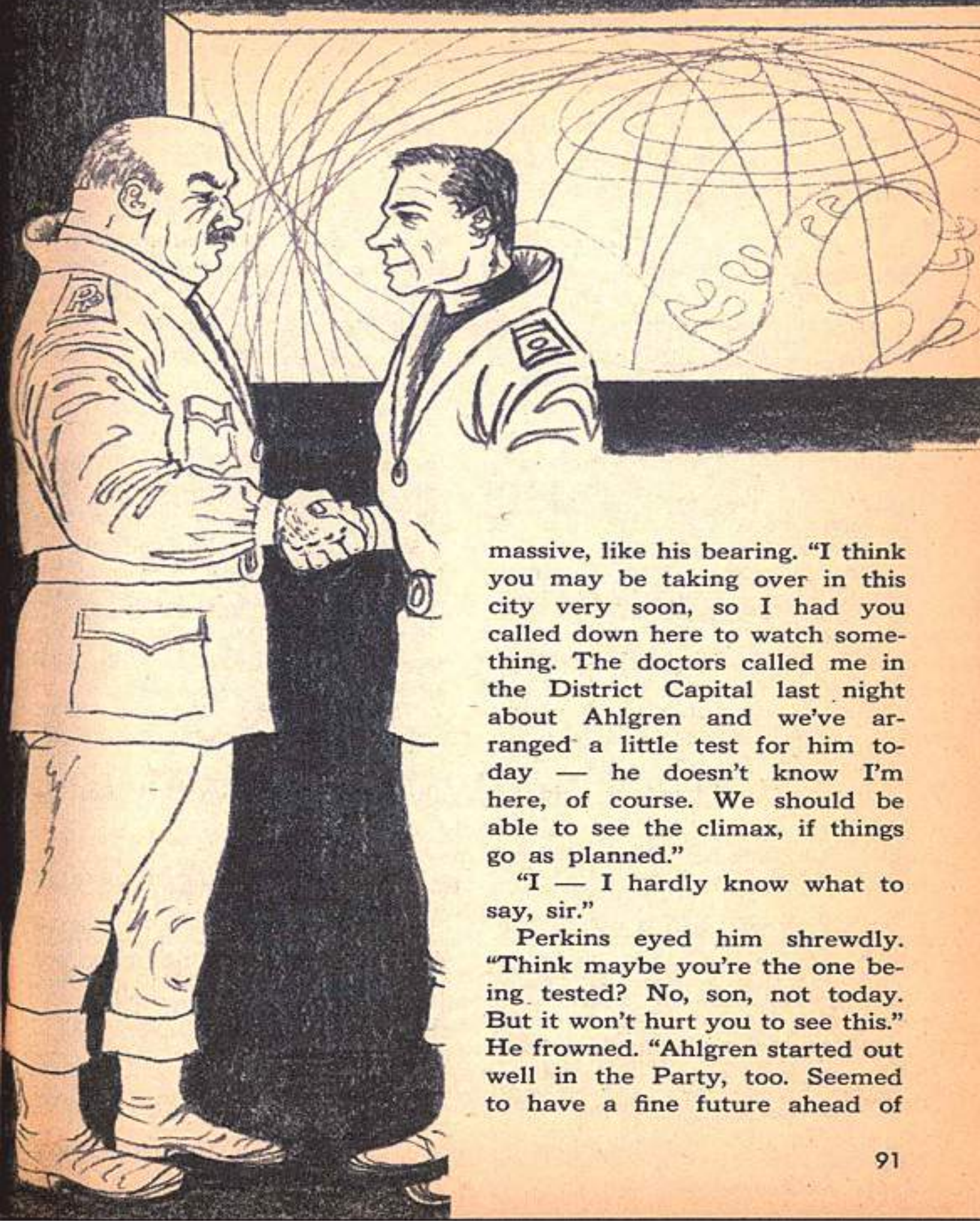
"Will you be able to marry me then?" Her first words to him burst out in a voice near breaking, like a question held in too long, that she had not meant to speak aloud.

