

Cerebrum

Albert Teichner

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CEREBRUM



By ALBERT TEICHNER

*For thousands of years the big brain served as a
master switchboard for the thoughts
and emotions of humanity.
Now the central mind was showing signs of decay
... and men went mad.*

Illustrated by BIRMINGHAM

THE trouble began in a seemingly trivial way. Connor had wanted to speak to Rhoda, his wife, wished himself onto a trunk line and then waited. "Dallas Shipping here, Mars and points Jupiterward, at your service," said a business-is-business, unwifely voice in his mind.

"I was not calling you," he thought back into the line, now also getting a picture, first flat, then properly 3-D and in color. It was a paraNormally luxurious commercial office.

"I am the receptionist at Dallas Shipping," the woman thought back firmly. "You rang and I answered."

"I'm sure I rang right," Connor insisted.

"And I'm sure I know my job," Dallas Shipping answered. "I have received as many as five hundred thought messages a day, some of them highly detailed and technical and—"

"Forget it," snapped Connor. "Let's say I focussed wrong."

He pulled back and twenty seconds later finally had Rhoda on the line. "Queerest thing happened," he projected. "I just got a wrong party."

"Nothing queer about it," his wife smiled, springing to warm life on his inner eye. "You just weren't concentrating, Connor."

"Don't you hand me that too," he grumbled. "I *know* I thought on the right line into Central. Haven't I been using the System for sixty years?"

"Exactly—all habit and no attention."

How smugly soothing she was some days! "I think the trouble's in Central itself. The Switcher isn't receiving me clearly."

"Lately I've had some peculiar miscalls myself," Rhoda said nervously. "But you *can't* blame Central Switching!"

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" By now he was equally nervous and only too happy to end the conversation. Ordinarily communications were not monitored but if this one had been there could certainly be a slander complaint.

ON his way home in the monorail Connor tried to reach his office and had the frightening experience of having his telepathic call refused by Central. Then he refused in turn to accept a call being projected at him, but when an Urgent classification was added he had to take it. "For your unfounded slander of Central Switching's functioning," announced the mechanically-synthesized voice, "you are hereby Suspended indefinitely from the telepathic net. From this point on all paraNormal privileges are withdrawn and you will be able to communicate with your fellows only in person or by written message."

Stunned, Connor looked about at his fellow passengers. Most of them had their eyes closed and their faces showed the mild little smile which was the outer hallmark of a mind at rest, tuned in to a music channel or some other of the hundreds of entertainment lines available from Central. How much he had taken that for granted just a few minutes ago!

Three men, more shabbily dressed, were unsmilingly reading books. They were fellow pariahs, Suspended for one reason or another from paraNormal privileges. Only the dullest, lowest-paying jobs were available to them while anyone inside the System could have Central read any book and transmit the information directly into his cortex. The shabbiest one of all looked up and his sympathetic glance showed that he had instantly grasped Connor's changed situation.

Connor looked hastily away; he didn't want any sympathy from that kind of 'human' being! Then he shuddered. Wasn't he, himself, now that kind in every way except his ability to admit it?

When he stepped onto the lushly hydroponic platform at the suburban stop the paraNormals, ordinarily friendly, showed that they, too, already realized what had happened. Each pair of suddenly icy eyes went past him as if he were not

there at all.

He walked up the turf-covered lane toward his house, feeling hopelessly defeated. How would he manage to maintain a home here in the middle of green and luxuriant beauty? More people than ever were now outside the System for one reason or another and most of these unfortunates were crowded in metropolitan centers which were slumhells to anyone who had known something better.

How could he have been so thoughtless because of a little lapse in Central's mechanism? Now that it was denied him, probably forever, he saw more clearly the essential perfection of the system that had brought order into the chaos following the discovery of universal paraNormal capacities. At first there had been endless interference between minds trying to reach each other while fighting off unwanted calls. Men had even suggested this blessing turned curse be annulled.