He sat up straight in his chair, feeling as if the world had suddenly shaken beneath him. "How can you ask me that? You know I can't marry — I have chosen the Party!" He gripped the desk to stop his hands from trembling; then he realized that she must be only making a desperate attempt to save herself from Conditioning.

"**I**N THE name of the Party, sir," said City PolPol Chief Lazar in a hushed and slightly awed voice, shaking the hand thrust toward him by District Director Perkins. They stood in a small room in the basement of the Party Building in Ahlgren's city. One-way glass in a wall showed a view of a Treatment Room where Conditioning was sometimes practiced.

"Lazar. I've studied your record." Perkins' handshake was





massive, like his bearing. "I think you may be taking over in this city very soon, so I had you called down here to watch something. The doctors called me in the District Capital last night about Ahlgren and we've arranged a little test for him today — he doesn't know I'm here, of course. We should be able to see the climax, if things go as planned."

"I — I hardly know what to say, sir."

Perkins eyed him shrewdly. "Think maybe you're the one being tested? No, son, not today. But it won't hurt you to see this." He frowned. "Ahlgren started out well in the Party, too. Seemed to have a fine future ahead of



him. Now . . ." Perkins shook his head.

A door leading to a corridor opened and a man dressed in the green smock of a doctor stuck his head into the room. "Would you mind if I watched from here, sir?"

"No, no, come in. Lazar, this is Citizen Schmidt. Doctor Schmidt, I should say, eh?"

Lazar acknowledged the introduction perfunctorily. A loyal non-Party citizen was neither a political danger nor a competitor for advancement, and therefore almost totally uninteresting.

Lazar turned to study the Treatment Room through the one-way glass. It was not impressive, except for the treatment table in the center, a low monstrous thing of wires and power. There were soft lights, chairs, a desk in one corner, and above the desk a small bookshelf. Lazar could see that one book had been placed behind the others, as if someone had tried to hide it. Looking closer, he made out that it was part of an encyclopedia.

Volume Paa-Pyx.

**A**HLGREN was holding Barbara by the wrists; he pulled her across the desk and kissed her. His decision had been made with no real struggle at all. Maybe he had made the decision weeks or months ago, without

knowing, and had just been traveling with the Party on inertia. Barbara trembled and tried to pull back and then let herself go against him. She was not only acting to save herself now; she could not be.

"They say life can be good again after Conditioning, Barbara," he whispered to her. "They say many regain full normal intelligence. They say — no, I could never send you to that! Not you, not that!"

"Oh, Jim, Jim." Years since anyone had called him by that name. Or was it so long? A half-memory came disturbingly and fled before he could grasp it. But a real memory came plainly to him, bringing with it a plan of action that was at least better than nothing: the memory of the address the young rebel had spoken to his ears alone.

"Listen!" He grabbed Barbara's arm and held her away from him. "There may be one chance, just one small chance for us."

"What?"

"The Underground. I have an address."

"No, Jim. You can't do that." She backed away, looking toward the door as if she heard the guards coming to seize them both.

"Why not? Don't you understand what Conditioning means?"



Don't you understand what you are facing?"

"Yes, but . . ." Indecision showed in her voice and manner. "I don't know if I should try to tell you."

"Tell me what? Don't you realize what you're facing?"

"Yes, but you . . ."

"Me?" So she could think of his welfare first, even while she faced the Ultimate Pain. She must have loved him all these years. "I've had enough of the Party anyway." The words came so easily and sincerely to his lips that he was surprised as if at hypocrisy in himself, but it was not that. Somehow in the past few minutes his whole outlook on the world had shifted abruptly; the change must have been building for a long time.

His mind raced ahead, planning, while Barbara watched his face intently, one hand held up to her mouth.

He pulled a stun pistol out of his desk, checked the charge and thrust it into his belt. "Follow me. Quickly."

A section of the bookcase swung outward at his touch. He led Barbara into the narrow passage in the wall and indicated an unmarked phone set into a small niche. "Private line to District HQ. This may buy us a little time."

She reached out tentatively

to restrain him, clenched her fingers and made no objection.

He picked up the phone and waited until he heard someone on the other end, then said: "Ahlgren here. Rebel plot. They've infiltrated. I must flee." He hung up. Of course District HQ would doubt the message, but it should divide at least for a time the energies of the Party that would now be arrayed against him — and against the frightened girl he now led toward the tiny secret elevator that would take them down to street level. In his revolt against the authority he had accepted for so long, he felt less alone than he had for years.

**T**HEY emerged into open air by coming out of the wall in a little-used entrance to a rather shabby apartment house a block from the Party Building, after Ahlgren had studied the glow-panel-lit hallway through a peephole to make sure it was unoccupied.

He had discarded his uniform belt and insignia inside the secret passage; his jacket hid the butt of the pistol in his belt. If no one looked too closely at him, he might pass in the half-dark streets for a plainly dressed citizen.

They walked the side streets toward the Underground address, not going fast enough to



attract attention. Barbara held his arm and from time to time looked back over her shoulder until he whispered to her to stop it. Other couples strolled past them and beside them; the normal evening life of the city progressed around them as if the Party and the Underground were no more than fairy stories.

The young rebel might have told someone else the address before or after Conditioning had wrenched and battered his mind out of human shape. Ahlgren could not rely on the place being even temporarily safe. Barbara and he could only pause there in their flight, warn any Underground people they could find, and try to flee with them to some place of slightly less danger, if any existed. It was a weak chance, but their only one. There had been no time at all to plan anything better. Rebellion against the Party had burst in Ahlgren with the suddenness of a PolPol raid. His very lack of preparation for this step and his good record to date might make District think for a long time that he was indeed the victim of infiltrating Underground plotters.

The address proved to be that of a middle-sized, unremarkable building in a lower-class residential area, two or three apartments over a quiet-looking small tavern. A single front entrance divided

inside, where stairs led up to the apartments and two steps led down to the level of the tavern.

A couple of male patrons looked around from the bar with mild interest as Ahlgren and the girl entered. They and the bartender seemed nothing but solid citizen types.

While Ahlgren hesitated, uncertain of what to say or whether to speak at all, the bartender said suddenly: "Oh, that bunch. They're upstairs." The man's face assumed an unhappy look.

Ahlgren took no time to worry over whether he and Barbara were such obvious rebels already, or how the bartender fitted in. The PolPol might be right on their heels. He only nodded and led Barbara up the stairs.

There were two doors at the top; he chose at random and knocked. No answer. He tried the other. After at least a minute of feverishly quiet rapping on both doors, one opened enough to reveal a thin man with a blank suspicious stare.

"Let us in," Ahlgren whispered desperately. "It is vital to the Underground." The PolPol might close in at any moment; he had to take the chance and speak plainly. His hand was under his jacket on the butt of his stun pistol and his foot was in the door.

"I don't know what you mean,"



said the thin man tonelessly.

"Look at me! I am the director of this city. I have deserted the Party."

THE man's eyes widened and there were excited whisperings in the room behind him. "Let them in, Otto," said a voice.

Ahlgren pushed his way into the room, dragging Barbara with him. A fat man sat at a table with a bottle and glasses before him, and a little pile of dingy books and folders on the floor at his feet. A pair of unwholesome-looking women sat on a sagging couch along one wall. A door with a homemade look in another wall seemed to lead into the other apartment. Evidently the Underground used the whole second floor.

Ahlgren wasted no time with preliminaries. "Listen to me. The PolPol may be on their way here now. Get out while you can and take us with you. Have you some place to run to?"

The fat man regarded Ahlgren owlishly and belched. "Not so fast. How do we know —"

There was a glare of searchlights against the dirty windows, through the drawn shades, and a booming amplified voice: "Ahlgren, come out peacefully. We know you're there. Ahlgren, come out."

He gripped Barbara and

looked into her eyes. "Try to remember me after the Pain."

"Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, you don't know, you don't understand!"