The Central Synaptic Computation Receptor and Transmitter System had ended all such negative thinking. For the past century and a half it had neatly routed telepathic transmissions with an efficiency that made ancient telephone exchanges look like Stone Age toys. A mind could instantly exchange information with any other Subscribing mind and still shut itself off through the Central machine if and when it needed privacy. Except, he shuddered once more, if Central put that Urgent rating on a call. Now only Rhoda could get a job to keep them from the inner slumlands.

He turned into his garden and watched Max, the robot, spading in the petunia bed. The chrysanthemums really needed more attention and he was going to think the order to Max when he realized with a new shock that all orders would have to be oral now. He gave up the idea of saying anything and stomped gloomily into the house.

AS he hung his jacket in the hall closet he heard Rhoda coming downstairs. "Queer thing happened today," he said with forced cheerfulness, "but we'll manage." He stopped as Rhoda appeared. Her eyes were red and puffed.

"I tried to reach you," she sobbed.

"Oh, you already know. Well, we can manage, you know, honey. You can work

two days a week and—"

"You don't understand," she screamed at him. "*I'm* Suspended too! I tried to tell it I hadn't done anything but it said I was guilty by being associated with you."

Stunned, he fell back into a chair. "Not you, too, darling!" He had been getting used to the idea of his own reduced status but this was too brutal. "Tell Central you'll leave me and the guilt will be gone."

"You fool, I did say that and my defense was refused!"

Tears welled in his eyes. Was there no bottom to this horror? "You yourself suggested that?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she cried. "It wasn't my fault at all."

He sat there and tried not to listen as waves of hate rolled over him. Then the front bell rang and Rhoda answered it.

"I haven't been able to reach you," someone was saying through the door. It was Sheila Williams who lived just down the lane. "Lately lines seem to get tied up more and more. It's about tonight's game."

Just then Rhoda opened the door and Sheila came to an abrupt halt as she saw her old friend's face. Her expression turned stony and she said, "I wanted you to know the game is off." Then she strode away.

Unbelieving, Rhoda watched her go. "After forty years!" she exclaimed. She slowly came back to her husband and stared down at him. "Forty years of 'undying' friendship, gone like that!" Her eyes softened a little. "Maybe I'm wrong, Connor, maybe I said too much through Central myself. And maybe I'd have acted like Sheila if *they* had been the ones."

He withdrew his hands from his face. "I've done the same thing to other wretches myself. We'll just have to get used to it somehow. I've enough social credits to hang on here a year anyway."

"Get used to it," she repeated dully. This time there was no denunciation but she had to flee up the stairs to be alone.

He went to the big bay window and, trying to keep his mind blank, watched Max re-spading the petunia bed. He really should go out and tell the robot to stop, he decided, otherwise the same work would be repeated again and again. But he

just watched for the next hour as Max kept returning to the far end of the bed and working his way up to the window, nodding mindlessly with each neat twist of his spade attachment.

Rhoda came back downstairs and said, "It's six-thirty. The first time since the boys left that they didn't call us at six." He thought of Ted on Mars and Phil on Venus and sighed. "By now," she went on, "they know what's happened. Usually colonial children just refuse to have anything more to do with parents like us. And they're right—they have their own futures to consider."

"They'll still write to us," he started reassuring her but she had already gone outside where he could hear her giving Max vocal instructions for preparing dinner. Which was just as well—she would know the truth soon enough. Without a doubt the boys were now also guilty by association and they'd have nothing left to lose by maintaining contact.

At dinner, though, he felt less kindly toward her and snapped a few times. Then it was Rhoda's turn to exercise forbearance and to try to smooth things over. Once she looked out the picture window at the perfect synthetic thatch of the Williams' great cottage, peeping over the hollyhock-topped rise of ground at the end of the garden. "Well?" he demanded. "Well?"

"Nothing, Connor."