He dragged her downstairs, seeking a way out of the trap. The PolPol would have the building surrounded, of course, but they would expect him to flee upward, to try to fight them off on the stairs, and perhaps try to escape over the roofs, as rebels often did.

The four Underground people had burst into passionate argument, but were doing nothing purposeful.

The lights were out in the tavern downstairs. The two patrons were standing behind the bar, the attitude of their vague shapes suggesting that they were waiting as interested spectators. The windows here too glared with searchlights, and the barkeep stood in the middle of the room glaring at Ahlgren.

"Ahlgren! Come out peacefully and no one will be hurt! Your case will be fairly heard!"

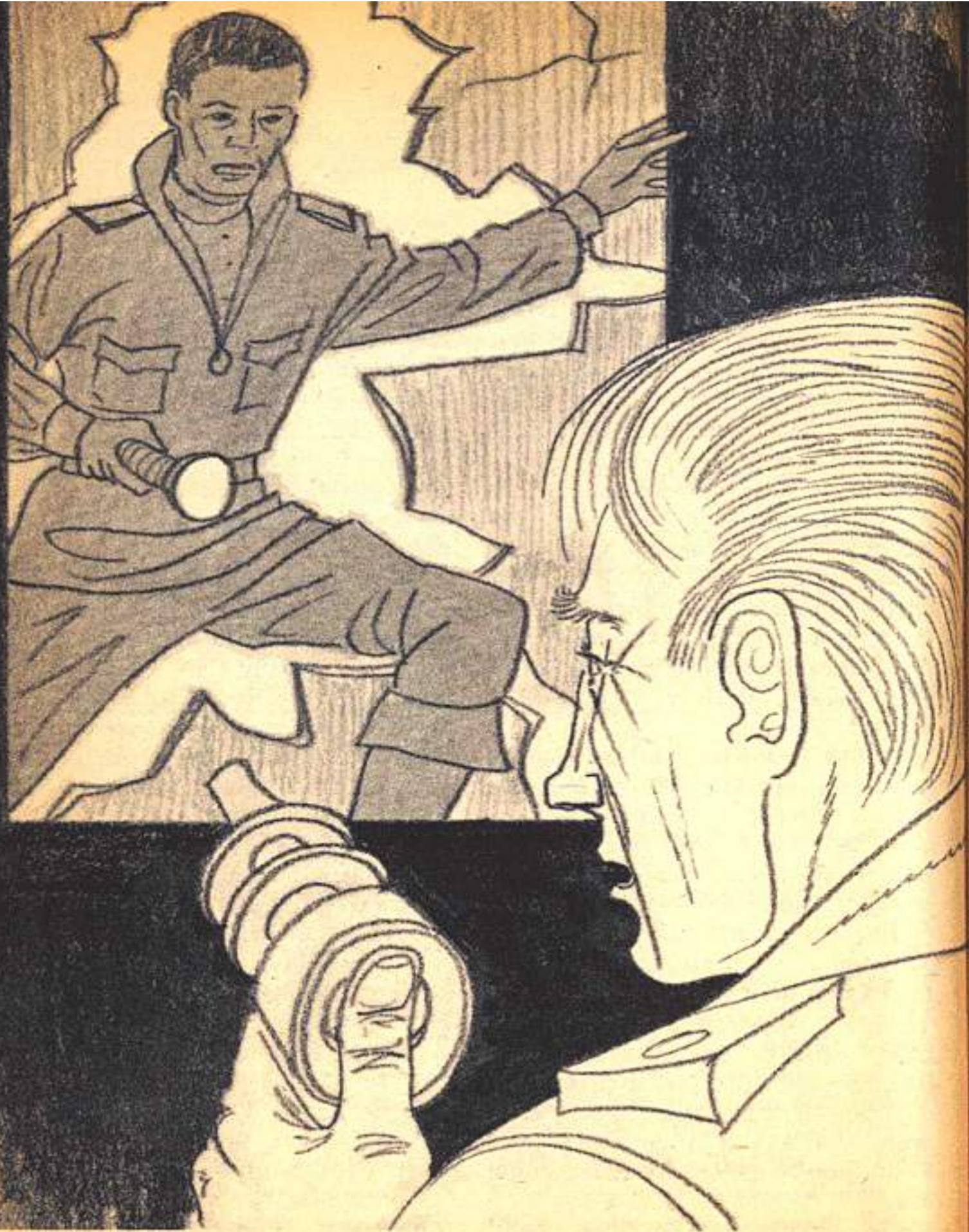
"Why don't you just do like the man says?" the barkeep suggested angrily.