"You sighed and I want to know what the devil—"

"Since you insist—I was thinking how lucky Sheila Williams always is. Ten years ago the government authorized twins for her while I haven't had a child in thirty years, and now our disaster forewarns her. She'll never get caught off guard on a paraNormal line."

HE snapped his fingers and Max brought out the pudding in a softly shining silver bowl. Above it hovered a bluish halo of flaming brandy. "Maybe not. I've heard of people even being Suspended without a reason." He slowly savored the first spoonful as if it might be the last ever. From now on every privileged pleasure would have that special value. "One more year of such delights."

"If we can stand the ostracism."

"We can." Suddenly he was all angry determination. "I did the wrong thing today, admitted, but it really was the truth, what I said. I've concentrated right and still got wrong numbers!"

"Me too, but I kept thinking it was my own fault."

"The real truth's that while the System assumes more authority each decade it keeps getting less efficient."

"Well, why doesn't the government do something, get everything back in working order?"

His grin showed no pleasure. "Do you know anybody who could help repair a Master Central Computer?"

"Not personally but there must be—"

"Must be nothing! People are slack from having it so good, don't think as much as they used to. Why bother when you can tap Central for any information? *Almost* any information."

"How can it all end?"

"Who knows and who cares?" He was angry all over again. "It will still be working well enough for a few centuries and we, we're just left out in the cold! I'm only ninety, I can live another sixty years, and you, you're going to have a good seventy-five more of this deprivation."

Max was standing at the foot of the table, metal visual lids closed as he waited for instructions. Rhoda considered him unthinkingly, then snapped back to attention. "Nothing more, Max, go to the kitchen and disconnect until you hear from us."

"Yes," he said in that programmed tone which indicated endless gratitude for the privilege of half-being.

"That ends my sad day," Connor sighed. "I'm taking a blackout pill and intend to stay that way for the next fourteen hours."

THE next morning he rode into the city in the same car as the one that had

brought him back the day before. None of the regulars even deigned to look in his direction. There was another change today. Only two fellow Suspendeds were reading their books even though there had been three for the past few months. Which meant another one had exhausted his income and was being forced into the inner city.

At the office none of Connor's associates greeted him. They didn't even have to contrast the new tension in his face with the easy-going, flannelled contentment of their fellows. Undoubtedly somebody had tried to reach him or Rhoda and heard the Suspension Notice on their severed thought-lines.

As was also to be expected, there was a notice on his desk that his executive services would no longer be needed.

He quickly gathered up his personal things and went downstairs, passing through the office workers pool. Miss Wilson, his Suspended secretary, came up to him. She looked saddened yet, curiously, almost triumphant too. "We all heard the bad news this morning," she said, her blue eyes never wavering. "We want you to know how sorry we are since you're not accustomed—"

"I'll never be accustomed to it," he said bitterly.

"No, Mr. Newman, you mustn't think that way. Human beings can get accustomed to whatever's necessary."

"Necessary? Not in my books!"

"Some day you may feel differently. I was born into a Suspended family and we've managed. Being on the outside has its compensations."

"Such as?"

"We-l-l—," she faltered, "I really don't know exactly. But you must have faith it will be so." She pulled out a card from a pocket of her sheath dress. "Maybe you'll want to use this some day."

He glanced at the card which said, *John Newbridge, Doctor at Mind, 96th Level, Harker Building, Appointments by Writing Only*. There was no thought-line coding.

"I have no doubt," he muttered. But she was starting to look hurt so he carefully slid the card into his wallet.

"He's very helpful," she said. "I mean, helpful for people who have adjustment problems."

"You're a good girl," he said huskily. "Maybe we'll meet someday again. I'll have my wife call—write to you so you can visit us before we have to come into the city."

"That," she smiled happily, "would be so wonderful, Mr. Newman. I've never been in a home like that." Then, choking with emotion, she turned and hurried away.

WHEN he reached home and told Rhoda what had happened, his wife was not in the least bit moved. "I'll never let that girl in my house," she said through thin lips. "A classless nothing! I'm going to keep my pride while I can."

There was some sense to her viewpoint but, he felt uncertainly, not enough for him to remain silent. "We have to adjust, darling, can't go on thinking we're what we're not."

"Why can't we?" she exploded. "I couldn't even order food today. Max had to go to the AutoMart and pick it up!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"That *you* made this mess!"

For a while he listened, dully unresponsive, but eventually the vituperation became too bitter and he came back at her with equal vigor. Until, weeping, she rushed upstairs once more.

That was the first of many arguments. Anything could bring them on, instructions for Max that she chose to consider erroneous, a biting statement from him that she was deliberately making herself physically unattractive. More and more Rhoda took to going into the city while he killed time making crude, tentative adjustments on Max. What the devil, he occasionally wondered, could she be doing there?

But most of the time he did not bother about it; he had found a consolation of his own. At first it had been impossible to make the slightest changes in Max, even those that permitted the robot to remain conscious and give advice. Again and

again his mind strained toward Central until the icy-edged truth cut into his brain—there was no line.

Out of boredom, though, he plugged away, walked past the disdainfully-staring eyes of neighbors to the village library, and withdrew dusty microfiles on robotry. Eventually he had acquired a little skill at contemplating what, essentially, remained a mystery to his easily-tired mind. It was not completely satisfactory but it would be enough to get him a better-than-average menial job when he had finally accepted his new condition.

At long last a letter came from Ted on Mars. It said:

Guilty by association, that's what I am! When it first happened I was furious with the two of you but resignation has its own consolations and I've given up the ranting. Of course, I've lost my job and my new one will keep me from Earth a longer time but the real loss is not being able to think on Earth Central once a day. As you know, it's a funny civilization here anyway. As yet, there's no local telepathic Central but all Active Communicators are permitted to think in on Earth Central once a day—except for the big shots who can even telepath social engagements to each other by way of Earth! Privileged but a pretty dull crowd anyway.

Oh yes, another exception to the general ration, Suspendeds like me. Funny thing about that, seems to me there are more Suspended from the Earth System all the time. Maybe I'm imagining it.

As lovingly as ever, your son, Ted. (NO. *More* than ever!)

Rhoda really went to pieces for a while after that letter but, oddly enough, all recriminations soon stopped. She began going into the city every day and after each visit seemed a little calmer for having done so.

FINALLY Connor could no longer remain silent about it. But by now all conversations had to be broached by tactful beating around the bush so he began by saying he had decided to take a lower level job in the metropolis.

Rhoda was not surprised. "I know. A good idea but I think you should wait a while longer and do something else first."

That made him suspicious. "Are you developing a new kind of unblockable ESP? How'd you know?"

"No," she laughed. "Some day we will maybe and people will use it better this time. But right now I'm just going by what I see. You've been studying Max and I knew you were bound to get restless." She became thoughtful. "What you really want to know, though, is what I've been doing in the city. Well, at first I did very little. I kept ending up in theatres where we Suspendeds can go. That gave a little relief. But since Ted's letter it's been different. I finally got up the courage to see Dr. Newbridge."

"Newbridge!"

"Connor, he's a great man. You should see him too."

"My mind may have smaller scope outside the System but what's left of it isn't cracking, Rhoda." Working himself into a spasm of righteous rage, he stalked out into the garden and tried to convince himself he was calmly studying the rose bushes' growth. But Sheila and Tony Williams came down the lane that skirted the garden and, as their eyes moved haughtily past him, his rage shifted its focus. He came back into the house and remained in sullen silence.

Rhoda went on as if there had been no interruption. "I still say Dr. Newbridge is a great man. He dropped out of the System of his own free will and that certainly took courage!"

"He willingly gave up his advantages and privileges?"

"Yes. And he's explained why to me. He felt it was destroying every Subscriber's ability to think and that it could not last. Some day we would be without anything to do our thinking and he wanted out."