What was wrong with these people? Didn't they realize — but he had no time.

"Shut up. Where does that back door lead?"

"Nowhere. I keep it locked." The barkeep swore. "Hope they







don't smash the place, but they sure as hell will if you don't go out. Sure, they say, we pay compensation, but look how long it takes. Sure, the glass they put in won't cut nobody, but I gotta sweep it up and put up plywood panels. Why don't you just go out?"

"Take it easy, Sam," said one of the patrons behind the bar, with a chuckle. Barbara was babbling, too, something she was sorry for, or sorry about.

A window smashed in and a PolPol officer stood outlined in the frame, flashlight in one hand sweeping the room. The director shot first. The invisible soundless stun beam doubled up the man; the flashlight spun crazily through the room as he dropped it. Ahlgren picked up a stool to batter at the rear door. It was the only way left.

"That don't go nowhere, I told ya! Stop! Why did I ever sign up?" the barkeep moaned, grabbing at Ahlgren to keep him from smashing at the door with the stool.

Ahlgren let him have the stun beam at close range.

It didn't bother the man in the least.

"Not on *me*, friend not on *me*. Tickle all you want," the barkeep said in obscure triumph, pulling the stool from Ahlgren's grip, which loosened from surprise.

The director felt the paralyzing tickle of a beam stab his own side; he had time to see Lazar grinning in at a window before sinking to the floor and into unconsciousness.

**H**E WAS slumped in a chair propped up by a stiff pillow when awareness returned. There was a sense of strangeness in his mind that he could not fully account for by what he remembered happening. Drugs? They were seldom used on anyone.

It was a Treatment Room; they were not going to waste any time. Lazar's face looked down at him, grinning, as he had seen it at the tavern window. Two or three of the green-smocked doctors who always administered Conditioning stood beside the monstrous table, watching him and waiting. And Barbara. She stood free in the background, not stunned or restrained in any way.

Lazar caught the direction of his gaze.

"Oh, yes, the young lady has been most helpful to us, future Citizen Ahlgren. It was in large part her idea —"

"Please." The doctor's voice had an edge to it. "I must insist, sir, that you not interfere with treatment."

"Very well." Lazar's grin was wider than ever. He touched Ahl-



gren's shoulder as one might pat a dog about to be gassed. "I was comfortably set to watch this show when you made me get up and work for it. But it'll be worth the trouble. Good luck in your new life." He went out jauntily.

Ahlgren let his eyelids close; he could not look at Barbara. She was whispering with a doctor. He prayed to the God of his childhood for the Pain to come quickly and bring complete forgetfulness.

A doctor was in front of Ahlgren. "Open your eyes. Look at me. Trust me. Never mind who's watching or that you think you've been betrayed. We didn't plan that, but it can't be helped now. I want you to do something and it won't hurt. Will you try?"

The doctor's eyes burned down. His voice compelled.

Ahlgren was held. "Try what?" he asked.

"What do you think it is I want?" the doctor asked with calm patience. "Try to remember."

Remember? What was there to remember? Ahlgren's eye roved about the room, fell upon the little bookshelf above the desk in one corner, and slid away again. But he supposed there was no escape from — what?

"You can get up now if you like, Jim. Move around."

He tried. His legs pushed him

erect. His arms functioned. Surprisingly, he could move; it took an effort but was not painful. How long had he been out from the stunning?

He found himself approaching the little bookshelf, while the doctors and Barbara watched silently. She was crying quietly; too late now. But he couldn't hate her.

OBEYING AN impulse, he reached behind the little row of books and pulled out what he saw with a shock was Volume P.