Connor sat down and stared thoughtfully out the window. Max had just lumbered into the garden and, having unscrewed one hand to replace it with a flexible spade, was starting on the evening schedule for turning over the soil at the base of the plants. He would go methodically down one flower bed, then up the next one, until all had been worked over, then would start all over again unless ordered to stop. "Are we to end up the same way?" Connor shuddered. He slapped his knee. "All right, I'll go with you tomorrow. I've got to see what he's

like—a man who'd voluntarily surrender ninety percent of his powers!"

THE next morning they rode into the city together and went to the Harker Building. It was in an area dense with non-telepaths each one showing that telltale cleft of anxiety in his forehead but briskly going about his business as if anxiety were actually a liveable quality. Newbridge had the same look but there was a nonetheless reassuring ease to the way he greeted them. He was tall and white-haired and his face frequently assumed an abstracted look as if his mind were reaching far away.

"You've come here," he said, "for two reasons. The first is dissatisfaction with your life. More precisely, you're dissatisfied with your attitude toward life but you wouldn't be willing to put it that way, not yet. Secondly, you want to know why anyone would willingly leave the System."

Connor leaned back in his chair. "That'll do for a starter."

"Right. Well, there aren't many anomalies like me but we do exist. Most people outside the System are there because they've been Suspended for supposed infractions, or they've been put out through guilt by association, or because they were born into a family already in that condition. Nothing like that happened to me. From early childhood I was trained by parents and teachers to discipline the projective potential of my mind into the System. Like every other paraNormal, I received my education by tapping Central for contact with information centers and other minds. But I was a fluke." His dark blue eyes twinkled. "Biological units are never so standardized that *all* of them fall under any system that can be devised. I functioned in this System, true, but I could imagine my mind existing outside, could see my functioning *from the outside*. This is terribly rare—most people are limited to the functions which sustain them. They experience nothing else except when circumstances force them to. I, though, could see the System was not all-powerful."

"Not all-powerful!" Connor exploded. "It got rid of me awfully easily."

His wife tried to calm him. "Listen, dear, then decide."

"You're surviving as a pariah, Mr. Newman, aren't you? Your wife tells me you've even started to study robot controls, valuable knowledge for the future and personally satisfying now. Millions of people do survive as outsiders, as do

the planetary colonists who only have limited access so far to social telepathy. The System has built into it defenses against Subscribers who lack confidence in it—if it didn't it would collapse. But people *in* the System are not forced to remain there. They can *will* themselves out any time they close their minds to it, as I did. But they don't want to will themselves out of it—you certainly didn't—and their comfortable inertia keeps everything going. I think you have to know a little about its history, a history which never would have interested you if you were still comfortably inside it."

He slowly outlined the way it had developed. First those uncertain steps toward understanding the universally latent powers of telepathy, then growing chaos as each individual spent most of his time fighting off unwanted messages. After a period of desperate discomfort a few great minds, made superhuman by their ability to tap each others' resources, had devised the Central System Switchboard. Only living units, delicately poised between rigid order and sheer chaos, could receive mental messages but this problem had been solved by the molecular biologists with their synthesized, self-replicating axons, vastly elongated and cunningly intertwined by the billions. These responded to every properly-modulated thought wave passing through them and made the same careful sortings as a human cell absorbing matter from the world. Then, to make certain this central mind would never become chaotic, there was programmed into it an automatic rejection of all sceptical challenges.

"That was the highest moment of our race," Newbridge sighed. "We had harnessed infinite complexities to our needs. But the success was too complete. Ever since then humanity has become more and more dependent on what was to be essentially a tool and nothing more. Each generation became lazier and there's no one alive who can keep this Central System in proper working order." He leaned forward to emphasize his point. "You see, it's very slowly breaking down. There's a steady accretion of inefficiency mutations in the axons and that's why more and more switching mistakes are being made—as in your case."

CONNOR was dazed by it all. "What's going to be the upshot, I mean, *how* is it going to break down?"

Newbridge threw up his hands. "I don't know—it's probably a long way off anyway. I guess the most likely thing is that more and more errors will accumulate and plenty of people will be Suspended just because Central is

developing irrational quirks. Maybe the critical social mass for change will exist only when more are outside the System than inside. I suspect when that happens we'll be able to return to *direct* telepathic contact. As things are, our projection attempts are always blocked." A buzzing sound came out of a small black box on the doctor's desk, startling Connor who in his executive days had received all such signals directly in his head. "Well, I've another patient waiting so this will have to be the end of our chat."

Connor and his wife exchanged glances. He said, "I'd like to come back. I'll probably have a twenty-hour week so I'll be in town a few days a week."

"More than welcome to come again," Newbridge grinned. "Just make the arrangements with Miss Richards, my nurse."

When they were in the street Rhoda asked, "Well, what do you think now?"

"I don't know what to think yet—but I do feel better. Rhoda, would you mind going home alone? I think I'll find a job right away."

"Mind?" she laughed. "It's wonderful news!"

After he left her he wandered around the city awhile. In his paraNormal days he had never noticed them but it certainly was true that there were a lot of Suspendeds about. He studied some of them as he went along, trying to fathom their likes and dislikes by the way they moved and their expressions. But, unlike the paraNormals, each was different and it was impossible to see deeply into them.

Then, as he rounded a corner, he was suddenly face to face with his new enemy. A large flat park stood before him and there in the middle was a hundred-story tower of smooth seamless material, the home of the Central System's brain. There were smaller towers at many points in the world but this was the most important, capable of receiving on its mile-long axons, antennas of the very soul itself, every thought projected at it from any point in the solar system. The housing gleamed blindingly in the sun of high noon, as perfect as the day it had been completed. That surface was designed to repel all but the most unusual of the radiation barrages that could bring on subtle changes in the brain within. The breakdown, he thought bitterly, would take too many centuries to consider.

He turned away and headed into an Employment Exchange. The man behind the desk there was a Suspended, too, and showed himself to be sympathetically

understanding as soon as he studied the application form. "ParaNormal until a few months ago," he nodded. "Tough change to make, I guess."

Connor managed a little grin. "Maybe I'll be grateful it happened some day."

"A curious thought, to say the least." He glanced down the application again. "Always some kind of work available although there do seem to be more Suspendeds all the time. Robot repair—that's good! Always a shortage there."

So Connor went to work in a large building downtown along with several hundred other men whose principal duty was overseeing the repair of robot servitors by other servitors and rectifying any minor errors that persisted. He was pleased to find that, while some of his fellow workmen knew much more about the work than he did, there were as many who knew less. But the most pleasing thing of all was the way they cooperated with one another. They could not reach directly into each other's minds but the very denial of this power gave them a sense of common need.

HE visited Newbridge once a week and that, too, proved increasingly helpful. As time went on, he found he was spending less of it regretting what he had lost. But once in a while a paraNormal came through the workshop, eyes moving past the Suspendeds as if they did not exist and the old resentment would return in all its bitterness. And when he himself did not feel this way he could still sense it in men around him.

"Perfectly natural way to feel," Rhoda said, "not that it serves any purpose."

"It's paraNormal lack of reaction," he tried to explain, "that's what really bothers me. They don't even bother to notice our hatred because we have the strength of insects next to theirs. They can all draw on each others' resources and that totals to infinitely more than any of us have, even if as individuals they're so much less. The perfect form of security."

But for a moment one day that security seemed to be collapsing. Above the work floor in Connor's factory there was a gallery of small but luxurious offices in which the executive staff of paraNormals 'worked.' None of them came in more than two days a week but use of these offices was rotated among them so all were ordinarily occupied and workers, going upstairs to the stock depot, could see paraNormals in various stages of relaxation. Usually the paraNormal kept his

feet on a desk rest and, eyes closed, contemplated incoming entertainment. On rarer occasions he would be leaning over a document on the desk as his mind received the proper decision from Central.