"Who hid this here?" he demanded. "I've been looking for it."

"Don't you remember, Jim?" asked a doctor gently. "You pushed it back there the last time. Now shall we try reading some things again?"

The sense of strangeness deepened until there was no standard left to judge the strangeness by. That doctor had a cursed familiar way of talking to the director of a city, even an arrested director, but the director opened the book. He would show them; there was no subject he couldn't read about.

He found the place he thought they wanted and began to read aloud, "Pain, the Ultimate," but all that followed was "see Conditioning."



"No, Jim. Turn further back. Let's try again where we were last time. Do you remember?"

Ahlgren turned pages, suddenly fearful that something was coming that he could not face. Paine, Thomas. Lucky man, bound up safe in a book.

"Party, the?" he asked, looking around at the doctors. He thought he remembered reading this article once; much of it had been only a vague jumble of nonsense. High-priced encyclopedia, too.

"No, we won't try that one today. Turn further back to where we were last time. Remember?"

Ahlgren knew it had to be done. For some reason. His hands began to tremble as he turned the pages. Pe. Pi. He was getting closer to something he didn't want to find.

Po. He dropped the book, but made himself pick it up again. Barbara gave him a violent nod of encouragement. She was still almost crying over something. Women. But this time she was here to help him and he was going to succeed.

He turned a few more pages and there it was. Something he had tried to face before — how many times? — and had always forgotten about after failure. His eyes scanned the clearly printed symbols, but something in his

brain fought against interpreting them.

"I can't read it. It's all blurry." He had said that before.

Barbara whispered: "Try, Jim. Try hard."

Ahlgren stared at the page in an immense effort, failed, and relaxed for a moment. The title of the article suddenly leaped into focus for him:

## POSSEMANIA

HE HELD up the book and began to read aloud in a quavery voice: " — from the Latin, *posse* power, plus *mania*. Of all mental diseases doubtless the most evil, in terms of the total suffering inflicted upon humanity throughout history; and one of the most resistant to even modern therapy."

Why had they wanted him to read this? Why had it been difficult? An awful idea loomed on the horizon . . .

" 'Unique among diseases in that its effects are put to practical use by society, it in fact forms the basis of modern government (see Party, the).' "

Ahlgren faltered and looked around him uncertainly. He felt sweat beginning to bead his forehead. The article went on to great length, but he flipped pages rapidly back to find Party, the.

He skimmed rapidly through



a few paragraphs, then read aloud in an impersonal, shrill, hurried tone: "Those with this abnormal lust for power over others generally find means to satisfy it in any society; ours is the first to maintain effective control over its members who are so afflicted. Now, the victims of the disease are necessarily detected during the compulsory annual psychological examination. If immediate therapy fails to effect a cure, as it usually does, mental Conditioning is applied to initiate or strengthen the delusions, welcomed by the patient, that the Party has the rest of the citizenry at its mercy and—"

"Take your time, Jim."

"— and that — that Conditioning is a painful and often crippling punishment employed by the Party itself, to erase thoughts of political opposition."

The world was turning under Ahlgren. He forced himself to read on slowly and sanely. Could this be truth?

"Following what is now to him the only practical course, the victim is guided to apply for Party membership as those found to be compulsive rebels and/or punishment-seekers are shuttled to the complementary organization (see Underground, the). He is of course invariably accepted and assigned, depending on his skills, to the Administration or

the Political Police (see PolPol)."

Again pages fluttered under Ahlgren's fingers. PolPol.

"— stun pistols locked at low neural frequencies that produce only a tickling sensation, to which all Party and Underground members are Conditioned to respond by going into psychic paralysis, unless in a situation where it would be physically dangerous to do so —"

Ahlgren skipped from article to article, his mind grabbing recklessly at the words that had been forbidden him.

"— most people generally ignore the activities of both Party and Underground, except as occasional sources of unexpected amusement —"

"— Underground members captured by the Party are quickly turned over to the government doctors for Conditioning. They are given treatments and sent out again to a different area, believing themselves rebel couriers or escapees. At each capture they are tested to see if their disease has abated to within the reach of therapy —"

"— the PolPol raid the same houses over and over, being Conditioned to remember no such addresses and to keep no records of them. Property owners are compensated for damage incurred. Personal injury in these



cases is of course extremely rare and accidental, when it does occur, due to the Conditioning of both Party and Underground people against it — ’”

“ — Party members composing the Administration perform most of our essential government functions, being constrained by their Conditioning against any abuse of power, corruption or dishonesty . . . ’”

**A**HLGREN felt cold sweat all over him. His headache was gone, but his throat felt raw. How long had he been reading aloud?

“That’s fine, Jim, that’s fine!” a doctor said. “Can you go on a little further?”

It took a giant’s effort. Yet it was something that must be done.

“By the interaction of Conditioning with the disease, the victim is prevented from apprehending the true state of affairs. He is, for example, unable to read this very article with any true comprehension. If read aloud to him, it will not make sense to his mind; he will interpret it to suit the needs of the moment, then quickly forget it. Indeed, this article, and similar writings, are frequently used as tests to determine a patient’s progress. . . .”

Ahlgren’s hand holding the

book dropped to his side. He stood swaying on his feet, utterly weary. He only wanted sleep, oblivion, forgetfulness.

A doctor carefully took the book from him, found the place, and read: “When continued therapy has brought a Party member near the point of cure, as is finally possible in about half of all cases, a realization of the true state of affairs becomes possible for the patient’ . . . That’s you now, Jim. You’re over the hump. Understand me? You’re getting well!”

Director Ahlgren was weeping quietly, as if from weakness and exhaustion. He sat down on the edge of the treatment table and the doctors gathered around him and began to fit the attachments of the table to him. He helped them; he was familiar with the process.

“I think this’ll be the last, Jim. We’re going to de-Condition you this time. Then one more subconscious therapy —” The doctor’s voice came through speakers . . .

. . . into the next room, where Perkins, Lazar, and Doctor Schmidt watched and listened.

Lazar stared through the one-way glass, gripped by vast elation. The director’s chair was his! The girl in the Treatment Room had thrown her arms about Ahlgren; perhaps she regretted that



she had been used against him. She should be grateful. It was not often that a mere citizen had such a chance to help the Party.

Doctor Schmidt was saying something to Lazar. "What?"

"I said, would you tell me what you thought of the material the former director read aloud just now?"

Lazar frowned. Why, it had been something — unpleasant. He turned to Perkins, giving up the problem with relief to his superior.

"What he read was a lot of subversive nonsense," Perkins rumbled, after a thoughtful pause. "It amounted to a confession of guilt."

"I see," said Doctor Schmidt. He looked a little sad. "Thank you, gentlemen. Shall we go?"

Perkins was staring with bright and hungry eyes at the motionless form of former Director Ahlgren on the table.

"Too bad we have to inflict such pain," he said.

HE WAS coming out of pleasant sleep, and the first thing he did was to reach out and find her hand. He looked up at her face. He remembered now — she'd said she'd wait . . . five years before.

"Was it your idea," he asked, "to help last night yourself?"

"No, the doctors suggested it,

darling. They thought you were approaching a crisis . . . but it's all right now."

"Then stop crying," he told her. "Every time I look at you, you're crying. Think I want to watch you cry all the time?" But she was half laughing, too, so it really was all right.

He lay in peace. Mountains had been lifted off him.

HIS mother was bending over him anxiously. He saw there was morning light coming into a hospital room.

"Son, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mother. No, no pain." Barbara was still there, looking happy.

His father came in, a little older and grayer than he remembered, shaking his head in the familiar way at his mother's ignorant worry about the supposed pain of Conditioning.

"It was on the Party news just now," his father said, grinning. "You were denounced for traitorous activity yesterday and purged last night. The usual appeal — for the citizenry to treat you kindly and not blame your new personality for your acts of treason. I think we can manage that somehow."

Jim Ahlgren looked around at the three of them. He said softly: "I've been gone a long time."

— FRED SABERHAGEN



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