This particular morning Connor was feeling bitterly envious as he went by the offices. He had already seen seven smugly-similar faces when he came by Room Eight. Suddenly the face of its occupant contorted in agony, then the man got up and paced about as if in a trap. Deciding he had seen more than was good for him, Connor hurried on. But the man in Nine was acting out the same curious drama. He quickly retraced his steps, passing one scene of consternation after another, and went back down to the work floor, wondering what it all meant.

Soon everybody knew something extraordinary was afoot as all the paraNormals swarmed noisily onto the runway overlooking the floor. They were shouting wordless sounds at each other, floundering about as they did so. Then, with equal suddenness, everything was calm again and, faces more relaxed, they went back into their offices.

That evening Connor heard the same story everywhere—for ten minutes all paraNormals had gone berserk. On the monorail he noticed that, though still more relaxed than their unwelcome fellows, they no longer exuded that grating *absolute* sense of security. No doubt about it—for a few minutes something had gone wrong, completely wrong, with the Central System. "I don't like it," Rhoda said. "Let's see Dr. Newbridge tomorrow."

"I'll bet it's a good sign."

Newbridge, though, was also worried when they got to see him. "They're losing some of their self-confidence," he said, "and that means they're going to start noticing us. Figure it out, Newman, about one-third the population of Earth—nobody can get exact figures—is outside the System. The paraNormals will want to reduce our numbers if more breakdowns take place. I'll have to go into hiding soon."

"But why you of all people?" Connor protested.

"Because I and a few thousand others like me represent not only an alternative way of life—all Suspendeds do that—but we possess more intensive knowledge for rehabilitating society after Central's collapse. That collapse may come much sooner than we've been expecting. When it does we're going to have enormous hordes of paras milling around, helplessly waiting to learn how to think for

themselves again. Well, when we finally reach the telepath stage next time we'll have to manage it better." He took out an envelope. "If anything happens to me, this contains the names of some people you're to contact."

"Why don't you come to our place now?" asked Rhoda. "We'll still be able to hold it for a few more months."

"Can't go yet, too many things to clear up. But maybe later." He rose and extended his hand to them. "Anyway it's a kind—and brave—offer."

"Sounds overly melodramatic to me," Connor said when they were outside. "Who'd want to harm a psychiatric worker with no knowledge except what's in his head and his personal library?"

BUT he stopped harping on the point when they reached the monorail station. Three Suspendeds, obviously better educated than most, were being led away by a large group of paraNormals. The paraNormals had their smug expressions back but there was a strange gleam of determination in their eyes. "Sometimes life itself gets overly melodramatic," Rhoda said nervously.

The possible fate of these arrested men haunted him all the way home as did the hostile stares of the people in the monorail car. At home, though, there was the momentary consolation of a pair of letters from the boys. There was little information in them but they did at least convey in every line love for their parents.

But even this consolation did not last long. Why, Connor muttered to himself, did they have to wait for letters when telephone and radio systems could have eased their loneliness so much more effectively? Because the paras did not need such systems and their needs were the only ones that mattered! His fingers itched to achieve something more substantial than the work, now childishly routine, that he was doing at the factory. Just from studying Max he knew he could devise such workable communication systems. But all that was idle daydreaming—it wouldn't be in his lifetime.

The next morning Rhoda insisted they go back into the city to try once more to persuade Newbridge to leave. When they arrived at the Harker Building it seemed strangely quiet. The few people who were about kept avoiding each others' glances and they found themselves alone in the elevator to the 96th level.

But Miss Richards, the doctor's nurse-secretary, was standing in the corridor as they got out. She was trembling and found it difficult to talk. "Don't—don't go in," she stuttered. "No help now."

He pushed past her, took one glance at the fire-charred consulting room where a few blackened splinters of bone remained and turned away, leading the two women to the elevator. At first Miss Richards did not want to go but he forced her to come along. "You have to get away from here—can't do any good for him now."

She sucked in air desperately, blinked back her tears and nodded. "There was another ten-minute breakdown this morning. A lot of paraNormals panicked and a vigilante pack came here to fire-blast the Doctor. They said I'd be next if things got any worse."

Connor pinched his forehead to hold back his own anguish, then pulled out a sheet of paper. "Dr. Newbridge was afraid of something like this. He gave me a list of names."

"I know, Mr. Newman, I know them by heart."

"Shouldn't we try to contact one of them?"

As they came out into the street, she stopped and thought a moment. "Crane would be the easiest to reach. He's an untitled psychiatrist and one of the alternate leaders for the underground."

"Underground?"

"Oh, they tried to be prepared for every eventual—"

"It's impossible!" Rhoda broke in. She had been looking up and down the great avenue as they talked. "There isn't one person in the street, not one!"

An abandoned robot cab stood at the curb and he threw open the door. "Come on, get in! Something's happening. Miss Richards, set it for this Crane's address."

The cab started to shoot uptown, turning a corner into another deserted boulevard. As it skirted the great Park, he pointed at Central Tower. There seemed to be a slight crack in the smooth surface half way up but, as a moment's mist engulfed the tower, it looked flawless again. Then all the mist was gone and

the crack was back, a little larger than before.

CONNOR leaned forward and set the cab for top speed as they rounded into the straight-away of another uptown street. Occasionally they caught glimpses of frightened faces, clumped in lobby entrances, and once two bodies came flying out of a window far ahead. "They're killing our people everywhere," moaned the nurse.

As they approached the crushed forms, Connor slowed down a little. "They're dressed too well—what's left of them. They're paraNormals!"

A minute later they were at the large apartment block where Crane lived. They entered the building through a lobby jammed with more silent people. All were Suspendeds.

At first Crane did not want to let the trio in but when he recognized Newbridge's nurse he unlocked the heavily-bolted door. He was a massively-built man with dark eyes set deeply beneath a jutting brow and the eyes did not blink as Miss Richards told him what had happened. "We'll miss him," he said, then turned abruptly on Connor. "Have you any skills?"

"Robotics," he answered.

The great head nodded as Connor told of his experience at work and on Max. "Good, we're going to need people like you for rebuilding." He pulled a radio sender and receiver from a cabinet and held an earphone close to his temple, continuing to nod. Then he put it down again. "I know what you're going to say—illegal, won't work and all that. Well, a few of us have been waiting for the chance to build our own communication web and now we can do it."

"I just want to know why you keep mentioning *our* rebuilding. They're more likely to destroy all of us in their present mood."

"Us?" He took them to the window and pointed toward the harbor where thousands of black specks were tumbling into the water. "They're destroying themselves! Some jumping from buildings but most pouring toward the sea, a kind of oceanic urge to escape completely from themselves, to bury themselves in something infinitely bigger than their separate hollow beings. Before they were more like contented robots. Now they're more like suicidal lemmings

because they can't exist without this common brain to which they've given so little and from which they've taken so much."

Connor squared his shoulders. "We'll have our work cut out for us. Dr. Newbridge saw it all coming, you did too."

"Not quite," Crane sighed. "We assumed that at the time of complete breakdown the System would open up, throwing all the Subscribers out of it, leaving them disconnected from each other and waiting for our help. But it worked out in just the opposite manner!"

"You mean that the System is staying closed as it breaks down? Like a telephone exchange in which all the lines remained connected and every call went to all telephones."

"Exactly," Crane replied.

"I don't understand this technical talk," Rhoda protested, watching in hypnotized horror as the speck swarm swelled ever larger in the sea.

"I'll put it this way," Crane explained. "Their only hope was to have time to develop the desire for release from the System as it died. But they are dying *inside* it. You see, Mrs. Newman, every thought in every paraNormal's head, every notion, every image, no matter how stupidly trivial, is now pouring into every other paraNormal's head. They're over-communicating to the point where there's nothing left to communicate but death itself!"

THE END

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